

The Push and Pull of African Americans Support for the Democratic Party

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Introduction

In nearly every presidential election since Roosevelt's 1936 bid for office, African Americans have supported the Democratic Party. And since 1946, a majority of blacks have identified with the Democratic Party. This historical consistency has established African Americans as the unwavering backbone of the Democratic Party, often being referred to as the party's base support. The overwhelming support African Americans have provide to one political party has led many scholars to ignore any fluctuation that may exist in racial minorities' party identification. African Americans' loyalty to the Democratic Party fits into a larger theoretical framework of nonmovers (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960; Converse 1969; Beck and Jennings 1991), where short-term political, economic, and societal shifts have little sway on how racial minorities identify with political parties (Green, Philip, and Palmquist 1990, 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002).

Despite convincing empirical evidence that shows little fluctuation in black partisanship, rich theoretical arguments stemming from the race and ethnic politics literature suggests contextual shifts in society map on to minorities political behavior (Gillion 2013). Moreover, fluctuations in racial minorities' political behavior as well as their political attitudes are shaped by governments' attention to the minority community (Dawson 1995). Some argue that blacks' party identification, in particular, is linked to how racial minority groups view the president (Tate 1994 and Dawson 1995) and the economy (Luks and Elm 2005).

The conflicting perspectives that emerge from previous studies of minorities attitudes and behavior begs the question how can African Americans remain entrenched in one political party, yet be attuned and susceptible to fluctuations in minority policies and the state of the economy? In particular, is African Americans' partisanship consistent over time, or does it shift with the changing social and political environment?

There are many limitations that have hindered scholars from answering this question. Available data rarely contain questions that capture citizens' reaction to minority policies over time or real-world economic factors that specifically relate to minority groups. In addition, many studies have been handicapped by data sources that do not

survey a large pool of African-Americans over a continuous period of time. However, the main source of weakness lies within the analytical approach, where scholars make the implicit assumption that political and economic conditions should have similar effects across the American public.¹ This analytical approach of examining the American citizenry as a whole, often without respect to race, has become the norm for studying party identification (for a review, see Johnston 2006). Yet this approach potentially overlooks the diverse historical relationships that racial minorities have established with the different political parties. When scholars ignore the racial distinctions of party identification, they are likely masking the divergent reception that minority citizens have toward different political events and economic conditions over time.

In an attempt to reevaluate racial and ethnic minorities' party identification, this article shifts the focus of the literature from the collective American public to an individual assessment of racial minorities party allegiances. In doing so, this article develops a party crutch hypothesis, which contends that minorities move toward the Democratic Party during harsh economic times and when they see race as a salient problem facing America. They do so believing that the Democratic Party is their best resource to implement the social policies that represent their communities' interest. However, both political parties can earn political benefits when they address race. Democratic presidents' discussion of race emboldens blacks support of the Democratic Party. Likewise, when Republican presidents speak favorably about minority issues, it leads minorities to rethink their support for the Democratic Party, as illustrated by a decline in with those identifying with the Democratic Party.

We assess the theoretical reach of this paper by using a novel dataset of party identification for African Americans, minorities perceptions of race, and aggregate measures that capture federal politicians' attention to minority issues over the last fifty years (1954-2012). Thus, we offer the first direct test of the influence that real economic conditions and governmental policies have on racial minority party affiliation over a

¹ Consider the political implications of down turns in the economy, for example, a vast and growing literature that suggests citizens punish the president's party, both Democrats and Republicans alike, as a result of rising unemployment.

substantial period of time. The results show minority party identification is influenced by short-term fluctuations of politicians' efforts and national economic conditions that are relevant to the minority community. By separating out racial minorities' party identification over a long time horizon, this study accounts for the null findings of previous research and challenges our understanding of how racial minorities respond to the changing political events of the day.

In what follows, the article begins with a brief review of the existing scholarship on the social and political conditions that shape party identification, continues with a discussion of the limitations that stem from a theoretical focus that excludes the importance of race in America, and proposes a modification that highlights the role of racial issues in shaping minority partisanship, both the macropolity and the micropolity. The subsequent empirical analysis supports this theoretical shift. The concluding section outlines what the variation of minority party identification means for policy success and electoral politics.

Is Minority Partisanship Fixed?

The literature on political partisanship has provided rich theoretical contributions that help us understand citizens' support for political parties. Much of the earlier research characterized party identification as being fixed and is established at a young age. It is viewed almost as an inherited trait, where parental preferences largely influence young citizens' party allegiances (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960; Campbell 1969). The intensity of citizens' party attachment can steadily grow as people become older through a process of reinforcement (Converse 1969). Later scholarship echoed these earlier works and expanded the argument to propose that many of the short-term socio-political conditions have little effect on micropartisanship, or individual changes in partisanship (Green, Philip, and Palmquist 1990, 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). While this research does not explicitly examine racial and ethnic minority partisanship, the conclusions that are researched have been extended to minority groups.

