In 1970 Black R&B recording artist Marvin Gaye recorded “What’s Going On?”, a protest song about the troubling conditions in America that included the Vietnam War, police brutality, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Blacks at the time were still engaged in a civil rights struggle that included an activist agenda to combat social problems such as poverty and crime. While today many signs point to Blacks still engaged in a civil rights struggle, there are important differences between yesterday and today. Instead of Vietnam, the country is at war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Incarceration has joined joblessness as a pressing concern in the Black community. Unequal educational opportunities and racial segregation in housing and communities persist, but the poverty rate among Blacks has diminished. In 1959 over half of Black families lived below the poverty line. In 1970 the percentage fell to just under one-third. More recently, in 2001, roughly 23 percent of Black families resided below the poverty line. Furthermore, the public stature of African Americans has been elevated since the 1950s. Blacks serve in almost equal proportion to the population in the U.S. Congress, on the U.S. Supreme Court, in powerful positions in U.S. presidential administrations, and now even as president.

These last two facts—the declining poverty rate and social-political elevation—are important shifts in the status of African Americans in this country. To remember the low position of Blacks entering into the civil rights and Black power movements is to understand their earlier politics and political orientation. Now that Blacks have moved up the social, economic, and political ladder, what are their politics today? How have their politics changed? What’s going on?

In this book I examine the political attitudes of Blacks since the civil rights era to identify their political goals and preferences. Are Blacks as united as they were under the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership? King’s assassination in 1968 left Blacks politically in disarray. However, political dissension among Blacks was evident before his untimely death, as Blacks questioned whether racial integration would actually lift Blacks out of poverty and into equality with Whites. Kwame Ture (formerly Black civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton’s Black Power, published in 1967, asserted that Blacks needed to separate themselves politically from Whites in order to bargain effectively in a political context.
system designed to limit the advance of racial and political minorities. In addition to a public debate over integration as the primary objective of civil rights activists, there was Black dissension over other goals, including opposition to the draft, Black economic power, and community control. A Black political agenda, Doug McAdam (1999) contends, got washed out of the national political scene by state repression and the entrance of other social and political disturbances over the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the students’ and women’s liberation movements. Public opinion data from the 1980s, however, revealed that even in the post–civil rights era the vast majority of Blacks have supported a liberal political agenda that includes a protective welfare state and affirmative action (Dawson 1993; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Tate 1994). In other words, Blacks appear united politically in important respects.

However, trend data also show that Black public opinion is less radical today than it was in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, public opinion surveys revealed a distinctive shift toward political moderation. This Black opinion shift, I argue, is based on the transformation of African American politics, away from radical challenges to the political status quo toward inclusive, bipartisan electoral politics.

Public opinion scholars debate the sources of public opinion (Norrander and Wilcox 2002). In the case of Black Americans, scholars have found that their liberal positions are often based on their racially subordinate status in this country, and on the racial identities that form due to racial bias. However, in this book I advance another theory to account for Black public opinion today. It is based on the transformation of Black political leadership and its incorporation into the American political system. Political incorporation is defined as inclusion in the dominant governing coalition (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). In the 1980s African Americans and Latinos were able to win majority leadership posts in a number of American cities that were once White-led. The role of Blacks in the national Democratic Party has expanded since the 1980s. As noted earlier, Black Democrats serve in key legislative posts in Congress, and at the head of today’s party is African American Barack Obama. Political incorporation into the institution of American political parties is key to explaining how radicalism among Black national leaders has declined.

In a seminal book critiquing Reverend Jesse Jackson’s 1984 presidential bid, Adolph Reed (1986) explained how this transformation of Black politics from civil rights protest politics into electoral politics impacted Black political behavior. He contends that protest leadership is no longer a legitimate agent to advance Black political interests. My thesis contends that protest leaders, such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, are central in the cultivation and maintenance of a radical Black politics both in an exclusionary and inclusionary democratic system. However, Black political incorporation normally purges the community of its radical leaders (Tate 2004). As Shefter notes, “If a group is to gain a position in the regime that is secure, it must be integrated into the system in a manner consistent with the interests of the other members of the regime’s dominant political coalition” (1994: 231). Furthermore, their exclusion in organized, orderly politics is an inevitable price that
outside actors pay in their struggle to win inclusion and integration within the confines of existing institutions and organizations (Michels 1999).

