

***Black Evangelicals and the Democratic Party: Intersectionality and  
the Myth of the Monolithic Black Vote***

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**Abstract**

The theory of intersectionality provides a framework to improve visualizing identity as a conglomerate of inseparable, overlapping categories of an individual's characteristics or identifications. The political implications of this theory serve to modernize oversimplified Black voter profiles with a more nuanced approach. The introduction of President Barack Obama was a critical paradigm shift in the relationship between voters and presidential candidates, especially Black voters. Black-identifying Americans overwhelmingly voted for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012, and have voted in large numbers for Democratic candidates in most recent elections. Yet, Black voters are not a monolith. Among other cleavages, Black evangelicals differ from most other Black-identifying voters in their views on several important issues like LGBTQ+ marriage equality and abortion rights. Black evangelicals are in fact more conservative in comparison to most Black voters. This study aims to answer why Black-identifying evangelicals align with the Democratic party despite these divisions, and to understand the role that an intersectional lens plays in remapping Black political attitudes and behavior. This study draws upon nearly 200 survey responses and 15 interviews and compares them to the 1996 National Black Election Study and the 2016 CNN Exit Poll. Due to the influx of racially diverse

presidential candidates, a more interdisciplinary lens is imperative to confronting assumptions about Black voters.

*Keywords:* political science, voting, Black and African American studies, intersectionality, Obama presidency, Black evangelicals

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Following the 2016 presidential election, the divisiveness of American identity politics and party polarization significantly increased. In order to better cipher the consequences of this increase, identity itself must be observed in a way that comprehensively accounts for its complexities. American identity politics involves the division of groups based on different categories of identity like race, gender, age, and religion (Carastathis 2016). However, the summation of voters' racial differences and its effect on voter behavior is severely oversimplified, especially concerning Black voters. Political academia continually situates Black voters as a unified, monolithic voting bloc and it does not provide a true representation of the diversity of Black political identity. Both the complexity and fluidity of identity require a more nuanced approach to point to several intragroup differences within the Black community.

In order to better illustrate this understanding, Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality constructs an interdisciplinary framework to envision the complexities of identity (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality defines the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality has also been deployed in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, anthropology,

and others to methodize its revisualization of overlapping identities (Cho 2013). In this study, Black evangelicals offer a compelling case to observe the interconnected influences of race and religion to illustrate diverse Black political thought. Among other cleavages, Black evangelicals show higher levels of social conservatism, especially on important issues like LGBTQ+ marriage equality and abortion rights. However, Black evangelicals continue to support the Democratic party in large numbers during presidential campaigns. Black evangelicals voted for Democratic candidates like Gore, Bush, and Bill Clinton but voted in even higher numbers for Barack Obama (Roper n.d.).

Traditional metrics used to collect public opinion data tend to group together Black voters as a large liberal coalition which fails to provide an accurate depiction of some Black voters' more moderate placements and conservative views. Similarly, observing Black evangelicals is also significant because of campaign strategies that clearly target them through the extensive number of historically Black churches. These campaign methods are used to garner what is assumed to be “the Black Vote”(Laird 2020) which is not at all a single-ticket vote.

The origin of the assumption that Black voters operate as a unified coalition also has historical components. Ismail K. White asserts that Black Americans did in fact have high levels of political unity when they received the right to vote (White et al 2020). The passage of the Voting Rights Act led to Black political unity that emerged from strong social bonds (White et al 2020). These social bonds were brought by the organized, collective efforts of early suffrage movements and the momentum of the Civil Rights Era. However, this “unity” began to decrease as the economic diversity of Black voters began to increase. This means that as more Black people began to have different economic classifications as they received political equity and access to more socioeconomic resources. Nevertheless, the continued diversification of

socioeconomic status of Black voters led to an increase in political diversification within the Black community.

Moreover, classifying religious and racial identities is not a new polling method. However, it is mostly only utilized when observing white evangelicals. Black evangelicals' racial and religious classifications have often been observed separately by scholars which has led to the unfortunate normalization of Black voters' classification as a monolith, and white evangelicals as a standard categorization. Institutionalizing these tropes limits the understanding of the political diversity that exists within the African Diaspora and society as a whole. It is also important to understand that Black evangelicals are not 'intersectional.' Rather, intersectionality creates the foundational, cumulative framework to visualize Black evangelicals' overlapping religious and racial categories that can be observed simultaneously. Although Black evangelicals have supported Democratic candidates in large numbers, they are still one of the most conservative blocs of the Democratic party (White et al 2020) and religion may be a relevant factor.