Blacks, in particular, are often viewed as non-movers, showing continued growth in the Democratic Party with nearly unanimous support.

A contrasting perspective of partisanship is found among scholars who study macropartisanship, or the aggregate distribution of partisanship in America. These studies characterize party identification as being more fluid and susceptible to shifts in presidential popularity and economic factors (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989, 1992; Weisberg and Smith). For some works, the focus has been on the historical reshuffling of party allegiances along racial lines. For example, both white men and southern white women, who once strongly associated themselves with the Democratic Party, shifted party loyalties to the Republican Party. In a different trajectory, a shift took place among racial and ethnic minorities, where African Americans and Latinos have made the Democratic Party their political home (Black 2004, 1001). Even with the increase of racial and ethnic minorities, these shifts shrunk the Democratic Party in a post civil rights era (Black 2004, 1001).

Other studies suggest that the portrayal of African American stable party support is not consistent with much expected shifts that should occur in response to government performance. For example, citizens reward their elected representatives during favorable political and economic times. Voters reflect on these conditions through retrospective voting when casting their ballots (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). Voters also consider the political conditions and punish or reward political parties during elections (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Fiorina 1981; Healy and Malhotra 2009). Personal importance of any issue leads to individuals being less reliant on party labels in deciding which party should be blamed for government failures (Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

For the most part, however, this literature does not distinguish the conflicting influence governmental behavior has towards the minority community relative to the American public. As a consequence, little is known about the factors that contribute to the variation that exist in minorities' party affiliation. Or if there exist any variation in African-Americans party affiliation. In the next section, we propose a party crutch theory that accounts for the changing political ties racial minorities have towards political parties.

Blacks Party Preferences Responding to Political and Social Conditions

Issues matter for individuals. And they resonate with citizens in different ways. If the issues are salient enough for citizens, they can shift long held partisan ties (Campbell 1960; Carsey and Layman 2006). For the minority community, the issue of race-relations carries this influence. Citizens use symbolic cues associated with various groups to influence their ideology (Conover and Feldman 1981, 642). Thus, beneficiaries of liberal policies are often the ones to embrace liberal ideology (Conover and Feldman 1981). The underlying divide between conservatives and liberals are shaped by more than static differences in political ideology, but rather is formed by the evolving political landscape (Zschirnt 2011, 685).

Throughout history, African-Americans have changed their ideological position and moved towards the party that has buttressed their interest. In the most extreme cases this shift has meant a complete change in party alignment; it was the Republican Party of Lincoln during Emancipation that once cemented black support and later the switch to the Democratic Party was driven by Roosevelt's New Deal that affirmed black support (Walton 1972, 116). In other cases, African American support for a particular party has intensified as a response to the changing social conditions. Harsh forms of discrimination and racism emanating from the Deep-South propelled racial and ethnic minorities to strengthen their ties with a political party that would take up their concerns (O'reilly 1995). Robert F Kennedy, the brother and attorney general for President John F. Kennedy, used minorities discontent with social issues as fuel for the Democratic Party's campaign efforts. The establishment of the Voter Education Project, a project that offered financial support to minority organizations to increase the black vote in the south, drew large numbers to the Democratic Party. Again in 1984 and 1988, presidential hopeful Jesse Jackson rallied racial and ethnic minorities towards the Democratic Party by highlighting social inequities that exist in historically black colleges and at the workplace. Even President Clinton's reelection in the 1996 benefited from an influx of minorities to the Democratic Party after he

presented his national discussion of race, a program that sought to have a continuing national dialogue on the social conditions that impact the minority community.

What was true in these various time periods still holds significance today, and has done so over time. The issue of race remains a prevalent topic that not only galvanizes minorities to engage in the democratic process, but it also forces them to evaluate their ideological leanings and political affiliation. Thus, it may be the case that minorities move toward the Democratic Party when they see race as a salient problem facing America or during harsh economic times for the minority community. They could do so, believing that the Democratic Party is their best resource to implement the social policies that represent their communities' interest.

This theoretical narrative highlights the issue of race, whether manifested in the economic, political, or social conditions of the day, as being a driving force behind citizens' party preferences. Scholars have alluded to this link and have argued that when citizens can distinguish the party's differences on an issue, it is likely for policy positions to influence aggregate partisanship (Carmines and Stimson 1989; MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1987; Sundquist 1983). Being able to distinguish policy issues, however, often is not enough. Citizens must also see these policy issues as salient for it to shape their partisanship (Carsey and Laymen 2006). Minorities are able to distinguish issues of race because these topics are important to the minority community. Evidence of this recognition has been found in minorities' evaluation of government performance, which are often distinct from the perceptions of the American public. For example, Michael Dawson (1995), in one of the few studies that disaggregates presidential approval by race, demonstrates that events such as honeymoon periods for Republican presidents and international crises that lead to a "rally around the flag" effect, drive white presidential approval but have little sway on black attitudes of the president's job performance. For African Americans, on the other hand, those factors that are race specific, such as changes in the black/white unemployment gap, influence their perceptions of the president but are ignored by white citizens Michael Dawson (1995, 170).