Having finally penetrated these organizations, minority leaders logically seek advancement and bargaining power. In this quest for advancement one can see how Robert Michels’s (1999) theory of parties as coercive organizations that compel political conservatism and bring forth oligarchical leadership forms applies as well to Black politics. Thus, as opinion leaders, Black elected officials, according to Michels’s theory, will promote a more moderate political agenda than that of Black protest leaders. In general, Black protest leaders of the civil rights era were originally not dependent on a White power structure, Black interest groups, or Black elected officials, since their finances and members were recruited through the independent Black church (see McAdam 1999; Morris 1984). By examining the legislative votes and agendas of Black members of the U.S. Congress, one can see how Blacks are linked vitally to their leaders—the vast majority of whom are Black Democrats—who in turn are also linked vitally to the national Democratic Party and its political agenda.

While I concentrate on the absence of radical leadership in Black politics today as the main reason why Black opinion has moderated, alternative theories exist that could account for a conservative turn in Black public opinion. The political environment Blacks reside in contributes in important ways to their political opinions. Ronald W. Walters (2003) argues that the policy arena since the late 1970s is now dominated by White nationalists who cover their racial agenda by discounting or ignoring the Black perspective (see also Swain 2002). While Walters does not see a shift toward the political center in Black opinion, this new policy arena, absent a genuine integration of Black interests, has profound political ramifications in American politics that now includes Black political leadership. His thesis of a White nationalist-dominated public policy environment can also help explain how Black policy opinion is now formed in the national arena without meaningful regard to the racial implications of public policies, such as school vouchers and “three strikes” legislation. A majority of Blacks (55 percent) favored school vouchers according to a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll conducted in 2001 (table 3.2). A majority of Blacks (64.5 percent) in a 1994 Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners poll also favored laws imposing life imprisonment for a person convicted of three serious crimes (table 4.1). Walters contends that the Black media have not been effective in countering the sway that conservative White nationalists have exerted in framing the national public policy agenda (2003, 267).

The conservative policy environment that dominated the national policymaking process during much of the 1990s and 2000s is one explanation for Black support for some conservative public policies. Another possible explanation has been forwarded in the work of scholars who establish that Black political thinking is shaped by myriad factors, particularly the segregated racial environment in which many Blacks reside. Michael Dawson (2001) and Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004) examine the way in which Black political attitudes are shaped by their interactions and experiences in all- or primarily Black environments, which Dawson argues...
function as the “Black counterpublic.” Black conservatism exists in the Black counterpublic. Thus, Black support for moderate and conservative public policies may be rooted in their experiences as Black Americans in a post–civil rights environment as shared and discussed in an all-Black environment.

In any event, a political environment thesis, as opposed to my Black political incorporation argument, suggests that Black public opinion is merely reacting to a conservative period that is temporarily shaped by Republican political hegemony. If this is the case, Black opinion should move away from the political center now that the Democrats are back in charge. Democrat and African American Barack Obama won the presidential election of 2008. House Democrats regained control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2006 from the Republicans, who surprisingly won control in 1994 during the Democratic Clinton administration. Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s (D-CA) legislative record is a strongly liberal one. Serving in the new 110th Congress with Pelosi is U.S. Representative James E. Clyburn (D-SC), the second African American to ascend to the House’s third-ranking leadership position as majority whip. His record is also strongly liberal. However, I still contend that, institutionally, America’s two-party system, combined with genuine minority political incorporation, has meaningfully shifted Black minority opinion away from the political margins toward the center. This shift, reflected in my theory of Black political incorporation, is more enduring than temporary. Increasing numbers of Blacks now support bipartisan legislative agendas as a consequence of their entrance into mainstream, electoral politics. However, Dawson’s and Harris-Lacewell’s contention that ideological conservatism is rooted in the Black community also finds support, as Black religiosity and, for example, their preferences for evangelicals are related to their views on gay rights.

Twists and Turns in the Study of Black Public Opinion

We need a new theory of Black public opinion that incorporates the institutional parameters that shape it, in addition to the social and historical conditions that scholars have argued account for the liberal distinctiveness of Black public opinion. Early opinion studies of Americans in the 1950s and 1960s revealed African Americans to be among the most liberal groups in America. The 1970s radicalized Blacks, and their opinions shifted farther to the left of the political spectrum as a consequence of the civil rights, Black power, women’s liberation, and peace movements (Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979). In contrast to White Americans, Black party affiliations and policy preferences were not linked very closely to their socioeconomic status (Gilliam 1986).