In addition, this study further complicates this narrative by forming distinctions between Black evangelicals' party identification and self-reported ideology. Black voters have been portrayed, and later systemically labeled, as strong left-wing liberals. Party identification and partisanship are not necessarily reliable indicators or measurements of Black people's political opinions. Recent studies that specifically observe Black voters have just begun to unearth the considerable levels of conservative attitudes despite majority alignment with the Democratic party (White et al 2020). In this study, some Black evangelicals' preferences present this same peculiar placement but vary in party identification as the number of older Black evangelicals' Independent voter classifications rise. The introduction of increasingly racially charged campaign rhetoric led to the rise of both conservative and liberal extremists during the campaign

of President Donald Trump, widening the ideological distance between the two major parties (Talisie 2019). Contrasting the broader Black electorate, Black evangelicals voice their feelings of displacement from *both* the Republican and Democratic parties.

Therefore, this leads to an interesting puzzle. From both the survey and supplemental interviews in this study, this perplexity is shared by many Black evangelicals but some struggle with defecting from the Democratic party despite their feelings. Growing party polarization crafted a far-leaning left-wing Democratic party that distanced itself from more centrist voters, especially older Black Evangelicals. Now, Black evangelicals especially feel that neither party is fully representative of their ideals because of their clashing support for fiscal liberalism and social conservatism that neither party offers together. Regardless of the rise in Black evangelicals' more moderate, centrist attitudes, they still support fiscal liberalism and welfare reforms most commonly attributed to the Democratic party.

Although a considerable amount of Black evangelicals' views diverge from Barack Obama's endorsement of a more socially liberal agenda, they supported him during both of his presidential candidacies. Granted, the vast majority of Black evangelicals also voted for Bill Clinton, but at a lower percentage than Barack Obama (Pruitt 2020). Thus, the question is whether Black evangelical voting behavior is simply an extension of past trends of majority Black voters supporting Democratic candidates or if Barack Obama's shared racial background with Black evangelicals influenced their allegiance to his campaign. This is not to claim that shared characteristics of identity will lead to more favorable views of candidates by their similar constituents. Rather, these shared traits increase the window of opportunity for presidential candidates to share their campaign platform. This means that Barack Obama's racial similarity

with Black voters simply gave him a larger window of opportunity with more time to communicate his political agenda.

Relatedly, observing Black evangelicals' support for Barack Obama's presidential campaign offers a clearer picture of Black evangelicals' political preferences. The shared racial background between Black evangelicals and Barack Obama provides an unprecedented relationship between a presidential candidate and the broader Black electorate as a whole. This study aims to analyze not only the extent to which this shared trait influenced Black evangelicals' decision-making processes, but also how cross-pressured groups' identity plays a role in overcoming ideological differences. More specifically, why Black evangelicals decided to vote for Barack Obama despite having strong levels of social conservatism and increased movement towards politically moderate preferences.

Despite clear ideological differences, Black evangelical leaders endorsed Obama's campaign in religious services to actively persuade their constituents. Wallsten writes, "Two dozen of this region's most influential [B]lack pastors sat in the cramped conference room of a suburban Baptist church last week, brainstorming how to inspire congregants still dismayed by President Obama's support for same-sex marriage (Wallsten 2013). These leaders of historically Black churches in Virginia are an example of how Black evangelical leaders persuaded their constituents by pointing out the "historical racism of Mormonism" to compare Mitt Romney's campaign to Obama's. This evidence, combined with the evidence in this study, contend that Obama's campaign communicated to these church leaders with language that emphasized his identity as a Black candidate with the potential to address issues specifically impacting the Black community.

Contemporary politics include one-third of Black Americans self-identifying as ideologically conservative but up to 80 to 90% identify as Democrats (White et al 2020). This puzzle is even stronger for the case of Black evangelicals because their self-reported ideology is even more likely conservative. Additionally, there has also been a rise in Black conservatism that has not been met with a rise in the number of Black Republicans (Philpot 2017). This disparity warrants the notion that some Black Americans operate as moderate or conservative members of the Democratic party and stray away from the Republican party membership. The disassociation with the Republican party and Black conservatives stem from the party's stances on policies that disproportionately impact the Black community such as officer-involved shootings and mass incarceration (Mock 2019). President Obama's presidency sparked even more division as race became a driving force of this polarizing divide (Tesler 2016). This recent literature in public policy has aided this study in showing how Black evangelicals' past support for Democratic candidates is not necessarily reflective of their more centrist ideologies.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The survey questions in this study observed political ideology, religiosity, and conservatism. Each question was voluntary, meaning the nearly 200 respondents had the choice to opt-out of any question. The survey questions also allowed respondents to complete a voluntary interview, which 15 agreed. Since current academia lacks a comprehensive voter profile for Black evangelicals, this study offers a compilation of previous research's diagnostics and new contemporary questions. Next, the national Black polling data from Katherine Tate's 1996 National Black Election Study was used to compare Black evangelicals to a broader sample size of the Black electorate to better observe the impact of both religiosity and social conservatism for this specific subgroup. Although Tate's study is the most recent public opinion

data specifically tailored to Black voters, it was collected at a time where partisanship division and polarization were significantly less and bipartisan efforts between the two major parties were more common (Newport 2019). The questions on the survey from the NBES measured not only the political ideology of Black voters, religiosity, and party affiliation but also opinions on the criminal justice system, Black organizing power, and socioeconomic position. Lastly, the CNN Exit polls were used to compare white evangelicals' past votes in presidential elections to Black evangelicals to illustrate how religious ties may be politically split among racial lines.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Religiosity and Political Ideology***

