

Feb 8th, 1:30 PM - 3:00 PM

The African American Political Party Flip

Shanna Riley
Bowling Green State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Riley, Shanna, "The African American Political Party Flip" (2019). *Africana Studies Student Research Conference*. 4.

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf/2019/006/4

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Student Research Conference by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Shanna Mariah Riley

AFRS 4000

Professor Rebecca Skinner-Green

4 December 2018

The African American Political Party Flip

Abstract:

My paper discusses the African American political party flip during the 1930s-1960s. Throughout my research, I found that there were many factors in the African American political party flip which began in the 1930s and continued into the 1960s. After analyzing the origin of the Democratic and Republican parties, I found that the latter supported freeing slaves during the 1800s. I will discuss how presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson each handled Civil Rights during their times in office, and how this impacted the African American vote. Each president saw the power of African American voters, and knew that if they catered to African Americans, they could get more votes. Also, the Democratic Party built rapport with African Americans by further supporting Civil Rights with each presidency. The presentation will discuss how political and moral motives resulted the African American political party flip.

“Black Republicans fascinate because their partisan choice is so out of line with our expectations of black political behavior” (Fields, 2015, para. 1). A century ago, this same sentence would not be true. When the Republican and Democratic parties were born, African Americans started off as mostly Republican. Now, black Republicans are deemed an oxymoron.

What factors influenced African Americans to switch from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party?

The United States was very divided in the 1800s. Due to the Civil War and slavery, there was tension between the north and the south. Choosing a political party during this time depended heavily on a person's race, social status, and geographical location. The Democratic and Republican parties had opposing beliefs when they were founded. The biggest disagreement they had was on the issue of slavery.

Formed in 1828, the Democratic Party favored states making their own laws, leaving the federal government with as little control as possible. This appealed to farmers, factory workers, and especially to slave owners, who were afraid that the government would get rid of slavery. Slavery was the southern states' main economic support, so white southerners undoubtedly favored this party (Democratic Party, n.d.).

The Republican Party, founded in 1854, tried to help African Americans gain rights. One of this party's biggest ideologies and identifiers was its opposition of slavery. They pushed for reform, and championed constitutional changes that called for the abolition of slavery, as well as for the economic and social advancement of African American people. The push for the outlaw of slavery sparked the southern states to secede, which led to the Civil War in 1861. (Republican Party, n.d.).

White southerners wanted slavery to stay in the United States because it was a significant source of income for them. Following the Civil War, they also felt that Republicans played a part in their defeat, which led them to mistrust the Republican Party. Because of the Republican party's opposition of slavery, most African American southerners were Republican. Most

northerners supported this party as well, possibly motivated by an opposition to slavery due to not wanting to compete economically with the south (Republican Party, n.d.).

Between 1865 and 1875, important laws were introduced that would help African Americans gain rights. The Republican Party added the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States' Constitution during the 1800s. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States in 1865. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment went even further by granting former slaves American citizenship. This amendment said that every person "born or naturalized in the United States" was a citizen, and every citizen was provided with "equal protection under the laws" (Landmark Legislation: Thirteenth, Fourteenth, & Fifteenth Amendments, 2017, para. 3). The Fifteenth Amendment allowed African American men to vote. Ratified in 1870, this amendment prevented states from disenfranchising voters "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (Landmark Legislation: Thirteenth, Fourteenth, & Fifteenth Amendments, 2017, para. 4). Since most white southerners were Democrats, they did not want the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, or Fifteenth Amendments to be passed.

Also in 1870, the Civil Rights Act was introduced. A radical Republican, Charles Sumner, who pushed for African American advancement introduced this bill that "guaranteed all citizens, regardless of color, access to accommodations, theatres, public schools, churches, and cemeteries. This bill further forbid the barring of any person from jury service on account of race, and provided that all lawsuits [...] would be tried in federal, not state, courts" (Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875, 2017, para. 1). This bill was very radical for its time, so everything in the bill was not upheld. To make it more likely to pass, the bill was watered down by taking out integrated education (The Civil Rights Act, n.d.). In the end, the bill allowed people in the United States to enjoy "accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of

inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement [...] applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude” (Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875, 2017, para. 4). The bill also allowed African American people to perform jury duty.

