

**The
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Cover Story
Where the Left Lives:
Black America is the Core
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"The great political divide in America today is not red vs. blue, north vs. south, coastal vs. interior, or even rich vs. poor – it is now clearly black vs. white." This was the conclusion of the Bay Area Center For Voting Research upon the release of their report listing the 236 US cities with populations of 100,000 or more in order of how "liberal" or how "conservative" they are. Researchers at BACVR reached what is to us at **BC** an unsurprising conclusion:

“The nation’s remaining liberals are overwhelming African Americans.

“The BACVR study that ranks the political ideology of every major city in the country shows that cities with large black populations dominate the list of liberal communities. The research finds that Detroit is the most liberal city in the United States and has one of the highest concentrations of African American residents of any major city. Over 81% of the population in Detroit is African American, compared to the national average of 12.3%. In fact, the average percentage of African American residents in the 25 most liberal cities in the country is 40.3%, more than three times the national rate.

“The list of America’s most liberal cities reads like a who’s who of prominent African American communities. Gary, Washington D.C., Newark, Flint, Cleveland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Birmingham have long had prominent black populations. While most black voters have consistently supported Democrats since the 1960s, it is the white liberals that have slowly withered away over the decades, leaving African Americans as the sole standard bearers for the left....

“While there are some noteworthy pockets of liberals who are not African American, these places end up being the exceptions. College towns like Berkeley and Cambridge have modest black populations, but remain bastions of upper middle–class, white, intellectual liberalism. These liberal communities, however, are more reminiscent of penguins clustering together around a shrinking iceberg, than of a vibrant growing political movement.”

Regular **BC** readers might have already noticed that we eschew both the terms “liberal” and “conservative.”

All Americans, but most especially white Americans seem to live in a media-created, ahistorical sort of bubble. This reality-distorting set of interlocking bubbles, a sort of Matrix, not unlike that in the movie of the same name, constantly furnishes us with disinforming explanations that really don't explain. The liberal vs. conservative dichotomy is the “inside the matrix” explanation of how politics works. Outside the matrix, among the rest of humanity it is generally understood that the ground over which political disputes are fought is the left vs. the right.

Better than two hundred years ago, there was a moment in the French Revolution in which that nation's first constituent assembly sat. On the right side of the speaker sat France's ancient and bloodthirsty nobles, many of whom aimed to bring back the king. Allied with them were the Church, the country's biggest and richest landowner, and the masters of France's vast overseas slave plantations in Martinique, Saint Dominique and elsewhere in the New World. In a few years the slaves of Saint Dominique would rebel, tear the white stripe out of the middle of the French flag and rename their land Haiti, in honor of its exterminated native inhabitants. On the left side of the room sat the representatives of small farmers and small business people, the landless farmworkers, the urban workers and poor. And so it has been that all over the world since that time, the political forces which prop up and defend entrenched wealth and ancient privilege have been called “the right,” while those who fight for the humanity and dignity of poor and ordinary men and women and for their right to a place in the sun have been called “the left.” Those are the terms in general use outside the Matrix.

Words are tools for understanding reality. The most useful ones allow us to make clear distinctions between things that are in fact different. How do we tell whether a public policy or a political figure is “liberal” or “conservative”? The answer is that we can't always, and even when we think we can it makes little difference.

Hilary Clinton, Congressmen David Scott (D-GA) and Artur Davis (D-AL) and General Wesley Clark are all supposed “liberal” Democrats. But all supported the war in Iraq, and none of the three who had a vote cast it against the Patriot Act. Democratic Senator Pat Leahy is a liberal, and voted John Roberts onto the Supreme Court, just as “liberals” before him voted for Clarence Thomas. “Liberal” Democratic Senate leader Harry Reid supports Bush's latest right wing crony appointment to the Supreme Court, and “liberal” Senator Barack Obama voted for “tort reform” that protects wealthy corporations from suits by ordinary citizens.

On the other hand we are constantly told that the Black Church is “conservative.” But **BC**'s February 3, 2005 issue quotes a Chicago Tribune article saying that the National Baptist Convention, which encompasses four denominations and claims 15 million African American congregants earlier this year

“...declared their opposition to the war in Iraq and to the nomination and expected confirmation of Alberto Gonzales as attorney general.

”They also called for a higher minimum wage, discontinuation of recent tax cuts, investment in public education and reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, some provisions of which are up for review in 2007....

”Leaders also demanded that Bush stop privatization of prison construction, reinvest in children's health insurance and increase global relief for black nations such as Sudan and Haiti.”

So the “liberalism” of Hilary Clinton, Harry Reid, Barack Obama, or David Scott gives us no clue as to what they actually stand for, any more than the supposed “conservatism” of the black church explains Rev. Jesse

Jackson, Dr. Martin Luther King or the National Baptist Convention. The labels “liberal” and “conservative” hide more than they explain. It’s only when we emerge from the Matrix to ask which side political personalities, organizations and social forces line up on, the left or the right, that we get useful answers.