The findings in this study first quantified the influence of religiosity on Black evangelicals by measuring varying levels of church attendance. The higher the frequency of church attendance equated to higher levels of religious ideology and influence. Those who had stronger religious ties were more likely to either be moderate voters or leaning conservative. 53% of respondents either said they were “Moderate”, “Lean Conservative”, or “Strong Conservative.” Eight respondents who went to church more than a few times a month said they were “Lean Conservative” and four were “Strong Conservatives.” There was also a correlation between those who attended once a week or more with more conservative attitudes on the questions concerning whether prayer should be installed in schools, LGBTQ+ marriage equality, and abortion. 40% of all of the respondents identified as “Moderate” voters. Most respondents who identified as strong Democrats went to these services less frequently by either a few times a year. Those that attended religious services less frequently, like once a month or a few times a year leaned more liberal and were more inclined to oppose the installation of prayer in schools and be in favor of both abortion and marriage equality. Only 18% of respondents claimed they



were “Strong Liberal” which were mostly attributed to respondents who were between the ages of 18 to 25 followed by the 28% of respondents who said they “Lean Liberal.”

The most contested issues attributed to Black evangelicals’ social conservatism are most heavily linked to LGBTQ+ marriage equality and abortion rights. 42.9% of respondents opposed LGBTQ+ marriage while nearly 15% of respondents were undecided on the issue. Although 42.4% of respondents were in favor of LGBTQ+ marriage, nearly 80% of those respondents were from ages 18 to 25. In regards to abortion rights, 59% wanted abortion to be illegal in the United States. Aforementioned, the generational gap between respondents was evident with these two issues where respondents above the age of 30 were more likely to oppose both issues.

### ***Party Identification and Self-Reported Ideology***

Among other issues of contention, Black evangelicals seem to be displaced by both the Republican party and the Democratic party. Despite the increase in Black evangelical conservative ideology, there has not been a similar rise in the number of Black Republicans (Philpot 2017). Unlike traditional polling methods, the Black community is a bit more difficult to observe because there is a distinct dissimilarity between their self-reported ideology and their party affiliation (Philpot 2017). Black evangelicals’ responses in this study mirror the same pattern. Interestingly, there is a significant rise in Independent party identification in the Post-Obama era based on both the interviews and surveys in this study. This may imply that Black evangelicals are beginning to distance themselves further from the Democratic party in comparison with the broader Black community.

In terms of the broader Black community, one-third of Black Americans self-identify as ideologically conservative but up to 80 to 90% identify as Democrats (White et al 2020). This is mostly due to the rising polarization between the two major parties. Figure 1.1 shows that there

has been a rising number of Independent voter classifications by Black evangelicals. Only 16 respondents said they were either leaning or strong Republicans, but 80 respondents said they held more moderate ideology. Some members of the Black community have negative views of the Republican party's stances on issues that disproportionately impact the Black community as a whole like officer-involved shootings and mass incarceration. Since these issues' impact along racial lines, the majority of the Black community may seem united in those instances.

Nevertheless, there is still a rising amount of conservative ideology so it is more about the party image of the Republican party than Black people converging around an entire liberal agenda.

Figure 1.1 also shows discrepancy between party affiliation and self-reported ideology, especially when comparing Democrat Black evangelicals to their ideologies. 43% of "Strong Democrats" either said they were "Lean Conservative", "Moderate", or "Strong Conservative." Party identification seemed to follow national trends in CNN national exit polls where younger voters were more likely to align with the Democratic party. Additionally, older Black evangelicals, especially above the age of 40 were more likely to identify as a moderate or leaning conservative. In interviews, younger voters seemed way more inclined to note that the Republican party did not share their same ideals in other areas of fiscal liberalism, federal welfare policies, criminal justice reform, and immigration policies. Interviewees also felt that the increase of racially charged rhetoric in the 2016 campaign from Donald Trump, the rising number of extremist Republican constituents, and some occurrences of white supremacy, further isolated them from the party. Out of 184 respondents who answered this specific question, none reported to be a "Strong Republican" although there were 4 respondents claiming to be "Strong Conservative." Additionally, ideologically moderate voters seem to be skewed in how they lean between being either Democrats or Independent voters. This provides evidence to support the

notion that Black evangelicals' party affiliation does not accurately represent their self-reported ideologies.