These newfound rights of African Americans were not approved of by many people, especially white southerners. Republicans were unable to hold any political power in the south. These politicians were purged, as they were unwelcomed there (Republicans freed the slaves, 2016). Furthermore, violent groups such as the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) were formed to reverse the progressive political changes, and to instill fear in African Americans. This deadly group of people wanted to keep white supremacy in place. So, they killed, intimidated, tortured people, and destroyed property for their cause (History.com editors).

In 1883, there was a shift in the lives of African Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was nullified by a Supreme Court ruling. The ruling declared that racial discrimination at private businesses could not be prevented by the Constitution. This began the start of Jim Crow, which was a period when segregation was legal (The Civil Rights Act, n.d.; Urofsky, 2018). After this court ruling, Frederick Douglass, a black political figure, writer, orator, and abolitionist commented on the matter: “For the life of me I cannot see how an honest colored man who has brains enough to put two ideas together can allow himself under the notion of independence to give aid and comfort to the Democratic party in Ohio or elsewhere. [...] My advice to colored men everywhere is to stick to the Republican party. I hope you will allow no man to tell you contradicted that I am not now, as I ever have been, a firm and inflexible Republican” (Douglass, 2015, para. 3 & 4). This excerpt was taken from a letter written soon after the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was nullified. Douglass’s statements were very strong and urging, and he clearly saw an

issue with Democratic policy. He believed that the Republican Party was going to help African Americans gain rights.

African Americans strongly supported the Republican party until the Great Depression that began in 1929. The Great Depression devastated the economy, which left one fourth of Americans unemployed (Amadeo, 2018). When Democratic President Roosevelt (1933-1945) enacted the New Deal in 1933, which was intended to create programs and reform for poor Americans, African Americans started to support Democrats more. By 1936, three-fourths of African Americans supported Democrats (African Americans and the New Deal). President Roosevelt started many programs to help America out of its economic slump. Roosevelt's time as president brought about significant change in the economy and workforce, and African Americans benefited from many of his programs. During his time as president, African American government workers increased significantly. Specifically, 15 percent of the Works Progress Administration's workers were African American. The National Youth Administration also hired a significant number of black administrators in the south, and helped more than 300,000 African American youth. The educational programs from the New Deal also taught one million African Americans how to read and write. (Roosevelt Institute, 2010).

While President Roosevelt brought significant economic change. Still, he did not focus directly on Civil Rights. Roosevelt did not want to lose the support of white southern Democrats, who were integral in passing the New Deal. For this reason, he shied away from Civil Rights. Many southern Democrats held political seats during his presidency. He knew that they would not support him if he took a strong stance on Civil Rights. There was overt racism in the United States during his presidency, so he did not want to lose the support of racist communities that he needed to support his campaign. He did not address the problems in the African American

community until later in his presidency, when he denounced lynching by calling it murder (Roosevelt Institute, 2010).

Some of the programs Roosevelt enacted, however, hurt African Americans. During Roosevelt's presidency, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration reduced the number of acres people could have. Because many African Americans were sharecroppers, this forced many black farmers to leave their land in 1933 and 1934. The Federal Housing Administration also perpetuated racial segregation during his time in office by denying African Americans mortgages to live in white neighborhoods (Roosevelt Institute, 2010; African Americans and the New Deal, 2016).

It is arguable that Roosevelt's administration influenced a shift in politics that still persists today. When the New Deal was introduced, African Americans saw that they could benefit greatly from the unemployment programs. Though it was damaging to some populations, New Deal helped many Americans out of their poverty. The Roosevelt administration stabilized the American economy, which inadvertently affected many African Americans. When many African Americans did benefit, it is possible that they became more trusting of the Democratic Party. President Roosevelt recognized and later addressed the racial issues of the time during his presidency. The government publicly recognized that African Americans needed federal protection (Roosevelt Institute, 2010).

Also, during Roosevelt's time in office, Democrats saw power in the African American vote. In fact, by 1933, 71 percent of African American voters supported Democrats (Republicans freed the slaves, 2016). According to NPR (National Public Radio), "Franklin Roosevelt's second administration – led by the New Deal – made the Democrats a beacon for black Americans deeply affected by the crushing poverty that was plaguing the country" (Bates, 2014,

para. 11). Democratic politicians saw that if they catered to African American needs, they could obtain their votes. This political party that had not let black people attend their conventions until 1924 saw the political benefits of catering to the needs of African Americans (Jackson, 2011).