The Core of the Left Lives in Black America

BACVR director Jason Alderman calls the revelation that the core of the American left lives in black America “disheartening.” We at **BC** can understand why a self-described white “liberal” might feel that way. But it should be no surprise. Almost three years ago, Black Commentator coined the term “the black consensus” to define the persistent fact that African Americans, across lines of gender, class and generation held to a set of political opinions well to the left of America’s so-called mainstream. The BACVR study only reaffirms what **BC** said three years ago:

“African Americans remain in remarkable, consistent agreement on political issues, a shared commonality of views that holds strongly across lines of income, gender and age. The Black Commentator's analysis of biannual data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies confirms the vitality of a broad Black Consensus. Most importantly, the data show that Black political behavior has not deviated from recent historical patterns, nor is any significant Black demographic group likely to diverge from these patterns in the immediate future....

”African Americans are and have always been, in fact, clumped together on the left side of the conventional American political spectrum. An objective reading of the JCPES survey confirms some of the underlying basis for Blacks' liberal voting patterns – which is long term bad news for the Right and self-styled Black conservatives. Still, this is not good enough news for Black progressives, since the task of organizing people for political action requires an understanding of how they actually feel about issues as they relate to their own lives and in the context of their group's particular world view, rather than within the framework presented by American corporate media.”

Black Leaders Must Make African American Issues American Issues

Organizing black communities around what African Americans already believe is however, *not* what a sizeable chunk of black leadership wants to do. At last month’s CBC week, Rep. Mel Watt treated CBC Monitor’s Leutisha Stills to an uncivil rant about how inappropriate it was to cast issues like war and peace or universal, single-payer health care as “black issues.” Rep. Watt’s prescription for black leadership would instead free our elite from its bothersome constituents and enable them to rent themselves to the highest bidder on just about any matters except funding HBCUs and maybe voting rights.

This kind of leadership dooms black America to non-representation and continued political isolation, as well as making invisible on the greater American political scene the fact that tens of millions of citizens already favor national health care as a human right, an education of equally high quality for all, have opposed the war in Iraq from the start, and hold an array of other political views that the corporate media might call “ultra-liberal” but are actually leftist. At this time, black political leaders are in the best position of any American leaders to publicly stand up for single-payer health care and other reforms, because there is no doubt that their constituencies would unequivocally support them.

If Barack Obama for instance, was to experience a flashback to his early unequivocal opposition to the war in Iraq, or his days in the Illinois State Senate, when he supported universal health care via the Bernardin Amendment, the rightward running room for white Democrats would suddenly and dramatically narrow.

To its credit, the BACVR report poses an important question for black and white American leftists, and maybe for “liberals” too. If African Americans are the core and base of the left in America, why are we so vastly under-represented in its leadership?:

“Despite being the core of America’s liberal base, a major split exists between who the nation’s liberals are and who leads them politically. White politicians still control the levers of power within the Democratic Party, and black faces are rare around the decision making tables of America’s liberal advocacy groups.”

This is probably a question that white leaders of the Democratic party would rather not see asked too loudly.

White Democratic party leaders and some of their black colleagues have always known that black America is where the left lives. They count on its votes, but need to muzzle its voice, and have honed to a fine art the practice of appearing just a wee bit less openly hostile to black aspirations than Republicans. A despicable strategy perhaps, but its continued success depends on black leadership being allowed, as Rep. Watt and others desire, to follow the money instead of being held accountable to the black consensus, to the actual will of their black constituents, who are firmly on the left.

The only folks who seem unaware that the left lives in black America are actual self-described white leftists, and the modest number of blacks who listen much too attentively to the corporate song that an imaginary “post-civil-rights” generation of conservative blacks is about to emerge. Fortunately no evidence exists which might substantiate this oft-repeated claim. **BC** advises brothers and sisters in the former group to turn off the TV and radio for a few weeks. Put down the Wall Street Journal and the Atlanta Constitution. Talk to your black neighbors and friends, if you have any. Talk to your parents and their friends. Talk to your pastor unless you’re in a mega-church, in which case (s)he won’t have time to talk to you anyway. Forget about “conservative” and “liberal.” Look instead for indications of whether the black people you talk to are on the right, or on the left and we suspect that you too will find where the left lives.

White Leftists Must Solicit Black Participation, or be Irrelevant

For the white left, the situation is more complex. African Americans have overwhelmingly opposed the war in Iraq from its outset, but the black presence at last month’s large antiwar demonstrations in Washington, in San Francisco and elsewhere lagged far behind the actual percentages of black vs. white opposition to the war. By failing to find ways to effectively unite with the broad leftward current that flows through the heart of black America white leftists also doom themselves to the margins of America’s political life.

Right now it is Ramadan, and devout Muslims turn to face Mecca several times a day. It is hard to imagine white Americans going out to convince their fellow whites of anything if they cannot make common cause with their black neighbors who are already of the same stripe.

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