

FORUM

Blacks like Bush, but do Republicans like blacks?



Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Guest Columnist

At first glance the new poll from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies that shows that more than 40 percent of black voters like Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush seems preposterous.

The supreme article of faith in American politics is that blacks are the ultimate Democratic party loyalists. In recent presidential elections, the Democratic candidate has grabbed 80 to 85 percent of the black vote.

Since less than 50 percent of whites vote for Democrats, this cinch black vote is the cushion the Democratic presidential contenders must have in order to win the White House. Despite this idea fixe in American politics, there are good reasons why black leaders and Democrats should not ignore or ridicule the center's poll.

The center is no fly-by-night outfit.

It is the one of the nation's oldest and most respected black think tanks. Many elected officials and political analysts rely on its polls and surveys to gauge the mood of African Americans.

Another reason to take the poll seriously is that blacks are more prosperous than ever and more conservative than many think. Two recent polls by the center confirm this trend. One found that for the first time ever more blacks than whites claimed they were better off financially in 1998 than the year before. Pollsters also found that a majority of blacks favor stiffer sentences for drug use, violent crime, three strikes offenses and support school vouchers.

Finally, black leaders must know that many blacks reflexively vote Democratic not because of any inherent belief that the Democrats offer everything to them, but because they feel that the Republicans offer nothing.

Republicans have no one but

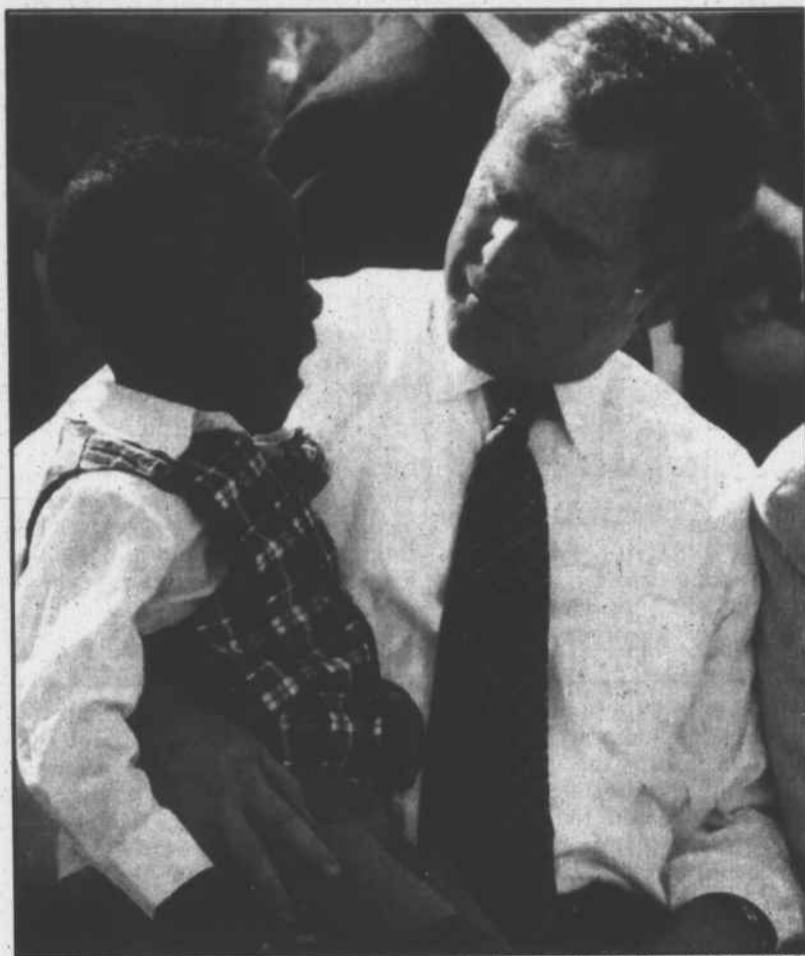
themselves to blame for this. The Grand Old Party has blown every chance they've had to attract more blacks to their ranks.

The Colin Powell debacle in the 1996 presidential election was a near textbook example of how Republicans have mastered the knack of turning black voters from potential political friends into enemies. Powell was universally liked by blacks and nonblack voters, liberals, moderates and even many conservatives.

But he never got out of the Republican box. The major conservative groups ganged up on him and threatened to wage war against him if he actively sought the Republican nomination. Powell didn't have the right stuff for many in the Republican Party. However, if the party had embraced Powell, and he had actively stumped for the Republican presidential nominee, it would have forced large numbers of blacks to listen and ponder the party's political message. This would have posed deep political peril for the Democrats. Blacks make up a big part of the population in the states that control the majority of the nation's electoral votes.

But Republicans mistreat black voters for another reason. They, like most Americans, buy the myth that blacks are doctrinaire Democrats. For nearly a half century following Reconstruction the Democratic Party was the party of segregation and Jim Crow. Blacks by necessity were staunch Republicans. The first dozen black elected congressional officeholders were Republicans. During the Depression blacks leaped at FDR's promise of jobs and relief, and voted overwhelmingly Democratic. But they did not totally abandon the Republicans. In 1956, Republican President Dwight Eisenhower sent the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction to Congress.