Democratic President Truman (1945-1953) succeeded President Roosevelt after his death in 1945. President Truman went even further with Civil Rights than his predecessor did. In 1947, he took steps towards giving African Americans more rights. He addressed the NAACP at the Lincoln Memorial, which was a big step in recognizing the racial issues that the United States faced during the time (Wormser, 2002). He made Civil Rights a national issue. According to the Washington Post, “Harry Truman made an explicit appeal for new Civil Rights measures from Congress, including voter protections, a federal ban on lynching and bolstering existing Civil Rights laws” (Bump, 2015, para. 6). Truman also integrated the army (Wormser, 2002).

The United States was very racially divided during this time, which meant Truman’s focus on Civil Rights was met with backlash. Many white, southern Democrats did not want Civil Rights laws to be passed. When these Civil Rights laws were passed at the Democratic Convention in 1948, many southern Democrats walked out to show their disapproval. Not only this, but Democrats who did not support Civil Rights created a short-lived political party called the “Dixiecrats” in 1948 (Wormser, 2002).

Truman’s presidency further wedged the divide between people in the Democratic Party. Many Democrats supported Civil Rights, and African Americans were identifying as Democrats more than ever before. Despite losing support from southern white Democrats, President Truman continued to make a stand for Civil Rights. President Truman saw the power of African American voters. He knew that they would play a huge part in the presidential election of 1948.

And though the Dixiecrat Party won three southern states during this election, Truman won the presidency.

President Truman may have been influenced by other countries to make steps towards ending segregation. One source explains, “One of Truman’s strongest arguments in favor of Civil Rights was that America and Russia were now locked in a deadly ‘Cold War’ and the Russians were using America’s Jim Crow policies to win support from the rest of the world” (Wormser, 2002, para. 2). It is a sound argument that President Truman wanted to win the support from the rest of the world during the Cold War.

Finally, President Truman may have also seen the ethical concern of Civil Rights. He was outraged at the mistreatment of African American veterans, and wrote about this issue vehemently in 1948: “When a Mayor and City Marshal can take a negro Sergeant off a bus in South Carolina, beat him up and put out one of his eyes, and nothing is done about it by the State authorities, something is radically wrong with the system” (Brown, 2018, para. 25). As president, he saw the injustices that African Americans faced daily. He saw that people mistreated them with no repercussions. This may have made him more sensitive and empathetic to the subject.

As an advocate for Civil Rights, Truman’s leadership strove to gain rights for African Americans, and played a part in the shift of the Democratic Party’s ideologies. After he and Roosevelt’s time in office, it is not far-fetched to believe that people associated this party as more liberal and progressive than the Republican party. This is a stark change from the ideologies that both parties held at their inceptions.

In 1953, Republican Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) became president. Eisenhower was very conservative on the subject of Civil Rights. During his two terms as president, he did not push for any Civil Rights laws. He did not support integration either. In fact, he refused to

address the civil unrest that took place due to riots, discrimination and lynching during the time. When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. requested he help quell the state of chaos in the south, President Eisenhower responded: “I don’t know what another speech would do about the thing right now” (Serwer, 2014, para. 20). Leaders also commented on his lack of furthering the Civil Rights movement. Roy Wilkins, the leader of the NAACP, said “but if he had fought World War II the way he fought for Civil Rights, we would all be speaking German now” (Serwer, 2014, para. 21). President Eisenhower’s lack of leadership and guidance during the Civil Rights movement showed the citizens of the United States that he did not care about the issue.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 was a turning point for the Civil Rights movement. Eisenhower’s handling of the aftermath of this ruling was a clear example of his equivocal attitude towards Civil Rights. When the governor of Arkansas went against the Supreme Court’s ruling and sent the National Guard to prevent African American students from entering a school, President Eisenhower was slow to react. Eventually, he did send soldiers to enforce integration of the school. But, his reasons for sending soldiers were not to support integration: “Eisenhower would always maintain that he had sent troops to enforce a court order, not to compel integration. ‘It is merely incidental that the problem grew out of the segregation problem’” (Serwer, 2014). This statement shows that he did not support integration morally and was not interested in integrating the United States. He sent the soldiers to Arkansas only to enforce an order of the judicial system.

