

# Center on African American Politics and Society

BLACK POLITICS SURVEY, SEPTEMBER 2008

## Survey on Race, Politics, and Society

*Sponsored by ABC News, USA Today, and  
the Center on African American Politics and Society*

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**T**he Center for African-American Politics and Society (CAAPS) and ABC News's "Black Politics Survey" reveals a sense of optimism and national pride among African Americans in the lead up to the November 2008 presidential election. Blacks - more than whites and Hispanics - express greater enthusiasm for the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama. But despite a sense of pride and higher rates of political interest and engagement in the campaign, black Americans are deeply divided over what are the best strategies for individual and group advancement.

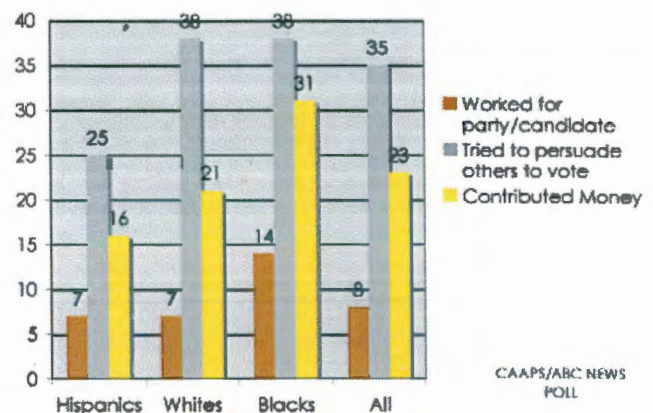
The survey also reveals the growing complexities of black identities, where other social identities besides race, particularly national and class identities, may have greater importance in determining how black Americans perceive themselves in the future. These competing identities open up the possibility of blacks building and joining multiracial coalitions in a variety of causes that address issues of mutual interests across different communities.

### Race and the Presidential Campaign

Findings from the CAAPS/ABC Survey reveal that blacks are more politically attuned to the election than whites and Hispanics. When asked, "how closely are you following the presidential race," 56% of blacks answered "very closely" compared to 48% of whites and 33% of Hispanics. This higher level of attentiveness among blacks suggests that black turnout in November will likely surpass black turnout rates during the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004.

The survey also shows that the presidential race is a statistical dead heat and that there are wide racial and ethnic differences in the level of support for the two candidates. Obama has a slight edge over McCain - 47% to McCain's 45%, an advantage that is within the 2% statistical margin of error in the sample. 92% of blacks say they will vote for Obama compared to 4% for McCain. A majority of whites (56%) expressed support for McCain while a little more than a third of whites (36%) reported support for Obama. A majority of Hispanics (57%) support Obama while a third of Hispanics backs McCain (33%).

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Campaign Activities



The high level of enthusiasm for Obama among blacks has been converted to greater-than-average levels of participation beyond the ballot box.

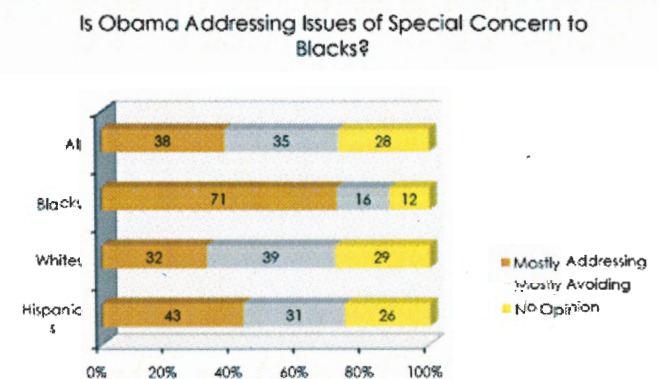
In three types of campaign activities: working for a party or political candidate, trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate, or contributing money to a campaign, blacks have participated at greater or at equal rates with whites and Hispanics in the past 12 months.