While political sociologist William J. Wilson’s (1981) work shows a bifurcating Black social and economic class structure, upper-middle-class Blacks did not become more conservative in their political thinking. The 1980s did not produce a significant class cleavage in the politics of Black America. Rather, surveys revealed that the vast majority of Black Americans across the income and class spectrum shared much the same opinions on government spending and affirmative action.
While regional, generational, and gender differences shape Black opinion on such cultural issues as gay rights, abortion, and gun control, the overall picture of Black public opinion that emerged indicated homogeneity, not heterogeneity. In more sophisticated models of Black public opinion, affluent Blacks were somewhat more conservative on public policy matters, but not strikingly so (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; Welch and Foster 1987).

All the empirical evidence based on surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s point to the role that race consciousness plays in promoting and sustaining a liberal ideology in the Black community. Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik (1979) found that Black respondents who, in open-ended statements mentioned their racial group or referenced race relations in America, were also significantly more liberal ideologically than Blacks who in open-ended responses did not mention race. Patricia Gurin and her colleagues (1980) developed a set of questions to determine how closely group members identified with their groups. Based on 1972 data, subordinate groups identified closely with their groups, in contrast to advantaged groups. They theorized that groups such as Blacks identified more closely with their group when they felt that their status in society was unfair and when they blamed the system. African Americans are significantly more likely than Whites to feel that Blacks are disadvantaged in this country because of racial prejudice and discrimination (Sigelman and Welch 1991). These collective grievances, therefore, form the basis for a politicized consciousness (Gurin, Gurin, and Miller 1980; Miller et al. 1981). In addition to political participation, this group consciousness, in theory, would support an activist welfare state as a form of racial redress.

The item that exerted the most liberal pressure on Black public opinion that Gurin and her colleagues developed is “common fate” (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; see also Dawson 1994; Tate 1994). The common fate measure asks African Americans if they believe that what happens to Black people in this country will affect their lives and, if they say yes, the degree to which the treatment of their racial group will affect their lives. The vast majority (75 percent) of Blacks in the 1984 National Black Election Study (NBES) survey responded yes to this question, with 30 percent of these respondents adding that the treatment of their racial group in this country affects them “a lot.” In the 2004 National Politics Study, 31 percent of African Americans responded that their fate was tied to the fate of their racial group “a lot.” Only 31 percent said that what happens to Black people in this country has no effect on what happens in their lives in 2004.

While White Americans have become significantly more tolerant (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985), Blacks’ perceptions concerning the personal significance of race and the degree to which society remains impaired by racism have not changed much. Laws that permitted discrimination against Blacks in education, employment, housing, and the provision of goods and services were struck down by the end of the 1960s. During this period African Americans also regained their right to vote, which in southern states had been nullified and diminished by racially discriminatory registration and voting practices and through redistricting. In the 1984 NBES, Blacks were asked the following: “Will Blacks in this...
country ever achieve full social and economic equality?” Approximately 46 percent responded, “Yes.” In 1996, when in a national sample Blacks were asked the very same question, only 39 percent responded yes. In this 1996 NBES study, 62 percent of the Black respondents agreed that “being Black” determined a lot about how Blacks are treated in this country. Similarly, when asked if there has been a lot of progress or not much real change in “getting rid of racial discrimination” in this country, only 30 percent of the 1996 NBES respondents believed that a lot of racial progress had been made. The majority of Blacks in 1996 (70 percent) said instead that not much real change had occurred in ridding the nation of racial discrimination against Blacks. In the 2004 National Political Study, when asked how much discrimination and unfair treatment Blacks face in this country, over half (54 percent) said “a lot.” Only 2 percent of the Black sample said “none,” and 7 percent said “a little.”

The analogy that comes to mind is not the simple one of viewing the same glass as half full or half empty; rather, even when pouring the water into a new glass as a new barometer of race relations, African Americans are significantly more likely than Whites to see that glass as half empty. Understandably, therefore, Blacks remain highly racially conscious even in a world where race relations have undergone significant transformation.