Dawson's work offers a meaningful theoretical contribution on the significance of race, but it also demonstrates the importance of a research design that distinguishes citizens' political evaluations by racial background. It is possible, even likely, that these differences are exhibited in individuals' party identification. These distinctions stem from large differences of public opinion that exist between blacks and whites on race related policies, where blacks have a more favorable view on issues such as affirmative action for blacks in hiring, consideration of race in school admissions, and equal opportunity in employment. An overwhelming number of African-Americans, over 70 percent, believe that the Democratic Party works hard to address these race-specific issues (Dawson 1995, 108)

We posit that racial minorities do not move to the Democratic Party solely because issues of race are in the news or on the political agenda, but they also strengthen their party affiliation when racial issues is viewed a problem that requires government redress. We see the link between minority partisanship and the view of racial issues as a problem as fitting within a theoretical framework we refer to as the "party crutch". An important aspect of this framework is the reward side of Democratic success. One might think that policy success from the Democratic Party on minority issues would embolden minorities to increase their support of the Democratic Party. Our party crutch theory, however, argues that political and economic success breeds a sense of complacency among racial minority groups. But signs of trouble should force minorities to revert back to the party that best address their interests.

Data and Measures

In order to assess the political and social conditions that influence party identification, I use several datasets that provide information on both individual level attributes as well as aggregate level factors.

Measuring Party Identification

To assess party preferences, this study incorporates a pooled dataset of 198 different Gallup and USA Today/Gallup polls surveyed from October 1, 1959 through December 31, 2012. This allows us to examine 173,941 individuals who self-identify as African-American. Measures of party identification drawn from the Gallup survey is useful for understanding changes in the social and economic conditions of the day because the survey is routinely conducted over time.

Measuring The Importance of Race, Minority Economic Conditions, and Political Attention to Minority Issues

To our knowledge, we do not know of another study that has analyzed the affect of real economic conditions, political rhetoric, and perceptions of the importance of race on individual assessments of African-American party ID. In order to measure citizens' perceptions of the importance of race, we draw upon Gallup's long-standing Most Important Problem (MIP) series. The question "What do you consider to be the most important problem facing America today?" has been used to address the relevance of particular issues over time (McCombs 1995). Often in previous studies, this metric is presented as one value and reflects the sentiments from the nation as a whole. In our study, we disaggregate the MIP series with individual level responses to acquire a distinct measure of the importance of racial issues for blacks and whites separately. Thus, when the percentage of individuals who feel race or race relations is the most important problem facing the country today increases, we consider this an indication that racial issues have become a more important in the black community and the American public.

To examine politicians' attention to minority issues, we employ a well-established process of content analysis to examine electronic copies of presidential speeches found in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* series published by the Office of the Federal Register, which is a part of the *American Presidency Data Project* (Woolley and Peters 2013). The initial stage of the classification process required a training set to classify statements. The training set is a dataset of speeches that has been classified by human coders and is then

used to train computers to recognize racial and ethnic minority remarks during the supervised learning process. Scholars suggest that classifying 500 documents is sufficient for training programs and as little as 100 can suffice for producing accurate results (Hopkins and King 2010). For increased accuracy, two research assistants separately read a random sample of 3000 paragraphs drawn from the complete dataset of presidential remarks across ten presidents (1960-2012), with 300 paragraphs being drawn from each president.² The training set was classified into two groups: statements that mentioned racial or ethnic issues and those that did not.³

Having established the training set, we use an ensemble approach that incorporates multiple supervised learning algorithms to classify representative speeches, a technique that improves the accuracy of classification (Jurafsky and Martin, 2008, Grimmer and Stewart 2012).⁴ Five different classifiers (general linearized models, maximum entropy, support vector machines, boosting, and random forest) were programmed by the training set and later classified the entire dataset of floor speeches.⁵ To validate the classification process, a five-fold cross validation procedure was used to compare the training set with the computer-programmed classifications.⁶

² While word order is often unimportant for quantifying text (Jurafsky and Martin 2008; Manning, Raghavan, and Schutze 2008), our experience revealed that retaining the word order of race-related terms, such as “African American,” “Civil Rights Act,” or “Southern Strategy,” improved the performance of the classifiers. Thus, we include bigrams (word pairs) and trigrams (word triples) to retain word order.