Blacks are twice as likely to have worked for a political candidate (14%) than whites (7%) and Hispanics (7%). Both blacks and whites have tried to persuade others to vote at roughly same rates - 39% and 38% respectively. The rates for Hispanics are lower - only a quarter (25%) report trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. And in a campaign year that has broken records for the amount of money raised by presidential candidates, blacks have been contributing money to campaigns at a greater rate than other groups. 31% of blacks report giving money to a candidate compared to 21% of whites - a difference of 10 percentage points. 16% of Hispanics reported contributing to a political campaign in the past year.

### Perceptions of Obama's Messages to Blacks & Whites

Pundits, journalists, activists, and public intellectuals have been debating since the start of the presidential election season whether Obama's campaign has paid sufficient attention to issues that are important to the black community. Some have argued that the Obama campaign's "race-neutral" approach has pushed issues that are important to black Americans off the public agenda. Others have argued that Obama's focus on issues that are universal to all Americans- such as the candidate's approach to healthcare, the economy, and education - benefits everyone, including blacks. Still others argue that Obama is avoiding discussing issues of special concerns to blacks because of political expediency. Some have speculated that discussing these issues would risk Obama alienating white voters.

The CAAPS/ABC Survey reveals surprising and unexpected responses to the question on whether Obama is avoiding issues important to blacks. When asked, "do you think as a candidate Obama has been mostly addressing issues of special concern to African-Americans, or mostly avoiding those issues," blacks are far more likely to agree that Obama has been addressing issues of concern, more so than whites and Hispanics.



Almost three-quarters of blacks (71%) think Obama has been addressing issues of special concern to them compared to nearly a third of whites (32%) and 43% of Hispanics. Indeed, a plurality of whites (39%) and nearly a third of Hispanics (31%) think that Obama has been avoiding discussing issues of special concern to blacks. Only 16% of blacks believe Obama has been avoiding black issues.

There are at least three possibilities for why Obama is overwhelmingly perceived by blacks to be addressing issues that are important to them. First, blacks may see issues and policy positions by the Obama campaign - such as healthcare, public education, an expanding economy - as issues that are important to the interests and concerns of black communities. Second, many blacks may perceive Obama's comments and speeches on black responsibility as the candidate's attempt at addressing issues of special concern to them. Third, the extraordinary levels of support for Obama among blacks might also be hindering criticism of the candidate, especially any criticism that highlights the shortcomings of the candidate's relationship to the black community.

When the CAAPS/ABC Poll asked those respondents who thought that Obama was avoiding black issues to explain why, most attributed the candidate's avoidance not to neglect or political expediency but to his attempts to reach beyond race. 56% believe that Obama is attempting to transcend racial issues while nearly a third (32%) think he is avoiding black issues because he knows it would be unpopular with white voters. Only 4% thought that Obama is just not concerned about

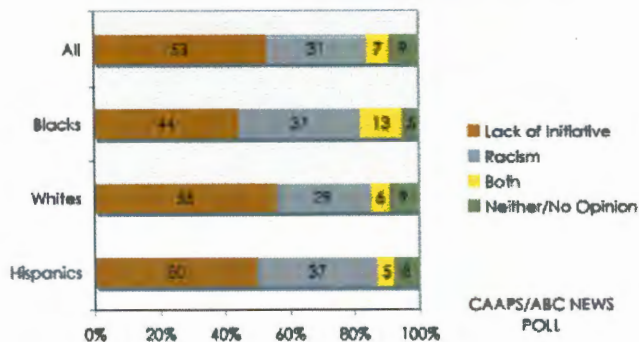


black issues. This pattern of responses holds up across racial and ethnic groups.

Other questions in the survey indicate that most blacks feel that Obama's messages of personal responsibility are addressed to them. When asked has Obama's speeches "calling black Americans to take responsibility for their actions and pull themselves up in society" was more to appeal to blacks or to whites, most blacks thought those messages were intended for them (52%) or for both blacks and whites (25%). Only 12% of blacks reported that the messages were intended specifically for whites. In contrast, nearly a third of whites think that Obama's calls for black responsibility were mostly intended for them; 37% believe those appeals were directed mostly at blacks.