Even as we recognize that Blacks generally support a liberal agenda due to their race consciousness, there have been some surprising twists and turns in Black public opinion that require a deeper explanation than just race consciousness. One example is Black support for the confirmation of Republican-nominated and politically conservative Clarence Thomas in 1991 to the U.S. Supreme Court (Mansbridge and Tate 1992). The Thomas confirmation is important in this respect because Black opinion was influential, contributing to his elevation to the high court. Blacks followed the confirmation proceedings closely and were generally well informed (Hutchings 2003). In a 1992 ANES Senate survey, Blacks were more likely to state that they favored Thomas’s confirmation by the U.S. Senate than were Whites and other minority groups. Thus, 67 percent of Blacks in the ANES Senate survey said that they supported making Thomas a Supreme Court Justice in contrast to 53 percent of Whites, American Indians, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Black women were significantly cooler in their opinions of Thomas than were Black men, but neither Black women’s identification with their race or with their gender had a significant effect on their evaluations of Thomas (Gay and Tate 1998). Thus, this twist in Black public opinion favoring conservative Clarence Thomas for the Supreme Court complicates any simple argument that race consciousness among Blacks promotes a liberal agenda. Thomas’s support in the Black community was based on his ability to put the accusations in a powerful racial frame, by referring to the process as a “high-tech lynching.”

Another surprising example is Black support for President Clinton’s welfare reform initiative in 1996 (Barker, Jones, and Tate 1999, 350–59). In the 1996 NBES, two-thirds of Blacks favored a five-year lifetime limit on how long a family under the poverty line can receive welfare benefits. Only 30 percent of Blacks in the 1996
NBES opposed welfare reform. Earlier surveys of Whites, Blacks, and minorities found that majorities, including Blacks, felt that the welfare system was not working, and that it discouraged people on welfare from finding work. Almost every Black member of Congress voted against the bipartisan welfare reform legislation that ended the federal entitlement of cash assistance “welfare” for poor families with dependent children (Tate 2003). At issue for liberal lawmakers in the final legislation that Clinton signed into law were cuts in the reform package aimed at job training for welfare recipients. Members of the Clinton administration were deeply divided over the reform legislation, including Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala and Chief of Staff Leon Panetta (Winston 2002, 51). How Blacks, who generally favor increasing federal spending on welfare programs, came to support a conservative measure that abolished the federal guarantee of financial assistance to families in poverty in spite of Black opposition in the U.S. Congress to the final measure is not fully understood.

Some might argue that liberal Blacks were confused about the real impact welfare reform would have on the Black poor, and hence that their opinions on welfare reform were not genuine because they were poorly informed. Public opinion scholars, however, dispute this interpretation of public opinion as shallow or as an inaccurate reflection of the respondent’s will (for these critiques see Hutchings 2003; Page and Shapiro 1992; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; but also see Kuklinski et al. 2000). The reconceptualization of public opinion developed as opinion scholars gathered additional data showing, for example, that American public opinion in the aggregate moves gradually and reliably in directions that over time fit with their political will as manifested in public policy (Page and Shapiro 1992). In this case, Black Americans supported a popular initiative—welfare reform—in 1996 that also coincided with the popular will.

A strong critique of the traditional view that citizens’ opinions are shallow comes from Paul Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip Tetlock (1991). The empirical observations of Philip E. Converse (1964)—establishing that people are inconsistent, and that they adopt contradictory policy stands over time, favoring a policy in one year and opposing it in the next—were not challenged by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, but rather took on a new meaning in their work. Unlike Converse, they suggest that policy consistency is rare essentially because of how people think and organize their political ideas. For example, a citizen might strongly favor the idea that the government should “do all it can to promote world peace,” and yet that same citizen might choose in another year to endorse the war in Iraq. Furthermore, the number of considerations involved in forming a policy preference is also related to political consistency, according to Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991). As a result, politically sophisticated citizens, they hypothesize, are expected to have the least consistent set of policy preferences; politically less informed citizens, on the other hand, often have the most consistent set of preferences. The revisionist position accepts that ordinary citizens are equipped with modest levels of political information, but that citizens reason nonetheless effectively, basing their policy preferences on political shortcuts or heuristics. This reliance on heuristics is
rational, given the cognitive limitations of humans and the investment they have in politics, according to Herbert A. Simon (1979).

