Black Public Opinion: Moving to the Center

WASHINGTON D.C. — In political opinion surveys from the 1950s through the 1970s, African Americans were consistently among the most liberal groups in the United States and were much further to the left than White Americans on most issues. Starting in the 1980s, Black public opinion began to move to the center, and this trend has deepened since. Why is this the case?

In her recent book, What’s Going On?, political scientist Katherine Tate contends that Black political incorporation and increased affluence since the civil rights movement have made Black politics and public opinion more moderate over time. Based on solid analysis of public opinion data from the 1970s to the present, Tate examines how Black opinions on welfare, affirmative action, crime control, school vouchers, civil rights for other minorities, immigration, the environment, and U.S. foreign policy have changed.

Blacks are now looking to elected officials for political leadership instead of civil rights leaders who in the 1970s tended to be radical influences forced to work outside the political mainstream. Now Blacks serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, in almost equal proportion to the population in the U.S. Congress, and in powerful positions in presidential administrations—including our current president. Tate suggests that Blacks are taking more of a mainstream line as they are now truly part of the political process.

An additional determining factor is that Black socioeconomic concerns have moved to the center as poverty has declined and economic opportunities have improved. Fifty years ago, over half of Black families resided below the poverty line. By 2001, that number had decreased to roughly 23 percent.

Vincent Hutchings, of The University of Michigan, declares What’s Going On? to be “a provocative and informative examination of African American public opinion. Scholars of Black politics will consult and debate this important work for many years to come.” And Hanes Walton Jr., also of the University of Michigan, agrees, adding that the book is “a fascinating read . . . a brilliant and original work.”

Katherine Tate is a professor of political science and African American studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of Black Faces in the Mirror and From Protest to Politics.

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