Despite the fact that Eisenhower did not champion integration throughout his presidency, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which protected African American’s voting rights, was passed while he was in office. Still then, the Senate did not support this fully: “Under the direction of Senate Majority Leader and future President Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, the Senate passed a

watered-down version of the House bill which removed stringent voting protection clauses” (The Civil Rights Act of 1957, n.d., para. 1).

President Eisenhower’s lack of leadership on Civil Rights may have pushed African Americans away from the Republican party in even greater numbers. His refusal to support integration throughout his presidency sent a clear message to them.

John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) ran for the Democratic party in the 1960 election. This presidential race between him and Nixon was the closest that the nation had ever seen. During this time, the Civil Rights movement was intense – there were bloody protests, marches, and sit-ins. Right before the election, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed during a Civil Rights protest. Kennedy went against advice given to him by his team, and helped to get the activist out of jail safely. This action played an important part in securing his spot in the White House: “The African-American vote went heavily for Kennedy across the nation, providing the winning margin in several states” (Campaign of 1960, n.d., para. 15). Kennedy’s help demonstrated his support of Civil Rights. He gave hope to African Americans.

When Kennedy took office in 1961, his stance on Civil Rights faltered. To avoid tension between his administration and southern Democrats in Congress, President Kennedy treaded lightly on Civil Rights Issues. Also, to maintain popularity, President Kennedy did not want to support Civil Rights strongly. As PBS editors stated, “The president needed the white southern vote to win reelection in 1964. So, Kennedy adopted a cautious approach to Civil Rights, emphasizing enforcement of existing laws over the creation of new ones” (JFK and Civil Rights, n.d., para. 4). In the face of trying to maintain political stability, while also presumably wanting to continue his support of them, Kennedy appointed African Americans to governmental positions in his administration to take the pressure off of himself to stand strong for Civil Rights

(JFK and Civil Rights, n.d.). Straddling the fence in his presidency benefited him greatly because he was able to win the votes of both sides.

As the Civil Rights movement progressed, violence against African Americans worsened. President Kennedy took a strong stance on Civil Rights toward the end of his presidency. In 1962, an African American man tried to register at a segregated university in Mississippi. President Kennedy sent troops there, and ended segregation on that campus (Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). Also, in 1963, when protesters were brutally beaten and tortured in Alabama, President Kennedy decided that it was time for change. He was embarrassed by racial tension and Jim Crow in the United States, and did not want to jeopardize public safety by allowing the violence to continue. Therefore, in a speech on national television and radio in 1963, “Kennedy announced he would send comprehensive Civil Rights legislation to Congress” (JFK and Civil Rights, n.d., para. 10). His speech gave African Americans hope that they would be seen as equal citizens in the United States, and enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts.

On November 22, 1963, before he could pass the Civil Rights Act, Kennedy was assassinated. His vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), took office in 1963. President Johnson explained that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be passed in memory of John Kennedy: “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights bill for which he fought so long” (Gittinger & Fisher, 2004, para. 3).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 protected African Americans legally – it “ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or nation origin” (History.com Civil Rights editors, 2010, para. 1). This was a significant victory in the Civil Rights movement. African Americans were protected by the law.

But, the movement did not stop there. President Johnson also signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which “aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote” (History.com Voting Rights editors, 2009, para. 1). Then, in 1968, the Fair Housing Act was passed. This bill “prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion, nation origin or sex” (History.com Fair Housing editors, 2010, para. 1).

Lyndon B. Johnson was not only a passionate Civil Rights supporter, but he was also ardent about ending poverty. He started many legislations and programs aimed at reducing poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. He signed Medicare and Medicaid into law in 1965, which are health insurance programs for elderly and economically disadvantaged people, which included many African Americans (History.com Lyndon B. Johnson editors, 2009).

Presidents Kennedy and Johnson restored hope for African Americans. President Kennedy was hesitant to fight for Civil Rights for much of his time in office and this may have been due to his focus on the Vietnam War, which went on from 1955 until 1975. His proposal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 showed people that he cared about the wellbeing and federal protection of African Americans. President Johnson covered a lot of ground during his time in office. He passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. He showed that he was an ally to African Americans with the policies and programs he made. John Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson’s legacies made African Americans more trusting of the Democratic party. As a result, in 1964, over 80% of African Americans identified as Democrat, while less than 10% identified as Republican (Bump, 2015).