³ All texts were pre-processed by removing punctuations, numbers, white spaces, and stopwords, which are common words that are used so frequently that they have little information value. The preprocessing produces improved estimates during the classification process (Feinerer, Hornik, and Meyer 2008).

⁴ Incorporating as few as four different algorithms for machine learning correctly corresponds to human classification 90 percent of the time (Collingwood and Wilkerson 2012).

⁵ The program *RTextTools* in the statistical program *R* was used to classify the sentences.

⁶ The five-fold cross validation process yielded 85% mean accuracy for overall minority concerns. We recognize that presidents may vary in their support of racial and ethnic minority concerns. To examine how much variation there is across the different presidents in terms of their discussion of race, sentences were also coded for whether the president supported or was neutral to minority causes. Sentences that addressed race and took a favorable stance on minority issues were coded with a “1”. When the president took a position that was unfavorable to racial and ethnic minority issues the sentence was coded with a “-1.” President’s attention to minority issues were then created by differing the positive and negative sentences. Given that modern presidents rarely take an explicitly negative position on race issues (only 2 percent of all minority related statements were coded as negative), this metric was highly correlated with a measure of the mere mention of minority issues.

Finally, for economic conditions, we use the minority unemployment rate produced from the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. We average the monthly data to obtain quarterly intervals of minority unemployment.

Considering these factors collectively, they offer a broad understanding of when issues of race become salient topics on the political agenda, are linked with economic conditions, and find relevancy for minority citizens. These factors should also serve as a good metric for minorities to evaluate political parties.

Model

The individual-level Gallup poll data comprises of quarterly responses from a different group of citizens each time the nation is surveyed. Due to the lack of repeated responses from the same individual over time, it is unlikely that within-subject errors are auto-correlated. Nevertheless, there could still exist a trend in the responses, where individuals surveyed earlier in the year may have different perception of the party than those surveyed only months later. To account for this possibility, we use a mixed model that is clustered by quarter. The mixed model allows us to include fixed effects (macro-level factors), such as minority unemployment and presidential attention to minority concerns, alongside random effects (individual attributes), such as political ideology and an individual's gender or age.

Alternative Explanations

To fully assess the hypotheses proposed in this study, we control for a series of macro-level and micro-level variables that are associated with alternative explanations of macropartisanship and micropartisanship. A powerful alternative explanation for shifts in macropartisanship is the corresponding shifts in presidential approval. We control for

The majority of presidential statements are favorable. Presidents rarely offer statements that are viewed as negative. As robustness

presidential approval by creating an aggregate measure of approval drawn from Gallup surveys that ask individuals to evaluate the president. We average the monthly data to obtain quarterly intervals of presidential approval.

For micropartisanship, the association that blacks have toward the Democratic party could vary by age groups, where younger minorities see themselves as being more independent than their older generation who lived through the civil rights era (Luks and Elms, 2005). To account for this difference we control for a respondent's age. In addition to age, individual wealth might also influence minority partisanship. In particular, increases in wealth may lead blacks to become more conservative, and thus more Republican. As Thernstrom and Therstrom (1997) write "social class, in other words, can send black Democratic voters heading in quite different political directions" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997, 305). Indeed, scholars have found that blacks who had a positive perception of the economy in the early 1980s were more likely to vote for the Republican Party (Welch and Foster 1992, 230).⁷ To account for the influence of wealth, we control for various levels of income in the multilevel model. In our final model at the individual level, we account for gender differences, education, and years of the midterm as well as the general election.