Political Ideology and Party Affiliation	Which best describes your political beliefs?					
	Lean Conservative	Lean Liberal	Moderate	Strong Conservative	Strong Liberal	Grand Total
Independent	3	4	28	2	6	43
Lean Democrat	6	28	22	1	9	66
Lean Republican	2		1			3
Strong Democrat	1	16	29	1	25	72
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>184</b>

Figure 1.1 Party Identification and Self-Identified Ideology Black Evangelical Survey (Gray 2020)

### *President Barack Obama's Campaign Strategies*

When observing Black evangelicals' opposing views on important issues like LGBTQ+ marriage equality, it is interesting to see how they supported President Barack Obama in large numbers despite his endorsement. Nevertheless, it is also essential to note that Barack Obama began his 2008 campaign in *opposition* to marriage equality for the LGBTQ+ community (Gilgoff 2012). Former White House advisor, David Axelrod, claims that Obama publicly stated that Obama "only supported civil unions, not full marriages" (Miller 2015). Axelrod admitted that he counseled Obama to oppose marriage equality because "opposition to gay marriage was particularly strong in the [B]lack church, and as he ran for higher office, he grudgingly accepted the counsel of more pragmatic folks like me, and modified his position to support civil union

rather than marriage” (Axelrod 2015). It is interesting that Barack Obama went to a church congregation and said that marriage should only extend to heterosexual couples (Miller 2015). This is evidence of Obama’s campaign targeting the votes of evangelical voters. President Obama’s stance did not change until after two years into his first term where he told reporters that he was “evolving on the issue and was in favor of the repeal of the Clinton-era Defense of Marriage Act” (Miller 2015). Therefore, this campaign strategy may have played a factor in attracting Black evangelical’s position as more socially conservative members of the Democratic party.

Furthermore, the supplemental interviews in this study played a significant role in seeing how Barack Obama’s shared racial heritage played a factor in Black evangelicals’ voter preferences. Despite disagreeing with Obama’s social agenda, a significant number Black evangelicals saw him as a symbol of societal change towards racial equality, especially older Black evangelicals above the age of 40. In addition, both the survey and interview data illustrated that more than the majority of Black evangelicals believe that being the first Black president played a role in Obama’s campaign success. 45.8% of respondents “Completely Agree” and 37% “Somewhat Agree” with the notion that it played some factor in their support. Though, they also surprisingly expressed that this momentum was partially exhausted by Barack Obama and that new emerging Black candidates struggle in gaining the same benefits in expanding their window of opportunity.

In the interview portion, respondents made it clear that they did not vote for Obama simply because he was Black-identifying. A respondent who is a pastor at a historically Black church claimed that Obama’s campaign staff was in contact with the congregation’s national leadership. The staff reached out for the leadership to persuade their congregants of Obama’s

dedication to the Black community that would be extended if he were elected in the executive office. This was monumental for Obama's campaign staff because of the congregations' access to millions of Black evangelical voters especially in southern states that were largely considered conservative states. Nevertheless, every interviewee was asked if Barack Obama had been discussed by their church's leadership during religious services and all but one of the 15 respondents reported that it was still discussed despite some smaller church's 501(c)(3) status that restricts political expressions (Foundation 2020).

One 24-year-old respondent recalled how one of his church's leaders discussed how Obama was a critical component for racial equality in American society. They discussed Obama's racial identity as an unprecedented factor in past presidential races that had the potential to benefit them as a racial community. Thus, Obama's potential to be a racial advocate and address deficits in the Black community specifically, also played a large role in Black evangelicals overcoming their social differences with his campaign. One respondent, aged 74, expressed how he witnessed firsthand the Jim Crow South and had never thought that there would be "someone that looked like me running for president." He also implicated that despite their ideological differences, it had been a "symbolic moment for Black people that he had been happy to be a part of." Although Black evangelicals for Obama were not that much higher than for John Kerry (Dwyer 2004), Obama largely affected both voter turnout and enthusiasm.

However, both younger and older Black evangelicals agreed that Obama's morality also played a positive role in their support for his candidacy. In fact, a frequent response in the interview data was that Black evangelicals put less emphasis on their differences with Obama in part because of his ability to seem "approachable, relatable, and kind." Preceding the election of Donald Trump, this was a common trend where morality was typically sought by evangelical

voters regardless of race (Campbell 2019). Nevertheless, Obama’s campaign assured the broader Black electorate that he was capable of increasing resources funneled directly to underprivileged Black communities. Thus, understanding the attraction of Black evangelical voters to Barack Obama contains several components that include his initial stance on marriage equality, his shared racial background, and Black evangelicals’ displacement between the two major parties.

