

1995: Blacks and the Republican Party

CAROL M. SWAIN | May 22, 2005

In "The Future of Black Representation" in Fall 1995, Carol Swain warned that racial redistricting was helping Republicans. She's still warning Democrats.

Can the Republican Party successfully attract a growing percentage of the black vote? Barring new embarrassing blunders, such as the Trent Lott fiasco of a few years ago, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." Republicans could easily garner as much as 15 percent to 20 percent of the black vote in national elections, and, in the not-too-distant future, could even return to the much higher pre-Goldwater levels of the 1950s and '60s. Republican candidates are already doing well among blacks in some states. And the Republican Party, of course, has much to gain and little to lose from vigorously pursuing a greater share of the black vote. Democrats sense this, and some, at least, are scared.

The black vote may even be more attractive to the Republican Party than the Hispanic vote because Hispanics are less likely to be citizens and less likely to turn out to vote even if they are eligible. Republicans could chip away at black allegiance to the Democratic Party by expending more efforts in black communities, continuing to push for faith-based initiatives popular among black Christians, expanding black homeownership, supporting charter schools and other educational reforms that resonate with blacks, and continuing to take a tough stand on national security.

Republicans have already made themselves more palatable to Catholics and Jews. Will blacks be the next group to jump ship in large numbers? I believe the future does not bode well for traditional Democratic politics. My older sister, a former welfare recipient, cast her first Republican vote in 2004 for the re-election of President Bush. She supported his position on national security and liked the fact that he was unashamed to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. Many blacks are more willing to consider Republican candidates and ideas and to give a respectful hearing even to proposals that may be of doubtful benefit to them. In the recent votes in Congress on bankruptcy and repeal of the estate tax, 10 of the 41 members of the Congressional Black Caucus voted with the Republican majority against what some of us would consider the best interest of their constituents.

Because no one knows how long Republicans will maintain their dominance in Washington, blacks would do well to position themselves so that they can extract concessions from both parties. The Democratic Party seems ill-equipped to deal with some of the new dynamics of black life in America, and many blacks are willing to look elsewhere for leadership. More young blacks are taking a second look at the party of Lincoln, and some of their parents are beginning to question their traditional allegiance to the Democrats. Enhanced two-party competition for the black vote would be a welcome change. For the next development in this drama, stay tuned.

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