Results

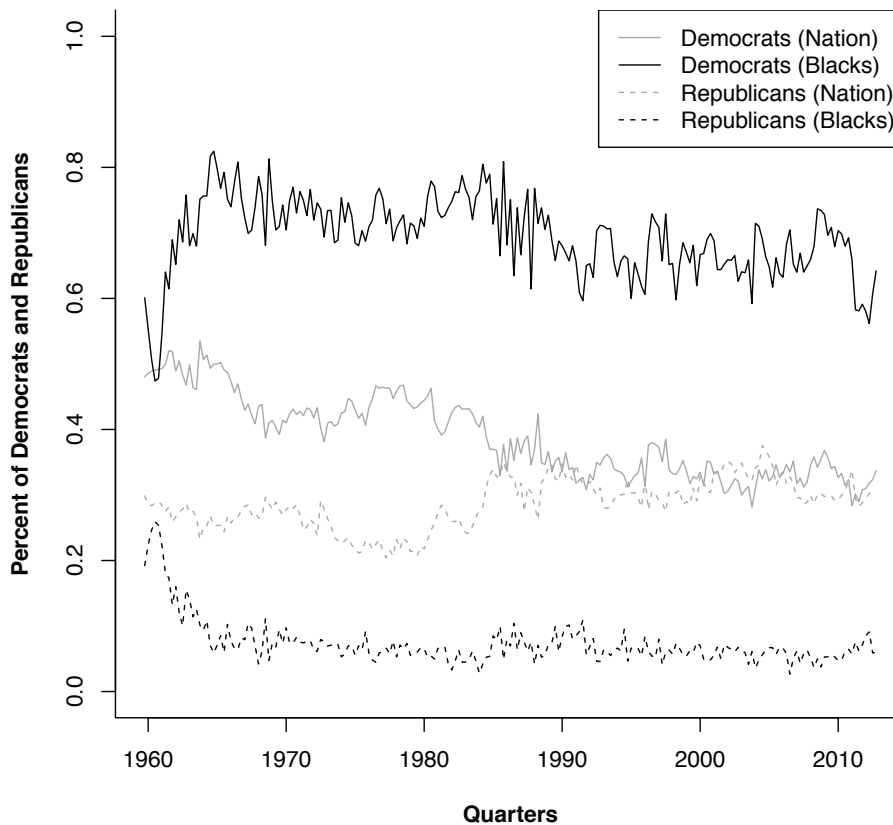
Macropartisanship

In Figure 1, we chart the percentage of individuals who identify with the Democratic and Republican Party, delineating the percent of African-Americans from the national percentage. As expected, the percent of African Americans who identify with the Democratic Party is far greater than the national average. We can also see that the civil

⁷ Based on a study of minorities in Houston Texas, there is only limited movement of religious Latinos to the Republican Party and no movement at all of African Americans to the Republican Party (McDaniel and Ellison 2008, 189). Thus, the Republican Party has only been slightly successful at translating minorities' religious conservatism into party support.

rights movement during the 1960s played a large role in changing minority perspective of the various political parties. Starting around 1961, African-Americans begin to move swiftly towards the Democratic Party. Any remaining support from the African-American community that president Dwight Eisenhower had won for the Republican Party in 1954 and 1956 with school integration faded quickly in the early 1960s. African Americans became the base of the Democratic Party by the mid-1960s. African Americans shift towards the Democratic Party begins to level off around 1968, when Lyndon B. Johnson leaves office and the fight for racial justice begins to dissipate.

Figure 1: Partisanship Over Time



Afterwards, there are occasional spikes in the Democratic Party that take place in response to race being an important issue. We see shocks in the system in 1984 during Jesse Jackson's run for office and his creation of the Rainbow Coalition, protests in 1992 surrounding the million Man March, and a major spike in 2008 with President Obama running for office. Apart from the local vacillation that takes place over time, there is also an overall trend for African-American party identification. Since the monumental social changes brought on by the 1964 civil rights act, the percentage of African-Americans identifying with the Democratic Party has dropped from 81 percent to less than 60 percent.

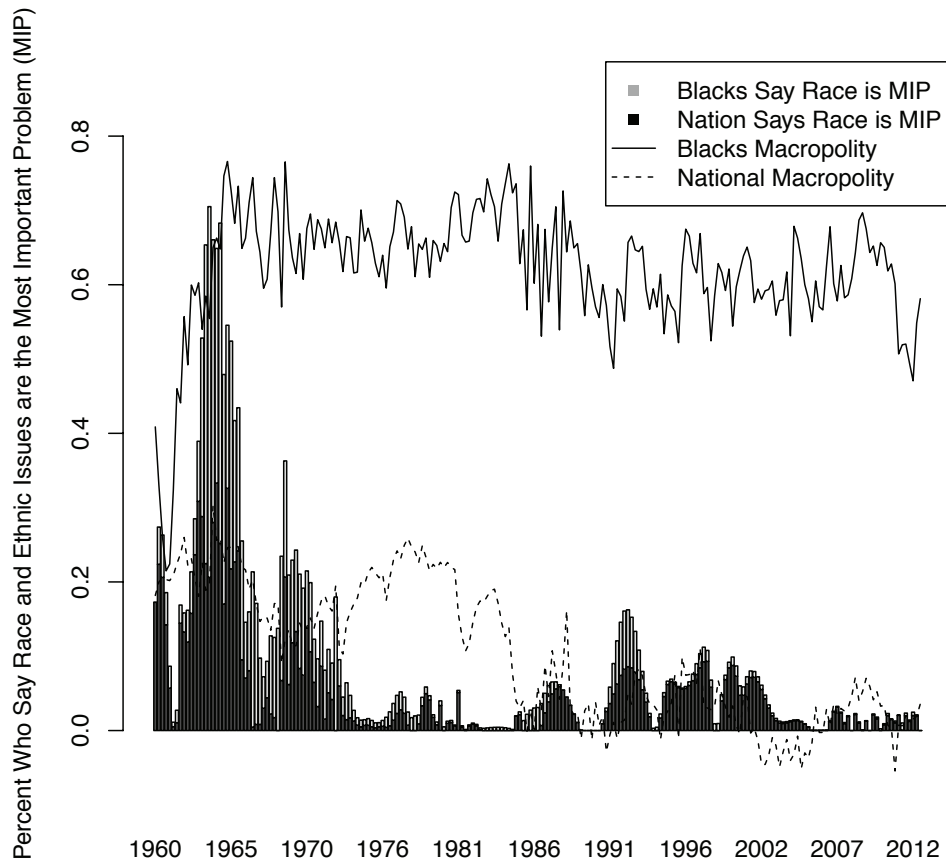
Our examination of Figure 1 offered several speculations that suggested that issues of race were associated with partisanship. However, we can more explicitly examine whether or not racial issues dominated the political and social arena with Gallup's Most Important Problem series question. Often, this question is presented as an aggregate measure that captures the national consensus. We found it prudent, however, to assess blacks perception of the MIP question separate from white.