### ***Black Evangelical Support for the Democratic Party: The 2016 Election***

	2016 Presidential Election Votes					
2012 Presidential Election Votes	Donald Trump	Hillary Clinton	No Vote	Do Not Recall	Someone Else	Grand Total
Barack Obama	3	99	8	2	15	127
Did Not Vote	1	24	25	1	6	57
Do Not Recall				2		2
Someone Else			1	1		2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>188</b>

Figure 1.2 Comparison of 2012 and 2016 Presidential Elections Black Evangelical Survey (Gray 2020)

Moreover, Figure 1.2 shows that most Black evangelicals voted for Barack Obama in both terms, but some did not vote for Hillary Clinton. The number of “Someone Else” votes increased from 2 in 2012 to 21 in the 2016 election, meaning respondents did not support either majority party. This shows a slight decrease in Black evangelical support for the Democratic party from 2012 to 2016. Interviews also expressed a displacement from both parties after the end of President Obama’s two terms. When asked the source of their dissatisfaction with both parties, respondents claimed that neither party “felt representative of their values.” There was a sense that aligning with either was a sacrifice for some of their ideals. The Republican party, for the more moderate respondents, were deemed more insensitive to racial issues that impacted the Black community. It was also expressed that aligning with the Democratic party seemed to be

against some Black evangelicals' disagreement with abortion rights and marriage equality that stemmed from religious beliefs but even more so in the 2016 election.

Some also thought President Donald Trump was successful in his negative campaigning against Hillary Clinton and believed her to be “corrupt” in some way. Three respondents who voted for Barack Obama voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. However, two older respondents in the interviews claimed that Donald Trump’s campaign seemed to have been racially insensitive to the plight of Black Americans. 11.8% of respondents who voted for Barack Obama, voted for neither Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. Granted, 77.9% of respondents who voted for Obama voted for Hillary Clinton. Despite the majority support for the Democratic candidate in 2016, it is clear that Black evangelicals’ tended to be a bit more skewed in 2016. In addition, Figure 2 also shows how votes in the 2016 election were also a bit skewed by the difference in self-reported ideology and the support for Democratic candidates. Although it is still a majority, moderate voter turnout is the largest representation.

	2016 Presidential Election Votes					
Political Ideology	Donald Trump	Hillary Clinton	Did Not Vote	Do Not recall	Someone Else	Grand Total
Lean Conservative		6	1		5	12
Lean Liberal		34	8	1	5	48
Moderate	4	51	15	3	6	79
Strong Conservative		1	1	1	1	4
Strong Liberal		26	8	1	3	38
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>181</b>

Figure 2. 2016 Presidential Election and Political Ideology Black Evangelical Survey (Gray 2020)

### *Black Voters' Linked Fate*

In an attempt to observe Black evangelicals' connection to the broader Black community and their political engagement, respondents were asked, "Do you think what happens generally to Black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?" This aimed to answer to what extent Black voters felt nationally connected in the American polity. 79.2% of respondents agreed with this notion in the survey. However, in the interviews this was mostly linked to issues of the criminal justice system, welfare programs, and economic tax reforms. Additionally, 88.7% of respondents believed that their socioeconomic status was worse nationally than white people. When respondents were asked whether Obama served in their holistic interest of "people like me," 34% "Somewhat Agree" and 37.7% "Completely Agree." 15.7% were neutral and only 12.6% disagreed with the notion. Dissenting respondents were questioned about this in interviews and claimed they felt that Obama did not represent their socially conservative views in opposition to LGBTQ+ marriage equality and abortion. Thus, there was some communal linkage on issues that impacted underrepresented communities among racial lines that respondents seemed to weigh amongst their more conservative social views.

### ***Comparison to CNN National Exit Poll and the 1996 National Black Election Study***

The objective of comparing the survey data to the CNN National Exit Poll and the 1996 National Black Election Study is to place Black evangelicals' political views within the broader Black electorate to showcase the lack of a Black monolithic voting bloc. In the 2008 presidential election, John McCain received 73% of white evangelical votes to Obama's 26% (Roper n.d.). In 2012, Mitt Romney received 79% of the white evangelical vote to Obama's 20%. The CNN Exit Poll offered data on white evangelicals where 80% of white evangelicals supported Donald Trump's candidacy which contrasted Black evangelical voters. Only 16% of white evangelical voters supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. Current scholars saw this as a "split" of the