Blacks, on the other hand, differ on why they think blacks face difficulties in improving their situation. Reflecting recent discussions about the need for greater personal responsibility, a plurality of blacks (44%) think that blacks' difficulties are attributed to a lack of initiative among blacks; 37% attribute those difficulties to racism. 13% report that both racism and lack of initiative are at play. 13% report that both racism and lack of initiative are at play.

Why Blacks Face Difficulty in Improving Their Situation

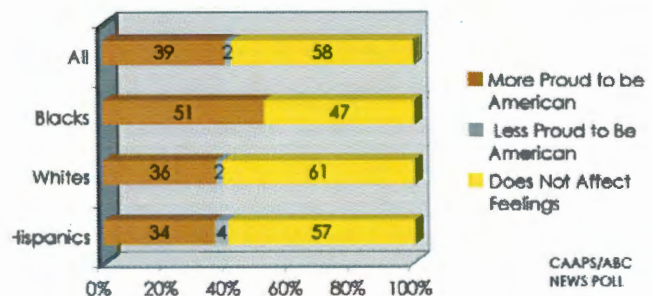


A majority of whites (56%) and Hispanics (50%) attribute the difficulty blacks have in moving forward to a lack of initiative while 29% and 37% respectively think that racism is the problem. Thus, a plurality of blacks and a majority of whites and Hispanics think that the blame lies in individual shortcomings, a perspective on black life that would complement Obama's call for blacks themselves to become responsible for the social ills affecting black communities.

### Surging National Identity Among Blacks?

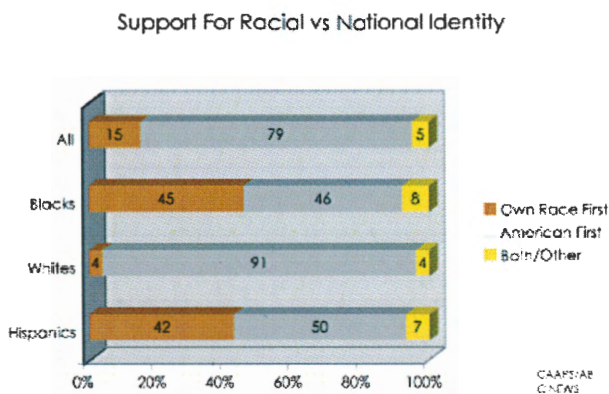
Barack Obama's ascendancy as the nation's first person of African ancestry to capture the presidential nomination of a major political party in the United States has contributed to a surge of racial pride and perhaps greater feelings of national identity among African Americans. When we asked blacks, whites, and Hispanics whether Obama's nomination "as the first black presidential candidate make you more proud to be an American, less proud, or does it not affect your feelings about being an American," blacks were considerably more likely to express feelings of national pride than whites and Hispanics.

Obama and Feelings of National Pride



Slightly more than half of blacks (51%) reported being more proud of being an American after the Obama nomination, compared to 47% who reported that Obama's nomination did not affect their feelings about being American. In contrast, only 36% of whites and 34% of Hispanics felt more proud to be an American while 61% and 57% respectively felt that Obama's nomination had no affect on their feelings of national pride. Only 2% of whites and 4% of Hispanics thought that Obama's nomination made them feel less proud of being an American.

To compare the saliency of racial identity and national identity we asked respondents whether they think of themselves as black, white, or Hispanic first or as American first. This question did not include hyphenated identities as choice categories (e. g. white Americans, African-Americans, Latino-Americans) since the question is designed to separately gauge the saliency of racial identities and national identities for each group.



An overwhelming majority of whites (91%) place their national identity over their racial identity. This finding is not surprising since whites are the majority racial group in the United States and therefore their identity as whites has historically been connected to what it means to be an American. Only 4% of whites place being white above being American. Blacks and Hispanics are evenly split in where they place their racial and national identity. 45% of blacks think of themselves as black first while 46% think of themselves as American first. Similarly, 42% of Hispanics think of themselves as Hispanic first, while 50% think of themselves as American first.