In Figure 2, we plot the quarterly percentage of individuals who felt racial issues were the most important problem facing the nation today alongside the macropartisanship for both black and white respondents.⁸ This figure reveals that the protest riots of the late 1968 brought race back onto the political agenda and was followed by minor spikes in black's macropartisanship. Though there is less overlap between the importance of race and blacks moving towards the Democratic Party after the 1970s, there are several historical moments that push race to the forefront of national attention that are later followed by positive increases in macropartisanship for the Democratic Party. Some of these occurrences took place during the apartheid movement in 1986, the Rodney King riots of 1992, and the contentious 2000 election. The partisanship trend of the nation, on

⁸ Macropartisanship is calculated as the difference between the percent of individuals who identify with the Republican Party subtracted from the percent of individuals who identify with the Democratic Party. Thus, positive shifts indicate the nation is becoming more democratic and negative shifts suggest that the nation is moving to the Republican Party.

the other hand, seem less responsive to the importance of race as a problem that government should address.

Figure 2: Macropartisanship and Race as the Most Important Problem (MIP)



In order to fully examine the influence of race on party affiliation, however, we require a more sophisticated model. In Table 1 we incorporate an autoregressive distributed lagged model to examine partisanship. To begin, in the first two models in table 1 we replicate the factors that influence macropartisanship, which were most notably put forth by Mackuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) and later reexamined by Green, Palmquist,

and Schickler (2002).⁹ As with the previous graphical depictions in this work, we separate macropartisanship for the nation from black macropartisanship. The base model meets some of our expectations and echoes the findings of previous research in many respects. Presidential approval ratings are viewed as a powerful factor for influencing partisan change. We see in particular when a Democratic President is in office and presidential approval increases, individuals tend to move towards the Democratic Party, as indicated by the positive coefficient on the interaction of presidential party and approval, and thus an upward shift in macropartisanship. Presidential approval serves as a better proxy for societal sentiments than economic conditions. Increased unemployment traditionally does not influence partisanship. These findings support the conclusions of previous works (Green et al. 2002). However, the base model offers a slightly different conclusion for African Americans. Popular Republican presidents have the ability to move minorities to the Republican Party. In addition, economic factors do influence minority partisanship. When Democratic presidents experience rising unemployment rates, minorities edge ever so close to the Republican Party. These results show that there is a substantial difference between the factors that drive macropartisanship for the nation and the variables that influence minorities partisanship. Moreover, the methodological approach used by previous studies not to separate racial groups potentially masks the race-specific variables that influence racial minorities. Indeed, models 3 and 4 in Table 1 reveal this to be the case and demonstrates that African Americans view economic and political social conditions of the day through a racial prism.

⁹ Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) argue that the “practice of using Gallup surveys to measure both the independent and dependent variables gives an exaggerated account of the short-term fluidity of partisan attachments.” Their remedy for this problem is to use macropartisanship variables drawn from CBS. There are two important problems that emerge from the use of the CBS survey. First, the CBS surveys were only fielded beginning in 1976. This time period excludes some of the most contentious historical moments of race in America, namely 1960 to 1968. Second, CBS surveys do not include a consistent measure of individuals perception of the importance of racial issues in America, the main independent variable of our study. Thus, we could not use the independent variables drawn from the CBS survey.