There were many factors in the African American political party flip which began in the 1930s and continued into the 1960s. Each president also saw the power of African American

voters, and knew that if they catered to African Americans, they could get more votes. Also, the Democratic Party built rapport with African Americans by further supporting Civil Rights with each presidency. Political and moral motives resulted the African American political party flip. Today, the effects are still seen today, as most African Americans identify as Democrats. As of 2016, 87 percent of African Americans identify as Democrats, while 7 percent identify as Republican (Party affiliation among U.S. voters, 2018).

References

African Americans and the New Deal. (2016). Retrieved from

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3447

Amadeo, K. (2018, November 16). New Deal summary, programs, policies, and its success.

Retrieved from <https://www.thebalance.com/fdr-and-the-new-deal-programs-timeline-did-it-work-3305598>

Bates, K. (Host). (2014, July 14). Why did black voters flee the Republican Party in the 1960s?

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/07/14/331298996/why-did-black-voters-flee-the-republican-party-in-the-1960s>

- Brown, D. L. (2018, July 26). How Harry S. Truman went from being a racist to desegregating the military. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/26/how-harry-s-truman-went-from-being-a-racist-to-desegregating-the-military/?utm_term=.0b2a47552820
- Bump, P. (2015, July 07). When did black Americans start voting so heavily Democratic? Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/07/when-did-black-americans-start-voting-so-heavily-democratic/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b716261b90d2
- Campaign of 1960. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/campaign-of-1960>
- Civil Rights Movement. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/civil-rights-movement>
- Democratic Party. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Democratic_Party
- Douglass, F. (2015, January 29). From the archives: Frederick Douglass on the Republican Party. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-archive-frederick-douglass-republican-party-20150129-story.html>
- Fields, C. D. (2015). The loneliness of the black republican: Pragmatic politics and the pursuit of power. *Political Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 130(4), 794–796. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/10.1002/polq.12427>
- Gittinger, T., & Fisher, A. (2004). LBJ Champions the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/civil-rights-act-1.html>
- History.com Civil Rights editors. (2010, January 4). Civils Rights Act of 1964. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act>

History.com editors. (2010, March 4). KKK founded. Retrieved from

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/kkk-founded>

History.com Fair Housing editors. (2010, January 27). Fair Housing Act. Retrieved from

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fair-housing-act>

History.com Lyndon B. Johnson editors. (2009, October 29). Lyndon B. Johnson. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/lyndon-b-johnson>

History.com Voting Rights editors. (2009, November 9). Voting Rights Act of 1965. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act>

Jackson, B. (2011, May 16). Blacks and the Democratic Party. Retrieved from

<https://www.factcheck.org/2008/04/blacks-and-the-democratic-party/>

JFK and Civil Rights. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/jfk-domestic-politics/>

Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875. (2017, January 12). Retrieved from

<https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1875.htm>

Landmark Legislation: Thirteenth, Fourteenth, & Fifteenth Amendments. (2017, January 12).

Retrieved from

<https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilWarAmendments.htm>

m

Republicans freed the slaves, so why do African-Americans vote Democrat? (2016, March 20).

Retrieved from <https://www.cdapress.com/archive/article-f2468660-efc2-11e5-9b74-ef2b7eee8454.html>

Republican Party. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Republican_Party

Roosevelt Institute. (2010, February 05). African Americans and the New Deal: A Look Back in History. Retrieved from <http://rooseveltinstitute.org/african-americans-and-new-deal-look-back-history/>

Serwer, A. (2014, May 18). Why don't we remember Ike as a civil rights hero? Retrieved from <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/why-dont-we-ike-civil-rights>

The Civil Rights Act of 1875. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-Civil-Rights-Act-of-1875/>

The Civil Rights Act of 1957. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/The-Civil-Rights-Act-of-1957/>

Urofsky, M. I. (8 Oct. 2018) Civil Rights Cases. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*, retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Civil-Rights-Cases#ref1225484>

Wormser, R. (2002). The rise and fall of Jim Crow. Retrieved from https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_truman.html