The same year, Eisenhower grabbed 40 percent of the black vote to win re-election. In 1960, Richard Nixon also received a sizable percentage of the black vote against John Kennedy.



Kendall Russell, 3, of Fort Worth, visits with Texas Gov. George W. Bush. Bush enjoys growing support from blacks in his bid to win the White House.

The Democrats got the black vote back in 1964 partly because Lyndon Johnson made good on his civil rights pledge, but also because blacks feared that Republican candidate Barry Goldwater's platform of "states rights" sent a strong signal that blacks were not wanted in the party.

Blacks got the same negative vibe from Nixon and from Powell's former boss, President Ronald Reagan.

Powell criticized both of his former bosses, Reagan and George Bush, for not showing more sensitivity on racial matters. Despite the three-decade-long cold shoulder from Republicans, many prominent blacks such as Powell and Alan Keyes still vigorously support the party. And in the few places where Republicans have made

any kind of real attempt to outreach to black voters they have significantly boosted their vote total among them.

Bush has a golden opportunity to snatch the political and ideological blinders from the eyes of Republican leaders and change the perception that his party is nothing more than a cozy, good ol' white guys club. If he does that he will find that many blacks will join the club. If he blows the chance, no matter how many blacks say they like him, they will again dutifully pull the Democratic lever in 2000.

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Electricity competition's impact on the urban consumers



David K. Owens

Guest Columnist

The next time you flip on your light switch, consider the change taking place across the country in how you get electricity. In many states, the electric utility industry is shifting from regulation to the use of open, competitive markets. Soon, competition will allow customers to choose from a host of electricity suppliers, like they now choose from a host of long-distance telephone suppliers.

In the future, customers will pay prices set by the marketplace, not by regulators. But competition does not necessarily mean immediate lower electricity rates for everyone. Certainly, large electricity users like petrochemical and manufacturing industries may be able to negotiate a lower rate. Residential users are concerned that they may not receive the touted benefits of competition—lower rates, more options and better services.

In order to ensure residential consumers, have buying clout, some industry observers suggest that residential consumers join together and buy electricity as one group or aggregate.

Many municipalities across the country are considering forming aggregations to help residents attract a low price from competing electric utility companies. Aggregation is fine, so long as it remains a voluntary option and doesn't shift costs to others.

Another important concern to North Carolina residents is the impact that deregulation might have on local taxes. Currently, Carolina Power and Light and Duke Power pay a substantial amount of local taxes that significantly contribute to the quality of life to North Carolina through important municipal services such as schools, police and road maintenance and construction, etc. This contribution to the community infrastructure is one of the significant issues in the debate on electric restructuring. It's just not all that clear how, if at all, the new suppliers will fill the gap.

Before the country rushes into electricity competition, a few things must be settled so that small business and residential customers are not left holding the bag on costs incurred while the industry was regulated. Other regulated industries like telephone and natural gas, which have been deregulated, had to address the issue of transitional costs resulting from sweeping changes in govern-

ment policy.

Recovering these transitional or stranded costs that electric companies like Carolina Power and Light and Duke Power incurred during regulation is a major issue facing the electric utility industry. These costs are expenses like the costs utilities incurred for energy conservation programs and in building facilities to serve all customers. Most of these costs were incurred to meet the requirements of regulatory commissions.

How all of this gets worked out will certainly affect consumers. If big electricity users are allowed to select new suppliers and not share in the costs incurred to meet their needs under regulation, then small business and residential users will bear a disproportionate share of the costs. We feel that traditional utilities should be allowed recovery of the investment in facilities built to supply electricity to serve all customers. And all customers should share in this cost.

This sentiment is echoed by Congressman Richard Burr, who is helping to lead a bipartisan effort in the House to move a comprehensive deregulation bill out of committee this calendar year. He has focused his efforts on protecting consumers. "The ultimate goal of deregulation is to ensure that consumers have choice.

We have to allow states to deregulate in their time frame. We think that it is appropriate for the states to allow stranded costs to be recovered—particularly those costs that related to regulatory commission requirements."

The N.C. Utilities Commission is studying the potential impact of competition on transitional costs and reliability of electric service before moving aggressively toward competition. Municipal officials showed support for stranded cost recovery in a recent statement issued for the Legislature to enact retail competition legislation that spreads transition cost recovery equally over all North Carolina consumers.

Burr, who concurs with this sentiment, said, "In North Carolina, because of the mix of stranded costs between cooperative, municipal and investor-owned utilities, everyone should participate in some sort of line charge."

As electric competition moves forward, issues like cost recovery will need to be resolved so all consumers share appropriately in costs incurred during electric utility regulation.

David K. Owens is executive vice president of the Edison Electric Institute, the industry's largest trade association.

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Judy Goldman October 12
- Women Writers at the Dawn of the New Russia
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