Responses to previous survey questions on the importance blacks give to racial and national identity suggests that blacks may be developing a stronger sense of national identity. That is, blacks' racial identity, which has been important to their understanding of politics and their motivations for political activism, may be becoming more complex as other identities - including national identities - compete with racial identities.

Two World Values Surveys, one in 1995 and the other in 2000, asked respondents in the United States which best describes them: were they "above all" Hispanic American, Black American, White American, Asian American, or were they American first and a member of their racial or ethnic group second. The response of blacks to this question in 1995 shows that approximately three-quarters of blacks (76%) identify themselves as Black American first and 18% choose to perceive themselves as American first. By 2000 there was a marginal shift of 4%, with blacks identifying more as American (22%) than Black American.

In the CAAPS/ABC Survey blacks' response to the question is evenly divided between the two categories. For blacks it might be that Obama's campaign theme of cross-racial unity and his emphasis on breaking beyond barriers that keep Americans separate, may be influencing a heightened sense of nationalism. It is unclear whether the increases in the level of national pride are short-term or long-term. If Obama loses the race it will be telling if this sense of national identity expressed among half the black population is sustained or if Obama wins whether blacks' feelings of national pride continue to surge.

### Differences over Group Strategies for Black Advancement

The survey indicates that blacks are far more likely to report that they have personally experienced racial discrimination. Nearly 60% of blacks report that they are either often or occasionally discriminated against because of their race (compared to 41% of Hispanics and 14% of whites). However, nearly a quarter of blacks (23%) report that they have never experienced racial discrimination.

This history of racial discrimination in the United States and contemporary experiences of discrimination among at least three-quarters of the black population (who perceive that they are either often, occasionally, or rarely discriminated against) contributes to feelings of unity among blacks. Indeed, 70% of blacks in the survey agree that there is a "black experience" in America compared to 20% who do not believe such an experience exists. And a majority of blacks (64%) believed their individual fate in the United States is linked to the destiny of all blacks. When asked "do you think what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life," 64% of blacks answered affirmatively. Nearly a third of blacks (32%) felt that they did not share their fate with blacks as a group.

This sentiment in the black population has been remarkably stable for at least twenty-four years when it was first asked in the 1984 National Black Election (NBES). It was asked in subsequent NBES surveys in 1988 and 1996. In 1984 and 1988 - both years when Jesse Jackson ran for the Democratic Party's presidential nominee - 64% of blacks reported sharing a similar fate with other blacks, the exact proportion reported in the CAAPS/



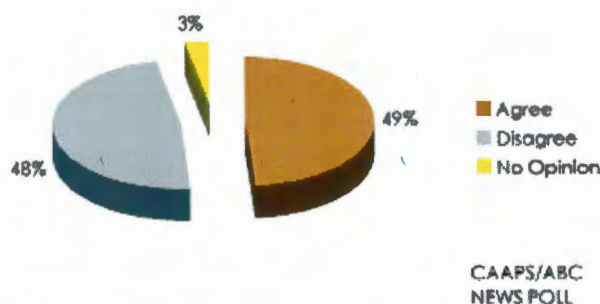
ABC News Survey. In the 1996 NBES, a higher percentage of blacks (77%) reported feelings of linked fate with other blacks.

But underneath the shared experiences of racial discrimination and feelings of racial solidarity are deep divisions among blacks about what are the best individual and collective strategies that should be pursued to improve black communities. When asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "blacks should stop thinking of themselves as a group and think more of themselves as individuals," black respondents were split down the middle. Nearly half agreed (49%) while the other half disagreed (48%) with blacks thinking of themselves as individuals.

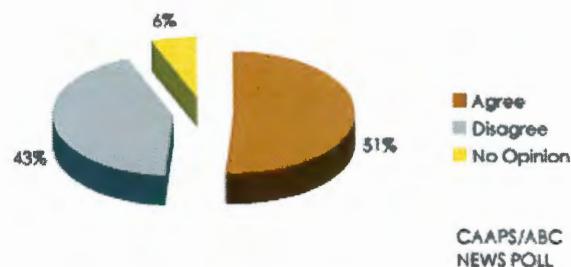
identity to get ahead in American society or do you think blacks can express their racial identity and still get ahead," blacks were again equally divided. Forty-nine percent (49%) of black respondents agreed that blacks have to play down their racial identity to get ahead while 46% believe blacks can express their identity and still be successful.