Table 1: Factors that Influence Macropartisanship

	Macropartisanship		Macropartisanship		Democratic Party ID	
	(National)	(Blacks)	(National)	(Blacks)	(National)	(Blacks)
(Intercept)	-0.0019 (0.0141)	0.3575*** (0.0441)	-0.0008 (0.0154)	0.3424*** (0.0554)	0.0080 (0.0151)	0.3033*** (0.0580)
Macropartisanship _{t-1}	0.9294*** (0.0266)	0.4716*** (0.0571)	0.9776*** (0.0320)	0.5157*** (0.0732)		
Party (1=Dem,-1=Rep)	-0.0251 (0.0140)	0.0265 (0.0230)	-0.0315* (0.0154)	0.0126 (0.0290)	-0.0238* (0.0102)	0.0058 (0.0235)
Unemployment	0.0008 (0.0015)	0.0019 (0.0024)	0.0002 (0.0021)	0.0001 (0.0039)	-0.0003 (0.0014)	-0.0003 (0.0031)
Presidential Approval	0.0068 (0.0186)	-0.0671* (0.0306)	-0.0045 (0.0216)	-0.0852* (0.0414)	-0.0032 (0.0146)	-0.0417 (0.0327)
Party:Unemployment	-0.0004 (0.0016)	-0.0065** (0.0025)	0.0017 (0.0021)	-0.0026 (0.0038)	0.0013 (0.0014)	-0.0020 (0.0031)
Party:Approval	0.0495* (0.0192)	0.0099 (0.0301)	0.0321 (0.0208)	-0.0063 (0.0405)	0.0258 (0.0139)	0.0044 (0.0325)
Most Important Problem (Race)			0.0246 (0.0346)	0.0741 [†] (0.0399)	0.0091 (0.0236)	0.0754* (0.0337)
Democratic Party ID _{t-1}					0.9799*** (0.0334)	0.5907*** (0.0781)
Observations	198	198	102	102	102	102
R ²	0.896	0.372	0.929	0.475	0.933	0.541
Adjusted R ²	0.893	0.352	0.923	0.436	0.928	0.507

Note:

[†]p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

In model 4, when the percent of minorities who feel that race is the most important problem facing the nation today increases, African Americans move to the Democratic Party. The interesting aspect of these results is that African-Americans' perceptions of the importance of race render the economic factors as being inconsequential. This work is at odds with previous studies that argue the economic benefits often drive African-American association with the Democratic Party (e.g see Weiss 1983). It appears that it is not the perceptions of the economy, but rather how those economic perceptions offer signals for potential racial problems in the minority community. Although racial minorities are greatly influenced by whether or not race is an important issue facing America today, the issue of

race has very little influence on the nation's macropartisanship, as seen in model 3. In the aggregate, only African-Americans are attuned and influenced by the issue of race.

It is possible, even likely, that we are underestimating the influence that race has on party with the use of a macropartisanship measure, which is the difference between the percent of individuals who support the Republican Party subtracted from the percent of individuals who support the Democratic Party. This measure implicitly assumes that individuals are moving to another party as opposed to declaring themselves independent. Assessing black partisanship in this way is particularly problematic since many racial minorities may not move to the Republican side but rather go through a "dealignment or movement away from partisan identification" (Pinderhughes 1984, 87). When we change the dependent variable to the percent of individuals who identify with the Democratic Party, as is the case in models 5 and the 6 in Table 1, the influence the issues of race wield over partisanship becomes even stronger. Substantively, when just 1% of African-Americans view race as being an important issue facing the nation, this leads to a 7% increase in African-Americans identifying with the Democratic Party.

Micropartisanship

One criticism of our study so far is that Gallup measures of macropartisanship and the perceptions of race are aggregate measures that might not hold the same sway at the individual level once we account for individual-level attributes. Few studies make this important leap from the aggregate level to individual assessments, but the step is important to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the factors that influence partisanship. To this end, we conduct a multilevel regression on party ID, separating African-American party ID from national party ID in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors that Influence Party Identification (Individual-Level)

	Party (-1=Republican, 1=Democrat)	
	Nation	Black
(Intercept)	0.524*** (0.069)	0.257** (0.094)
Most Important Problem (Race) (Aggregate)	0.078 (0.101)	0.056 (0.089)
Most Important Problem (Race) (Individual)	0.100*** (0.007)	0.031* (0.015)
South	0.089*** (0.004)	0.007 (0.010)
Income \$20,000 to \$40,000	-0.030*** (0.006)	0.083*** (0.012)
Income \$40,001 to \$60,000	-0.040*** (0.006)	0.102*** (0.014)
Income \$60,001 to \$80,000	-0.054*** (0.006)	0.123*** (0.014)
Income (above \$80,000)	-0.123*** (0.006)	0.071*** (0.017)
Female	0.025*** (0.003)	0.065*** (0.009)
Education	-0.050*** (0.001)	-0.011** (0.004)
Age	-0.002*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)
President Party (1=Dem,-1=Rep)	-0.339*** (0.082)	-0.031 (0.110)
Presidential Approval	-0.585*** (0.006)	-0.239*** (0.019)
Midterm Election Year	0.021 (0.017)	0.032 (0.023)
General Election Year	-0.030 (0.022)	-0.077** (0.029)
Obama Time in Office	0.177** (0.056)	0.024 (0.076)
Presidents' Discussion of Race	-0.002* (0.001)	0.003* (0.001)
Unemployment	0.034** (0.013)	0.043* (0.017)
President Party: Presidential Approval	1.197*** (0.007)	0.534*** (0.023)
President Party:Unemployment	-0.067*** (0.017)	-0.063** (0.023)
Number of Observations	200253	18794
Number of Groups mvar1	93	93
Variance: (Intercept)	0.004	0.006
Variance: Residual	0.562	0.364