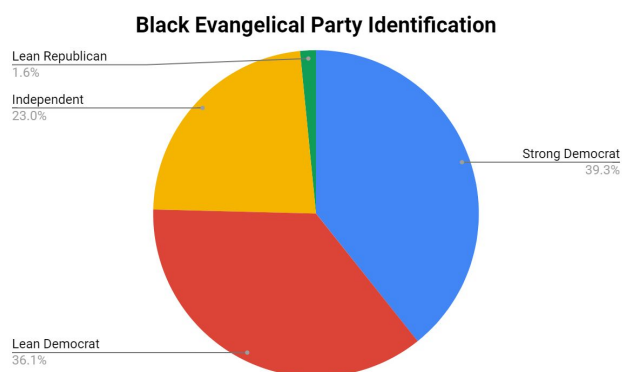
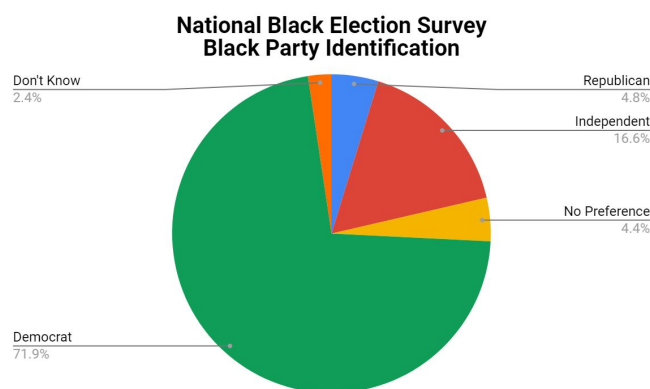


evangelical vote and implied that it may have been driven by racial tensions. This illustrates the role of intersectionality isolating Black Evangelicals from initially being attracted to the campaign. However, some votes were still swayed by Trump's dedication to traditional values which is seen in this survey, but those respondents did not volunteer for an interview.

The Billy Graham Center Institute reported that when both evangelicals were asked if they were disturbed by President Trump's comments about minorities, 55% of respondents agreed (Richard 2018). However, when the question was broken down by race it told a different story. 82% of Black evangelicals agreed with the statement and only 42% of white evangelicals agreed with the statement (Richard 2018). The expansion of this model to study more non-white evangelicals could potentially provide answers to how Donald Trump seemingly "split" the evangelical vote among racial lines (Thomson-DeVeaux 2018). This religious split is attributed to the rise in more racialized rhetoric in Donald Trump's campaign that played a role in Black voters and other underrepresented groups' subsequent distancing from the Republican party (Hochschild 1998). Therefore, it is clear that the influx of racial tensions has influenced attitudes on presidential candidates that make Black evangelicals a vulnerable cross-pressured group.

The 1996 National Black Election Study was conducted at a time where the political climate was significantly different from the current system. There was a decrease in party polarization and divisive partisanship (Blankenhorn 2018). However, the 1996 NBES remains the most current comprehensive, national polling study specifically observing Black political attitudes. Figures 15.1 and 15.2 below illustrate how Black evangelicals are much more likely to identify as Independent as compared to the Black electorate as a whole. There is also a noticeable increase in the identification as a "Moderate" voter in comparison. There is also a 7% increase in Independent party identification which supports the idea that Black Evangelicals have

shifted slightly to the right within the political apparatus of the Democratic Party. This may be that although Black evangelicals may support Democratic candidates, they seem to be more to the right of the Black electorate as a whole.



Figures 3.1 and 3.2 Comparison of NBES (Tate 1996) and Black Evangelical Survey Party Identification (Gray 2020)

Interestingly, on topics of social justice, welfare, and tax reform, Black evangelicals' responses were more similar to the broader Black electorate. Over 80% of Black evangelical respondents were in favor of the federal government addressing social issues and less punitive criminal justice reform. In the 1996 NBES, over 60% of respondents shared these same views.

### ***Key Points from Black Evangelical Interviews***

The interviews aimed to not only support the survey findings but to also construct a deeper understanding of Black evangelical's perception of different presidential candidates.

Another significant point that was uncovered in the interview portion of this study was Black evangelicals' views of the two majority parties. Additionally, issues of immigration, criminal justice reform, taxing the top 1%, and the welfare state was posed to respondents for their opinions. All respondents had negative views of President Donald Trump's immigration policies especially when respondents were told that the legislation also affected individuals from West Africa. There was a shared empathy for Latinx populations affected by Trump's immigration policies that were deemed "racist" and "careless." These views made respondents less inclined to align with the Republican party as one respondent even expressed that aligning with her socially conservative views would come with "a moral cost." In addition, respondents' fiscal liberalism was better detected in the interviews. They were all in favor of taxing the top 1% and supporting the welfare state. This is further evidence of Black evangelicals' position as a cross-pressured group between their fiscal liberalism and their social conservatism. In addition, all of the respondents were in favor of criminal justice reform and acknowledged that mass incarceration was a topic on everyone's mind. They believed that mass incarceration disproportionately affected the Black community and that the Democratic party was better tuned to confronting its systemic effects. A significant point was made by older Black evangelicals, both male and female, who had negative views of feminism and endorsed the notion that males are designed to be leaders. Another common thread in the interviews was respondents' approval of federal economic relief for minority groups which included their endorsement of social welfare programs that assisted underprivileged communities.

***Important Discussion Component: Academic Rhetoric concerning the Black Community***

When beginning this research, I first sought to update the outdated rhetoric used to describe Black voters to create a more comprehensive and holistic categorization of Black voters.