Moving from attitudes toward individual strategies to improve blacks' position in society to group strategies to improve the position of blacks as a group we see similar patterns. Asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "black people would improve their situation if they spent less time protesting and more time working within the system," a slim majority of blacks agreed (51%) while 43% disagreed.

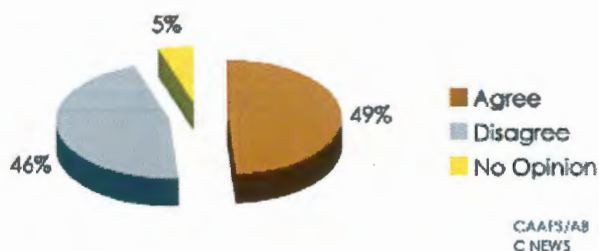
**Should Black People Stop Thinking of Themselves as a Group?**



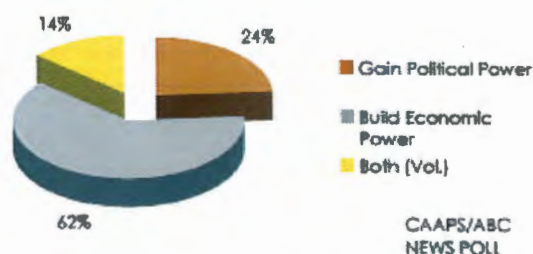
**Believe That Working Within the System is Better for Black Advancement than Protesting (Black Respondents)**



**Do Blacks Have to Play Down Their Racial Identity to Get Ahead?**



**Should Blacks Gain Political Power or Build Economic Power?**



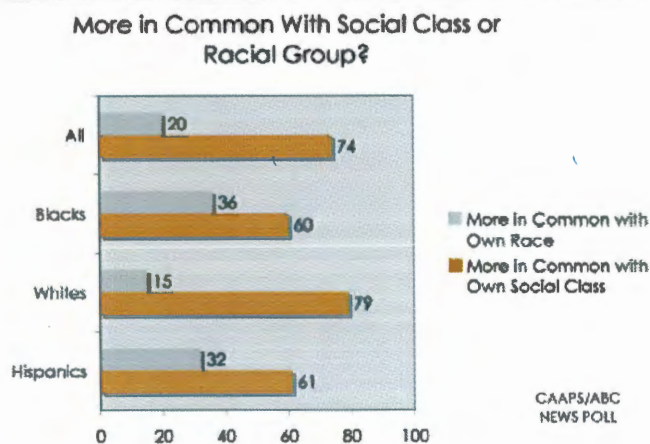
There are similar responses to a question about how important it is for blacks to express their racial identity if they would like to be successful in American society. Asked whether "blacks have to play down their racial

And considering a question that reflects the century-old debate between black leaders W.E.B. Dubois, who favored blacks pursuing civil and political rights, and Booker T. Washington, who encouraged blacks to build

an economic base and eschew politics, the survey gauged the relative importance blacks give to gaining political power and economic power. A majority of blacks (62%) agreed that blacks should build economic power to improve the position of blacks in society while nearly a quarter (24%) reported that building political power is the best way to improve blacks' position. 14% thought both are important. While blacks are divided over strategies for advancement and the need for protest, a general consensus in black public opinion emerges over the need to build economic power.

### Support for Class-Based Preferences & Multiracial Coalitions

Across racial and ethnic groups Americans report having more in common with their social class than their racial group. Though the intensity of commonality varies across groups, a majority of blacks, whites, and Hispanics feel that they have more in common with people from similar class backgrounds than their race.