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Shifting down to the individual level, allows wealth and economic indicators to now influence minorities' partisanship. This influence, however, is crosscutting. When economic conditions worsen, African-Americans moved towards the Republican Party. However, wealthier blacks are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than poorer blacks who belong to lowest income bracket. These results are in line with more recent works that contradict the link between wealth and conservatism and find that wealth in the black community promotes stronger Democratic ties (Feagin 1991, Hajnal 2007, Hochschild 1995). The association that blacks have toward the Democratic Party is also generational, where younger minorities see themselves as being more independent or Republican than their older generation who lived through the civil rights era (Luks and Elms, 2005).

At the individual level, we broaden the potential influences of race by including the average response to the MIP question for the quarter in which the survey was conducted alongside the individual level response to the MIP question. In addition to these two measures, we also assess politicians' discussions of race in each quarter by focusing on presidential speeches and policies that reference racial issues. The results support the Democratic crutch theory. African-Americans who see race as an important issue move towards the Democratic Party. However, this effect is seen at the individual level and not in the aggregate. When presidents address racial and ethnic minority concerns through their speeches, this places race on the political agenda and potentially serves as a rallying cry to deal with minority concerns. African-Americans interpret this increased salience on racial issues as a signal to align themselves with a political party that is most apt to address their concerns. Ironically, although perceptions of the importance of race does not move macropartisanship or aggregate support for the Democratic Party, it does serve as a driving force behind why individuals do support the Democratic Party.

Discussion and Conclusion

This work sheds new light on differences that exist in political partisanship and reshapes our understanding of how the issue of race influences party allegiances. Moreover, these results help make sense of the divergent conclusions reached on whether African-Americans partisanship is fixed or it moves with the social and political issues of the day. African-Americans partisan support does indeed move over time. This vacillation is largely due to racial minorities continued pursuit to align themselves with a coalition that could implement their preferred policies. These alliances are fortified when racial issues are viewed as a problem that requires government attention. Hence, minorities use political parties as a political crutch; they support political parties during times of hardship, but this party support wanes as perceptions of racial issues begin to improve.

Our explanation of minority partisanship movement through a party crutch is unique from studies of systematic blame that argue African Americans punish Republicans for their lack of minority policies.¹⁰ The difference is subtle, but the distinct rationales for minority support of the Democratic Party leads to divergent conclusions. In the latter case of systematic blame, minorities are only responding to governmental policies. In the former, where citizens are attempting to align with a party for policy success, minorities can preemptively move to the Democratic Party even when conservative policies have not been implemented. In many cases, racial minorities are not reacting to unfavorable minority policies of Republicans. Among the minority community, the Republican Party has already established a weak record on minority issues (O'Reilly 1995). Instead, minorities are reacting to a specific social event or potential consequence that revolves around a race-related concern, which forces them to reflect on the larger reputation of the political parties and decide which party is most apt to address their concerns.

Several implications follow from the study. First, there is a growing debate that exists in American politics on whether or not politicians should take a race conscious or

¹⁰ In theories of blame, minority groups tend to blame the Republican Party when their living conditions worsen. In 1988, for example, African Americans who believed the economy had deteriorated since 1984 were more likely to identify with the Democratic Party (Dawson, 1995, 116).

race neutral approach to addressing racial inequality in America. Over the last six years, we have seen an embracing of the race neutral approach by the first black president, Barack Obama (Harris 2013). This approach is taken likely because of the backlash the president fears would follow if he addressed race. However, this study shows that addressing racial and ethnic minority concerns actually moves minority citizens towards the Democratic Party. In other words, placing race on the political agenda benefits Democratic politicians, who have come to be viewed as champions of minority concerns.

Finally, if minorities view their political allegiances through a racial prism, it is difficult for Republicans to gain support among the minority community by moving away from racial issues. A colorblind policy strategy alienates minorities and offers the perception that conservative politicians may be unwilling to address societal problems on racial issues when they arrive. Thus, this work suggests that in order for the Republican Party to grow their numbers of racial minorities they must demonstrate their ability to resolve some of the most pressing issues that still remain in the black community around such issues as education, the carceral state, or health care.

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