The racial framing—or its absence—is important in Black opinion formation. Studies show that framing affects how opinions are formed, chiefly through priming. The media render certain information more salient and accessible than other considerations (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The media can frame the issue for the public by priming or highlighting the more newsworthy features of the debate; in doing so, it reduces the issue into a smaller subset of ideas—an heuristic—making the task of formulating an opinion easier for citizens (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Blacks, because of their strong racial consciousness, generally favor policies that explicitly support their group interests.

In earlier work I have shown that a majority of Blacks favor in principle color-blind redistricting techniques, but that they will switch positions if told that fewer Blacks and minorities will win elections if color-blind principles are used to design new districts (Tate 2003). Clearly, the more immediate concern of maximizing Black political power through the election of more Black representatives is information that Blacks failed to consider when first asked if “districts should be drawn without regard to race.” What is salient and proximate—and what stereotypes and other information people possess at a given time—are important components of their opinions. Thus, Black survey opinions that favor conservative policies are genuine, and not an artifact of uninformed thinking. Blacks will favor the national will, including bipartisan, conservative policies, such as three strikes legislation and welfare reform, because of their political incorporation. At the same time, as a group they can hold policy preferences that are out of sync with the majority’s policy preferences, such as their support for Black political empowerment, affirmative action, and their opposition to the death penalty. Thus, the racial framing of American public policies is important to African Americans. Blacks, therefore, are more likely to form more conservative options about policies lacking a racial frame. However, Democrats, as active agents of the Black agenda, are less inclined to adopt a racial frame.

The Role of Black Political Elites in Opinion Formation

The absence of a racial frame in Black opinion formation is important. Equally important is the debate over whether opinion is under elite control or mass-led. Most empirical studies of public opinion focus on the transfer of opinion from the masses to political elites, who then establish new public policies in democratic governance (e.g., Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Hutchings 2003; Page and Shapiro 1992). A bottoms-up transference of preferences appears to be the most democratic pattern. The empirical evidence that Congress is very responsive to public opinion is very strong (see especially Burstein 1998; Page and Shapiro 1992). Nonetheless, my alternative thesis indicates that much of what the public wants from government, outside of protest and organized litigation, is framed and
guided by the political elite (see Zaller 1992; Gerber and Jackson 1993). But as Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson note, the transfer of opinion from the elites to the masses is not necessarily undemocratic, since “the public chooses which [elite opinions] to endorse” (2002, 79).

I hypothesize that this change in the institutional nature of Black political leadership is a key explanatory factor in the moderation of Black public opinion (Tate 2004). While presidential leadership remains an influential force in public opinion generally, Black civil rights leaders and organizations were radical influences working outside of the political mainstream. Today, the vast majority of Black political leaders are elected officials. Furthermore, we see signs of new civil rights leaders who have previous officeholding experience, such as the National Urban League’s President Marc Morial (a former mayor of New Orleans and the son of New Orleans’s first Black mayor). Thus, Reed’s (1986) thesis that Black elected officials are replacing traditional civil rights leadership (e.g., the grassroots preacher) is compelling. At the same time, the 2007 extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act was achieved through the concentrated efforts of both protest leaders, notably the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and elected Black leaders in the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) (Tate 2006). Thus, a protest strategy remains strongly evident in Black politics, even as the Reverend Jackson ran for the Democratic presidential nomination twice—in 1984 and 1988. Reverend Al Sharpton ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, along with Carol Moseley Braun, the first Black female and Black Democrat to have served in the U.S. Senate (1992–98). Black U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) ran successfully for president in 2008. Rather than ending protest strategies, these electoral successes have contributed to a blending of both styles in African American politics today.

Today, an African American presides at the top of the Democratic Party, President Barack Obama. Black leadership, however, took some time to integrate fully with the Democratic Party. President Carter was publicly challenged, for example, by the Congressional Black Caucus as a result of his attempts to reduce the federal government’s commitment to President Johnson’s antipoverty and urban development programs. President Clinton’s efforts to reform federal welfare policy were opposed by most Black members of the U.S. Congress (Tate 2003); minority female legislators also expressed their frustration with these efforts (Hawkesworth 2003). However, Black Democrats did not publicly challenge President Clinton as they did President Carter. Clinton remained very popular with African Americans. Moreover, when comparing measures of support for presidential policy initiatives by Black House Democrats for Carter and Clinton, one finds that Clinton received higher levels of support from Black Democrats than Carter—a point I discuss further in chapter 9.

