Professor Harris-Lacewell's article on the religious nature of the relationship between the US Presidents and the African American community provokes many ideas and thoughts.

Chief, to my mind, is the obvious chronic failure of Presidents of both parties to truly support African Americans. Doubtless, we would all find the obvious candidates of failure: Wilson for his support of segregation, Reagan for his stigmatizing African Americans as typically poor and drawing unfair shares of "American" (read: white) resources, or the present Bush for so many things, refusing to meet NAACP leaders until his second term (and in that meeting acknowledging that he was unfamiliar with the Voting Rights Act), slashing funding for programs that aid African Americans at the expense of his own reallocation of funding to the wealthiest of this country, or worst of all, sending a disproportionate number of African-American troops into combat.

But perhaps there are others where the line between hostility, exploitation, indifference, and actual aid are less obvious. Perhaps people like Franklin Roosevelt, but even when African-Americans shifted their allegiances to support for the Democrats, within the most solidly Democratic part of the country they could not cast a vote. Perhaps JFK, but only for symbolism: his support for the Civil Rights movement was halting and tentative. Lincoln, surely, for his Executive Order initiating the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet look closely at the words of Lincoln and it is clear that the North did not fight the South for the eradication of slavery, that the ascendancy of business interests in the country dominated his own calculations, that his own rhetoric was frighteningly racist, and that even the Emancipation Proclamation was more Political Calculation about the destabilizing effects this order may have upon Southern slaveholders. I suppose that Lincoln, like Truman (integration of the Federal troops) and LBJ (passage of the key civil rights legislation at the national level) may be forgiven for their political calculations if only for the positive outcomes those calculations had for African American lives.
Much of the article focuses upon Bill Clinton as the "first Black President." I don't buy this canard at all. Clinton may have felt comfortable around African Americans, but the man was patently easy with everyone. Clinton may have known how to eat chitlins, but he also knew how to slam aspects of Black popular culture to his own political advantage. Clinton may have grown up in poverty, but he went on to Yale, Oxford, and the Governor's mansion in Little Rock before the White House.

The short of it is that Democrats consistently count on the African American vote as in their pocket and are fearful of demonstrating much in the way of allegiance to the issues that African American voters care most about, in order not to offend marginal Democrats. And at best the Republicans cynically appeal to issues of religious social conservatism such as gay rights and abortion in order to divide the African American voting bloc.

Religion has been a key component of the relationship between African Americans and American politics, with Presidents swept along in the tide. The Black church in its earliest days provided guidance and hope, and later, a plan for how African Americans might demand equity. Belongingness to a powerful moral institution like the Black church has patently made an enormous difference to all our lives. To the extent that the Black church can mobilize and make demands upon our polity, then the church serves a powerful purpose. To the extent that Democrats and Republicans alike can use the Black church as a vehicle for ugly social conservatism as a means to suppress the rights of others, this is a very problem-filled relationship.
Melissa Harris-Lacewell offers a timely and provocative discussion of black religion as an institution mediating between black Americans and Presidential politics. Her historical references provide a plush contextual backdrop for a parsimonious and revealing survey analysis. This is a very important matter, and I am grateful that Professor Harris-Lacewell is applying her skill to it. I think Harris-Lacewell is correct to assert that black religious ideas about prophetic leadership have some impact on black views of Presidents, and that it is undeniable that these religious ideas are themselves rooted in a unique history of oppression. I think she oversteps, nonetheless, to suggest that Presidential roles have been understood and evaluated solely through a prophetic hermeneutical lens, and that prophetic tradition implies prophetic expectations for the President. The analysis showing a relationship between strength of religiosity (itself a very fuzzy concept, the operationalization of which remains hotly contested in survey research circles) and adherence to the Democratic party is interesting in itself, but does not point to the hermeneutical frame she believes is responsible for the relationship. It would be impossible to prove the historic or contemporary influence of hermeneutics without considering more of the ways black religious people have regarded the Presidency and the role prophetic leadership.

Harris-Lacewell rightly acknowledges that black religiosity is not a monolithic field, but still asserts that Black people judge Presidents according to the latter’s ability to fulfill the role of prophet for social justice. Black religious understandings and evaluations of political leadership are as widely diverse as black political thought in general. At no point in history, and certainly not presently, has all of black churchdom expected the President to fulfill a prophetic role in the social justice vein. Even those locatable within the prophetic tradition have not necessarily expected Presidents to be prophets.

Indeed, not all black religious ideologies have imagined the President as having the moral capacity to play such a role. During the Presidential contest between Landon and Roosevelt, the great Baptist leader and thinker Nannie Burroughs, along with a great many contemporaneous black Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals, proclaimed it utterly ridiculous that black people would expect a President, whether Republican or Democrat, to play any prophetic, messianic, or cosmic function on behalf of African Americans. Burroughs stood firmly in the prophetic tradition and was well ahead of much of the National Baptist Convention in her biting critique of power. Her prophetic leanings led her to dismiss any talk of a prophetic Presidency. Did many other black religious people attach prophetic charisma to Landon or Roosevelt? Of course. While Burroughs openly resisted black cooption by political parties, L. K. Williams, then President of the National Baptist Convention, served as head of the Republican Party’s Negro effort. This points to the fact that interpretations of the religio-racial significance of political leadership have always been deeply contested among clergy and laypeople alike, rather than taken for granted as a nearly hard-wired feature of black religion. In my view, the nature of the ongoing contestation is at least as interesting and important as its ever-shifting outcome.
In short, by reducing black religiosity to one slice of a particular eschatological and theodical vision, I think Harris-Lacewell paints black religious expectations of the Presidency with too wide a brush, and subsequently conflates the influence of black religion in general with the influence of what is perhaps its most famous hermeneutical trend.

Harris-Lacewell’s assumption about the historic predominance (as opposed to the historic visibility) of certain prophetic/social justice hermeneutics leads her to take individualist strains of black religious thought as a recent development posing a new challenge for the churches in this era of highly polarized moral politics. I see contemporary black individualist religion as a recent incarnation of strains that have always been present in black religion, along with other forms of religious thought that did not perceive the President in prophetic or messianic terms. The contestation among these groups has practically always been alive, and has periodically become highly visible, especially at pivotal moments in formal national politics. This is a unique moment, to be sure, but it is, in many ways, not a new one.

Omar M. McRoberts
Assistant Professor of Sociology
University of Chicago