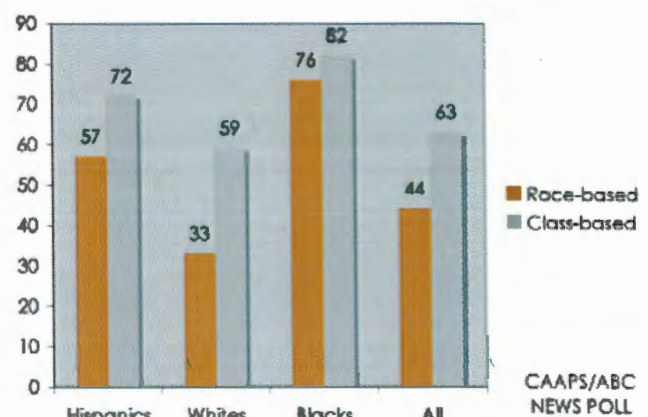


When asked if they feel that they have more in common with their self-described social class, no matter what their race, or more in common with others of their race, no matter their social class, an overwhelming majority of whites (79%) stated they have more in common with their social class. Only 15 percent of whites reported having more in common with their race. More blacks and Hispanics than whites reported having more in common with people from their race than their social class: 36% of blacks and 32% of Hispanics. As we found in responses to questions on national identity, social class might be another identity that challenges or comple-

ments the racial identities of blacks and Hispanics.

Moving from the discussion of social class to support for affirmative action policies, we see that class matters more than race. When respondents are asked whether they support or oppose affirmative action programs that give preferences to racial minorities in areas such as hiring, promotions and college admissions, we see differences in the intensity of support, with whites the least supportive of preferences (33%), Hispanics moderately supportive (57%) and blacks expressing the greatest support.

### Support for Race-Based vs. Class-Based Affirmative Action



When asked whether preferences should be given to poor people rather than based on race, support surges among whites and Hispanics. A majority of whites and a greater majority of Hispanics support affirmative action when income is used as a way to determine who benefits from the policy. Whites move from 33% support for race-based affirmative action to 59% of support for class-based affirmative action- an increase of 26 percentage points. Hispanics move from 57% to 72% - an increase of 15 percentage points. And blacks move from 76% to 82% - a small though important increase in support. Blacks are strongly supportive of both race-based and class-based affirmative action. However, we cannot determine from the data whether blacks would be willing to give up race-based affirmative action policies in exchange for class-based policies.



The commonality most whites, blacks, and Hispanics express in their affinity to their social class and the cross-racial support for class-based affirmative action points to the possibility for building multiracial coalitions around issues of shared concern. Both blacks and Hispanics are particularly open to coalition building across racial groups. When asked about solving community problems, a clear majority in both groups (86% of blacks and 81% of Hispanics) agrees that it is better building coalitions with other racial and ethnic groups than for their racial group to work alone to solve problems.

### **Prioritizing Policy Issues for the Next Administration**

Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics agree on the top policy priorities that the next presidential administration should address. While there is consensus that those issues of highest priority should be the economy, health care, and education, whites, blacks, and Hispanics differ on other policy items that deserve the greatest attention. When asked which policy items deserved the highest priority, a high priority but not the highest, or a lower priority, blacks and Hispanics expressed greater interests in the next administration addressing the minimum wage (52% of blacks and 57% of Hispanics) than whites (26%).

Similarly blacks and Hispanics placed a higher priority on poverty (65% of blacks and 63% of Hispanics) and fairness in the criminal justice system (51% of blacks and 46% of Hispanics) than whites (38% and 34% respectively). On the other hand, both blacks and whites placed less priority on immigration (27% for both groups) than Hispanics (42%). All three groups, including blacks, gave less a priority to the next administration addressing reparations for slavery (24% of blacks, 8% of whites, and 19% of Hispanics).

### **About the Survey**

The CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey was conducted by telephone from September 11-14, 2008, among a random national sample of 1941 adults, including an oversample of African Americans, for a total of 1032 black respondents, and an oversample of Hispanics, for a total of 315 Hispanic respondents. The survey is conducted in association with USA Today. The results from the full survey have a 2-point error margin. Fieldwork was conducted by ICR-International Communications Research of Media, PA. Fredrick Harris, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center on African-American Politics and Society at Columbia, and Gary Langer, Director of the ABC News Surveying Unit, were the lead investigators of this survey project.

### **Acknowledgements**

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