Several theories could help explain why Clinton received stronger political support from Black House members than Carter. For sure, the times were different, as members of Congress were generally more oppositional in the 1970s as a result of the Watergate scandal. Since 1975, rule changes in the House have made it easier...
for political parties to control their legislative members (Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1983). In addition, President Clinton and the Democratic Party also had significantly more Blacks involved in the federal policymaking process than was true during President Carter’s administration. These Black legislative leaders had also accrued greater seniority. The upshot of all these developments is that Black legislators tend to be more accommodating of Democratic presidential leadership today than in the past (Tate 2004).

Empirical studies of the political attitudes of the American elite are rare. Sidney Verba and Gary R. Orren (1985) surveyed 2,762 American leaders in the business and political spheres in 1975 and 1976. African American leaders constituted a group of such leaders; in general they were local elected officials and representatives of Black civil rights organizations. Most of the American leaders in this survey described their political ideology as moderate, with minorities labeling themselves “far left,” “very liberal,” “very conservative,” and “far right” (1985, 66). Only 4 percent of the Black leaders called themselves “far left,” and 29 percent identified themselves as “very liberal.” The political profiles of Black leaders reveal that they generally occupy the left in a manner not dramatically different from that of feminists, Democrats, labor, and youth (Verba and Orren 1985, 106). Only on the question of minority quotas did Black leaders diverge sharply from their liberal coalition partners in this study, staking out a position far to the left of other liberal leadership groups. Overall, Black political leaders in the mid- to late 1970s were liberal, but not strikingly radical on questions outside of race. These again were leaders representing government and mainstream civil rights organizations. Black elected political leadership is rarely radical.

I contend that the Democratic Party’s accommodation of the rightward direction of the courts and public opinion on welfare and on affirmative action has influenced Black opinion. Other scholars of urban politics have also argued that similar changes occurred in Black political leadership at the local level. Black mayors today have learned to accommodate conservative business interests that dominate the political process in metropolitan regions as well (Stone 1989). While minority incorporation has produced other policy changes, research has found that urban fiscal policies were not altered following minority incorporation (Pelissero, Holian, and Tomaka 2000). This has left Blacks little room in public debates to counter coalitional-moderate public policymaking effects in government. Thus, whereas in the past there was more frank and vocal dissent, today there is greater silence. This silence should not be interpreted as necessarily support for a moderate or conservative political agenda. Black elected officials can better pursue “backroom,” “closed-door” strategies to achieve their political goals as a consequence of greater integration and seniority. Yet this silence has had its impact on Black public opinion. One of the most striking changes in Black public opinion, as we shall see, is in the Black population’s position on the food stamp program. Whereas in the 1980s the vast majority of Blacks defended aggressively increased federal spending on food stamps, the majority today favors maintaining current spending levels.
or reducing spending. These shifts in Black public opinion, I contend, are based not on a decline in Blacks’ racial consciousness. Rather, contemporary Black opinion is based on the emergence of a new, more politically moderate political environment that includes Black leadership affecting Black public opinion.

Overview of the Book

Chapters 2 through 8 discuss Black attitudes on a variety of public policies, including welfare spending, crime, school vouchers, immigration, and U.S. foreign policy. Chapter 2 examines Black support over time for the welfare state. It shows a shift away from support for radical public policies such as a government-backed guarantee of a job and a minimum standard of living as well as support for conservative welfare reform legislation in 1996. While the CBC stands firm on its support of a safety net system for the American poor, I find that President Clinton’s leadership significantly influenced Black opinion favoring welfare reform.

Chapter 3 shows a notable shift among Blacks away from the principle of strong government assistance for Blacks and minorities between the 1970s and 2004. Black support for affirmative action remains strong, nonetheless. Chapter 4 examines Black opinion on crime control policies. There is movement away from ardent support for the rights of the accused; once again President Clinton’s position—in this case, his support of three strikes legislation—found considerable support within the Black community. Chapter 5 examines Black opinion on public education. Blacks remain strongly in favor of federal spending on public education but they are also in favor of GOP-backed initiatives outside of school busing to improve educational opportunities for Black and minority school children.

