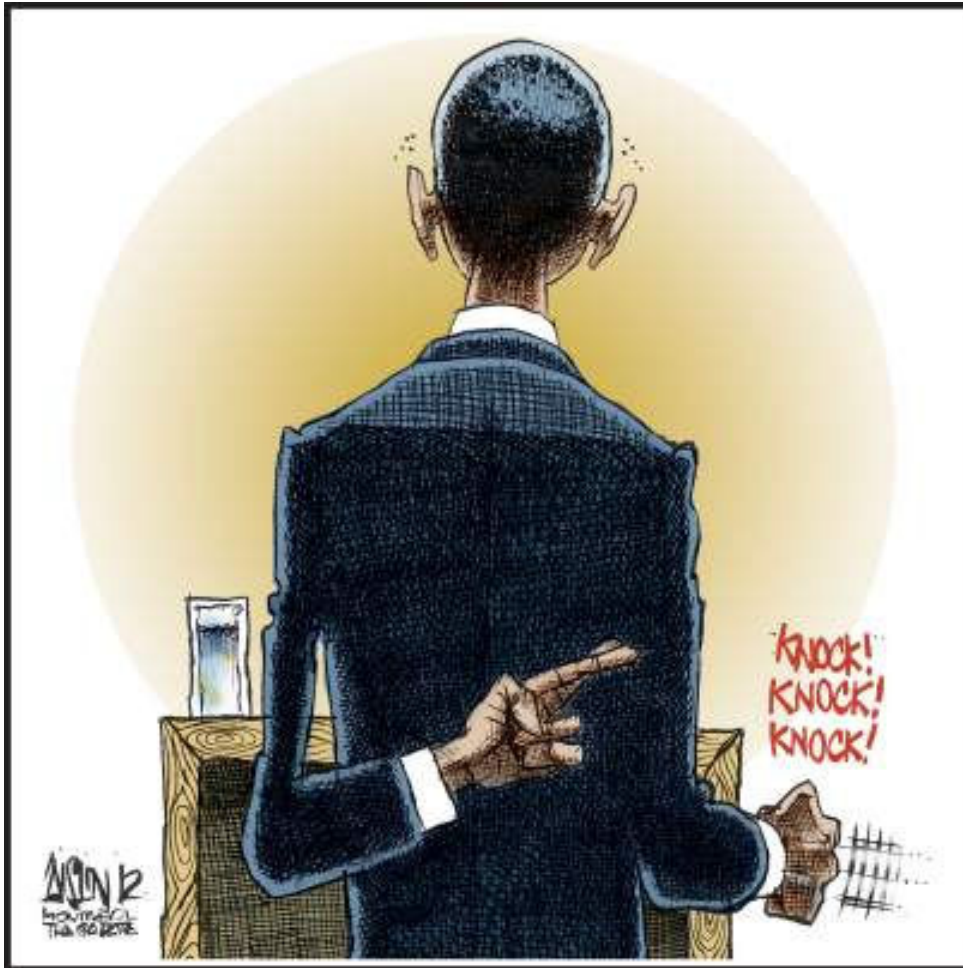


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The black vote



By **Antony Davies & James Harrigan**

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Barack Obama carried 96 percent of the black vote in 2008. All indications are that he will do similarly well with that demographic next month, which is no surprise given nearly monolithic black identification with the Democratic Party and Obama's status as the first black president.

The black vote has been, and likely will continue to be, safely and solidly Democrat.

But should it be?

To answer that question, we might reformulate Ronald Reagan's mantra from 1980: Are blacks better off now than they were four years ago? By the numbers, the answer is an unqualified no. And the evidence is overwhelming.

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During the George W. Bush years, median income for blacks was 80 percent of that for whites. That number has been declining steadily throughout Obama's term in office and was 75 percent in 2011, the last year for which census data are available.

To put this in clear terms, the median black income was \$28,000 (in today's terms) versus a \$35,100 median white income when Bush left office. By 2011, the median black income had fallen to \$23,600 while the median white income had increased to \$35,300.

This is due, in no small part, to unemployment. Here blacks have fared considerably worse than their white counterparts as well. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the official unemployment rate for blacks rose from 10 percent in 2008 to 14.5 percent today, while unemployment for whites increased from 5.2 percent to 7.2 percent over the same period.

But the official unemployment figures understate the reality. When workers are unemployed so long that they stop looking for work, the government stops counting them as unemployed. Adding back those discouraged workers shows that the actual unemployment rate for blacks rose from 10 percent in 2007 to 17.7 percent today, whereas white unemployment increased from 7.2 percent to 10.4 percent during the same period.

If unemployment paints a bleak picture, incarceration rates make matters considerably worse. Blacks today are imprisoned at almost seven times the rate at which whites are imprisoned. The majority of these people are imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses.

In perhaps the most telling metric, the poverty rate for blacks rose from less than 35 percent in 2008 to almost 39 percent in 2011, according to the Census Bureau. The poverty rate for whites during the same period was 15.8 percent and 18.6 percent, respectively.

Much of America is worse off today than it was four years ago. But blacks are so disproportionately worse off it is a wonder that Obama takes the black vote for granted. It is even more a wonder that he is right to do so.

Blacks might well support him in overwhelming numbers in the upcoming election. But one day soon, Democrats will have to take history into account.

There was a time when the black vote was solidly Republican. This is not surprising, given that Abraham Lincoln was the first Republican president. Blacks did not begin voting for Democrats in large numbers until Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for the presidency in 1932. And even after that, Republican candidates were able to win large portions of the black vote.

Dwight Eisenhower won 39 percent of the black vote in 1956. Richard Nixon took 32 percent in 1960 when he ran against John F. Kennedy.

So what happened? In 1964 Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, marshaled the Civil Rights Act through Congress. His Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, opposed it. Johnson went on to win the election of 1964 with 94 percent of the black vote.

Blacks asked the simple question, "What have you done for us lately?," and they walked away from the Republican Party en masse.

It took more than 100 years from Lincoln's election for that to happen but happen it did. That was 48 years ago. How long will it take black Americans to look at the evidence before them once again?

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