The verbiage to identify Black voters has consistently been “African American” in a multitude of fields in academia. In contemporary society, the term “African American” has become outdated amidst the discourse in academic spaces that modernize Black consciousness and Black intellectual thought (Tate 2012). The term “African American” references a specific subgroup within the African Diaspora that has ancestral linkage to the institution of slavery specifically in the United States (Tate 2012). Therefore, ethnicities within the African Diaspora who do not have a relation to that narrative do not identify as African American. This distinction is crucial to the understanding of Black political behavior and would be negligent to not represent in this study. Figure 4.1 illustrates the number of ethnicities represented in this study as Figure 4.2 shows the number of respondents who racially identify as Black.

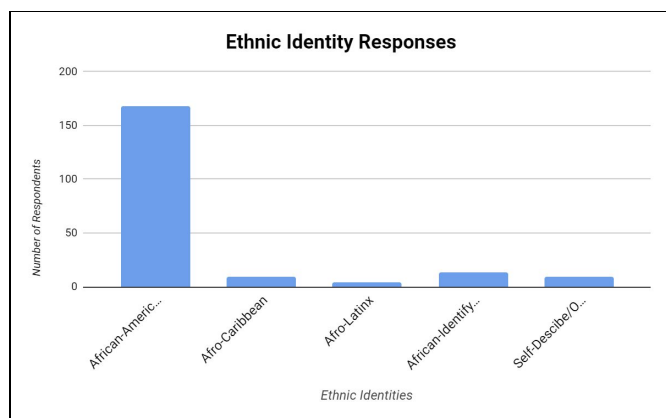


Figure 4.1 Ethnicity Representation in the Black Evangelical Survey (Gray 2020)

Out of 192 respondents, only two responded “No” and one responded with “Maybe” in whether they identify as Black. The three dissenting respondents self-described their ethnic identity as “multiethnic” is not surprising that they did not wholly identify with the term “Black.”

Nevertheless, these figures showcase how the adoption of the term “Black” would be more inclusive of the diverse ethnicities within the African Diaspora.

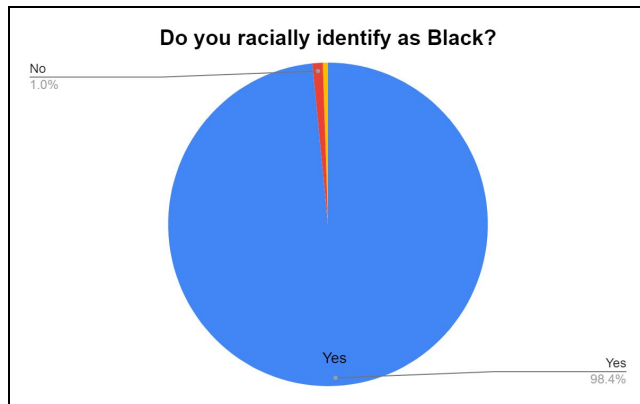


Figure 4.2. Black-Identifying Representation Black Evangelical Survey (Gray 2020)

### ***Limitations***

The main limitations of this study include the scarcity of current academia, the distribution of the survey, and the overrepresentation of younger respondents. The most recent polling data on national Black polling data was in Katherine Tate's 1996 National Black Election Study. The NBES was a national study that reached a sizable portion of the national Black electorate. However, this 24-year gap between the Tate study and this study brought up valid concerns in their comparison. As mentioned earlier, the political climate in American society in the 1990s was very different from the current environment. The two majority parties were closer in proximity on the political spectrum and bipartisan cooperation was more likely than in the current system. The dramatic increase of polarization led to a dramatic shift in redefining both party's identity in national politics. In addition, respondents had to voluntarily opt-in to interviews. This made it difficult to interview those who expressed that they voted Democratic in both the 2008 and 2012 elections, but voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. In addition, the survey was dispersed throughout congregations and 30.4% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. This may have skewed the results a bit more liberal than what may be seen by older respondents who are more likely to vote.

## CONCLUSION

This study enlisted critical race scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to confront the narrative that Black voters operate as a monolithic voting bloc. Although intersectionality was not the main focus of this study, it provided the framework to see the multitude of overlapping identity cleavages that operate within the African Diaspora. Although Black voters have a history of voting in large numbers for Democratic candidates, they are not a unified, monolithic voting bloc. In fact, one-third of Black Americans identify as ideologically conservative but up to 80 to 90% are Democrats (White et al 2020). The assumption that Black voters operate as a monolithic voting bloc stemmed from when Black people first fought for and received the right to vote after collective political defiance that forged strong social bonds (White et al 2020). Nevertheless, the increase in socioeconomic diversity of the Black community that followed the receipt of more civil rights led to an increase of political diversification.