Chapter 6 examines Black attitudes on abortion and rights for women and gay people. Chapters 7 and 8 examine Black public opinion on environmentalism, U.S. foreign policy, and the Iraq War. On these last policy arenas, Black opinion is not that different from that of Whites and other minority groups. Instead, the strongest divergences between Blacks, Whites, and other minorities are on welfare policies and the principle of government assistance to minorities. Thus, the opinion data in the chapters reveal that Blacks are less distinctively liberal relative to Whites than was the case in the 1970s.

In chapter 9 I present a summary of the book’s findings and my conclusions about the general direction of Black politics today. First, I argue that moderating trends in Black opinion are based chiefly on changes in the Black political leadership structure, and not on a conservative policy swing in the national political arena. Second, I explore prospects for Black support for the Republican Party based on their endorsement of bipartisan policies. Here I find that the Republican Party’s anti-affirmative action platform remains a barrier to any surge in Black support for Republican candidates at the national level, in much the same way that the
party’s anti-abortion stances has limited its support among liberal females. Black Republican leaders, however, may become influential opinion leaders in the Black community as a consequence of Black political incorporation.

A Brief Note on Data Sources and Methodology

This book relies on standard telephone surveys of adult Americans. A problem with standard surveys is that the sample size is often very small, ranging from 100 to 200 Black respondents, to occasionally as few as 50 Black respondents. In addition to Roper Center data, there are two longitudinal academic surveys that I analyze in this book: (1) American National Election Studies (ANES) and (2) General Social Surveys (GSS). The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut has one of the largest archives of social science data from academic, media, and private research firms dating from the 1930s to today (www.ropercenter.uconn.edu). The American National Election Studies that originated at the University of Michigan represent a set of political surveys covering presidential and midterm elections from 1952 to 2008 (www.electionstudies.org). Many questions from the original surveys, from chiefly the 1950s to the 1970s, have been replicated so that opinion shifts over time can be detected. The GSS at the University of Chicago comprise another academic survey set of Americans— in this case, from 1972 to 2008—that examines Black opinion shifts over time (www.norc.org). Multivariate analysis is based on pooled data sets to increase the sample size as well as large-scale political telephone surveys of African Americans, the landmark 1984–1988 NBES and the 1996 NBES. See the book’s appendix for a list of the data sets used in this study of Black public opinion.

My thesis is that the changing character of Black political leadership influenced Black public opinion over time, and not the other way around. Causal order, however, is best established through experimental design. This evidence is based primarily on survey data, including time series data; my principal claim that political elites have influenced Black public opinion, therefore, is based on indirect rather than direct evidence.

In most chapters I compare Black opinion to that of the opinions of Whites and other minority groups. I combine Whites, Hispanics, Indians (American), Asian Americans, and other minority groups together because I am theoretically interested in the examination of Black policy attitudes in contrast to the attitudes of other Americans, as opposed to a primary interest in race relations. Scholars interested in American race relations should and can provide assessments of the public policy attitudes of these groups separately. Treating Whites and each minority group separately in this book would extend the book’s purpose beyond its stated goal of representing an intensive study of Black public opinion. In some analysis, unreported as well as reported in this book, I separate Whites from other minority groups in my endeavor to compare and understand group trends as a function also of race relations.
Black responses on welfare and social spending programs could very well be influenced by question order and race-of-interviewer effects. Question order can bias responses. Respondents, for example, may be less inclined to support increased spending on social services if asked about reducing the size of the federal deficit beforehand. To address this problem, I report question numbers in tables for chapter 5 on affirmative action so that readers can see the question order in the interview instrument.

A final concern is the race-of-interviewer effect, which is problematic for minority citizens. Studies have shown that Black respondents are less likely to give pro-Black responses when the interviewer is White, or, in the case of telephone interviewers, when the interviewer is perceived to be White (Gurin, Jackson, and Hatchett 1989). Race of interviewer data have increasingly become difficult to obtain because the identity of minority interviewers is difficult to conceal for survey firms. When it is available, I control for race-of-interviewer effects since they can profoundly bias responses in political surveys, notably on racially sensitive questions.

Notes
1. See the U.S. Bureau of the Census’s website for the historical data on poverty rate by race, and specifically, www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpov2.html.
2. No ANES time series study was conducted in 2006.