

African-Americans support the Democratic Party because they perceive it to be more competent than the GOP on important issues.

*Since the end of World War II, African-Americans have traditionally supported the Democratic Party, with most commentators pointing to the party's liberal record on civil rights and race as the likely explanation. **Maruice Mangum** takes a close look at African-Americans' identification with the Democratic Party, finding that their perception of the party's competence is very important. He argues that African-Americans perceive the Democratic Party to be competent in issues such as preserving welfare and citizens' fiscal health as well as race relations, to a higher degree than the Republican Party, hence their greater support.*

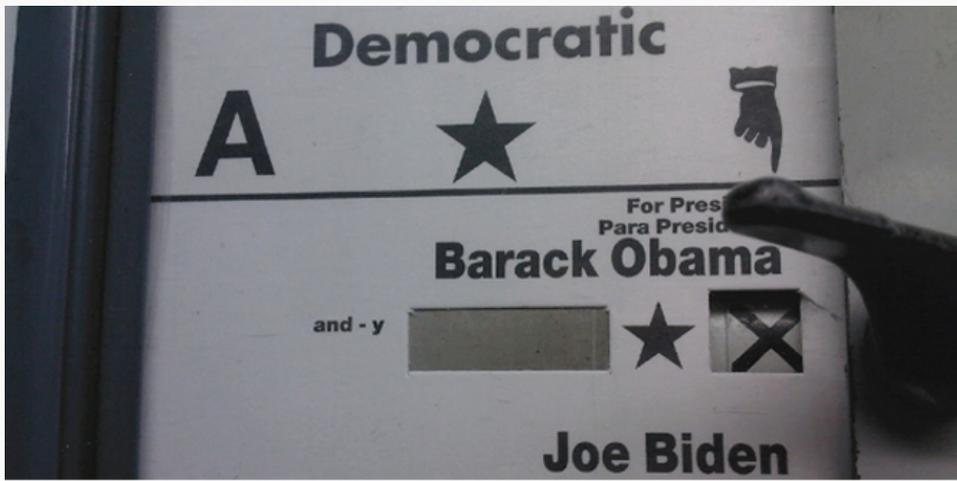


Party identification is a psychological attachment toward a political party, and much attention has been given to studying the party identification of whites. In comparison, very little attention has been given to understanding African-Americans' party identification and partisanship. Additionally, research that focuses on the party identification of African-Americans often paints a simplified picture of African-Americans. In recent research I examined the relationship between African-Americans' perceptions of the abilities of the two major political parties to handle key issues and their likelihood to identify themselves with either party.

I find that that African-Americans are sophisticated because they identify themselves with a party based in part on their perceptions of party competence on certain issues. I examined the relationship between African-American's opinions regarding the ability of the parties to handle the issues that are important to them most effectively and their party identification.

Modeling African-American Party Identification

Some citizens may believe one party is more capable than another, depending on the issue or issues in question. If the issue or issues are thought to be handled better by one party over another, then the perceived difference in party competence could be important. People will identify themselves with the political party they believe to be effective in dealing with the issues. It matters little whether respondents are correct in their perceptions. These perceptions are opinions and it does not matter if they are true or not, as they help people make sense of the world around them. People do not act and have beliefs based solely on facts; they are guided by their interpretation of facts or perception as well as emotion. Inasmuch as perceptions help people determine which political party reflects competence, they may guide their psychological attachment to a political party. Perceptions of the Democratic Party's ability to handle issues and policies might explain African-American affinity toward the Democratic Party and why so few African-Americans identify themselves as Republicans.



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The importance of certain issues, or issue salience, might suggest why certain policy issues matter more than others and have a disproportionate amount of influence in explaining African-Americans' party identification. It may be the case that awareness of party differences on race leads to awareness of the differences between the parties on other issues and policy domains. Those areas of greater interest to African-Americans are expected to have more influence. For instance, where the parties stand on the issues of race, welfare, and poverty might correlate more readily with party identification than handling the budget deficit and foreign affairs. Health care, the Nation's economic health, Social Security, and raising taxes might fall somewhere in the middle of the list of concerns.

In order to estimate the party identification and partisanship of African-Americans, I tested the effects of perceptions of party competence. Using data from the 1996 National Black Election Study, I regressed three dependent variables (African-Americans' party identification and feeling thermometers for Democrats and Republicans) on party competence evaluations.

I found that African-Americans, who stated that the Democratic Party would do better at handling the issues important to them, identified themselves with the Democratic Party. African-Americans who thought that the Republican Party would do better at addressing the issues selected the Republican Party. Further, party competence evaluations shaped partisanship more than party identification. This points to the likelihood that a combination of perceptions about what is good for African-Americans and the individual himself or herself dictate African-Americans' party identification and partisanship. The party competence measures that had the greatest effects were those that involved race and economics; the Democratic Party was thought by African-Americans to be the party most likely to preserve the fiscal health of individual citizens. In contrast to the group-centric focus presented in the literature, individual life circumstances also determine African-Americans' party identification and partisanship because they were associated directly with the party thought to be less likely to cut Social Security and less likely to raise taxes. African-American partisanship is also influenced by perceptions of competence at handling the nation's economy, foreign affairs and healthcare. African-Americans like the Democratic Party for being competent and dislike the Republican Party for not being competent on these issues.

These findings suggest that African-Americans are more complex in their decision making than what is discussed in the literature. The decision made by many African-Americans to identify themselves with the Democratic Party is not based simply on race and ideology. Nor are their evaluations of party competence based simply on affinity for the party. If African-Americans evaluated the Democratic Party as more competent than the Republican Party simply based on affinity, then the ratings for the Democratic Party would be much higher than they are and consistently high. Also, the advantage the Democratic Party has over the Republican Party on these items would be starker on all issues and policy areas. This seems to suggest that there is very little projection on the part of many African-Americans.

What do these findings suggest in terms of an African-American dealignment or realignment? They seem to suggest that there is potential for African-Americans to dealign or even realign themselves back with the

Republican Party. Areas where African-Americans were more likely to see that the Democratic Party was not as competent as other areas are: handling foreign affairs, the budget deficit and the nation's economy. These are policy areas where the Republican Party is typically considered competent by most citizens. As they become more important, it is possible; perhaps not very likely, that African Americans might leave the Democratic Party or align with the Republican Party. The Republican Party needs to capitalize on these competencies by emphasizing their importance and by demonstrating how their policies are beneficial to African Americans. Republicans will do themselves well if they focus their campaigns on dealing with economic issues and emphasizing less the social and cultural wars they have been waging in recent decades.

With increasing discontent and disappointment with President Obama, some African-Americans might believe the Democratic Party is not as competent in certain policy areas. Therefore, this fosters the belief that the Republican Party is better at handling foreign affairs, the budget deficit and the national economy. While the Republicans in the U.S. Congress have not been cooperating with President Obama, African-American support is not theirs to lose. Republicans can only gain African-American support when Democrats are perceived as ineffective. This does not necessarily mean that African-Americans will become identifiers of the Republican Party, but it may mean that they will identify themselves less with the Democratic Party. To thwart this possibility, it behooves the Democratic Party to be more liberal on economic policies than it has been of late to retain the support of African-Americans.

This article is based on the paper [Party competence perceptions and the party identification of African Americans in Party Politics](#).

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