Several factors illustrate the diversity in political attitudes within the African Diaspora. First, the increasing polarization and divided partisanship between the two majority parties made the plight of Black evangelicals more visible as a displaced, majority moderate voting group. As the two major parties shifted to the more extreme ends of the political spectrum, Black evangelicals felt torn between their social conservatism that was too rightwing for the Democratic party and their fiscal liberalism that was too leftwing for the Republican party. In reaction, there was a shift for a considerable number of Black evangelicals to the classification as Independent voters. This shift was largely conducted by older Black evangelicals above the age of 40 as Black evangelicals under the age of 25 still considered themselves "Strong" or "Leaning" Democratic party voters.

Moreover, there existed a correlation between religiosity and socially conservative values where the higher frequency of church attendance was associated with a higher likelihood of opposing views of LGBTQ+ marriage equality and abortion rights. There was also a distinction between party identification and self-reported political ideology. A large piece of the puzzle of Black evangelical voting behavior was the fact that they supported Democratic candidates in recent elections, despite their more moderate to conservative social ideology. This same discrepancy can also be attributed to the rise in Black conservatism not being met with an equivalent rise in the number of Black Republicans (Philpot 2017). Aforementioned, this can partly be answered by Black evangelicals and the broader Black electorates' disassociation with the Republican party. This is due in part to the Republican party's stance on issues that disproportionately affect the Black community like welfare programs, tax reforms, and mass incarceration. Thus, party identification is not a strong indicator for most Black voters' political ideology.

The introduction of Barack Obama was a critical paradigm shift between voters, especially Black voters, and presidential candidates. In the interview portion of this survey, this was mostly attributed to Barack Obama's campaign targeting strategies that approached Black churches as a racial advocate promising equity in resources to the Black community. Nearly 82.8% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that being the first Black-identifying candidate was important to Barack Obama's campaign. These respondents also made it clear that Obama's racial identity was not an essential or mandatory prerequisite for their support of his campaign. Rather, it allowed for a larger window of opportunity for Obama to present himself as an advocate for their specific community. These sentiments of linked fate with the broader Black community was proven to be more of a motivator to overcome the ideological distance.

There was also a significant discussion question that arose during this study. Current literature within political science, legal studies, and public policy are outdated when referring to Black people. Since political actors' decision-making tactics need to be reanalyzed due to the ingression of racially diverse presidential candidates, this study aims to lay the foundation on how to begin the discourse. Modernized rhetoric needs to correctly identify the voters in which scholars aim to discuss and analyze. It has been mistakenly common to refer to all Black voters as "African American" in academia but this term is exclusive to the diverse ethnicities that exist within the African Diaspora. It excludes Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, and African-identifying voters. In this study, there were a multitude of different ethnicities besides African American that were represented. Yet, nearly all but three multi-ethnic respondents of 200 said that they racially identify as Black. This clearly demonstrates that academia needs to adopt the term Black for a more comprehensive and mindful approach to discussing Black people.

The last part of this study conducted a comparison of the data from this study to the 1996 National Black Election Study and the CNN exit poll. Black evangelicals seemed to be more rightward than the larger Black electorate concerning political ideology with an increase in moderate and Independent classification. In comparison to the CNN exit poll, Black evangelicals seemed to be more liberal than white evangelicals because white evangelicals were more likely to support Republican candidates in higher percentages.

Black evangelicals seemed to support Barack Obama because of his commitment to the socioeconomic plight of underrepresented minorities and his potential to become a racial advocate with executive power. However, it is imperative to note that Barack Obama began his 2008 campaign in opposition to LGBTQ+ marriage equality which may have played a role in Black evangelicals' initial attraction to his social campaign. In the survey data, it was also



revealed that the unprecedented conditions of Barack Obama being the first Black-identifying presidential candidate played a role in making voters more attentive in weighing his campaign proposals. This speaks to race being a new factor that needs to be analyzed as more non-white presidential candidates become increasingly common. Voters seem to hold a greater window of opportunity for candidates who share similar characteristics of their background, including race. Older Black evangelical voters expressed this sentiment in interviews and described how their past personal experiences witnessing state-sanctioned racial discrimination, segregation, and inequity made Barack Obama's candidacy seem to be symbolic of national progress. Thus, future voters may be more inquisitive in how a candidate aims to address problems that are more salient to their shared racial community or other shared identities discussed by intersectionality.

Lastly, the broad assumption that Black voters operate as a monolithic voting bloc is not reflective of the diverse Black political attitudes. This study provided a more nuanced approach in observing Black political preferences and behavior which was better seen with an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates critical race theories. The theory of intersectionality permits scholars to see the multitude of voter cleavages within the African Diaspora. The study of white evangelicals is broadly accepted in academia and extending this to non-white evangelicals was beneficial in illustrating how identity is both pervasive and relevant in national politics. The complex and overlapping nature of identity shapes voter preferences and some traditional polling metrics should adopt more nuanced approaches to its oversimplified categorizations of voters. In turn, this will allow broader academia to finally accept the notion that Black voters are just as complex as any other voting group.

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