

epilogue



The Black and Independent Alliance in 2008

The whole purpose of party organizations at every political level is to sift out, sidetrack and eliminate men of independent political ambition, men whom the party bosses cannot trust.¹

Walter Karp

The power wielded by the Democratic and Republican parties (domestically and abroad) is probably well beyond the imagination of those who founded the nation. Not a word about political parties is written in the U.S. Constitution, and yet within a few years of the nation's founding, two parties effectively took control of the federal government. Over time, the parties would substitute themselves *as* government. By the mid-nineteenth century, the two-party system had become well established, institutionalized; by the mid-twentieth century, bipartisanship was legally entrenched, the mechanisms through which elected offices are obtained and retained, fully seized under monopolistic control. As a result, independent and third-party candidates are at an enormous competitive disadvantage. The effect is a new kind of Jim Crow—legal disfranchisement—not by race but by political affiliation, where independents have become second-class citizens in the law. How is this maintained? To paraphrase the political scientist Douglass Muzzio, those who make the rules, rule.²

- In order to appear on the ballot, independent and third-party candidates running for president have to gather up to thirty times

the number of signatures than do the Democratic or Republican nominees.

- A bipartisan group called the Commission on Presidential Debates decides the timing and format of the national presidential debates. (It is headed by the former chairmen of the Democratic and Republican parties.)
- More than half of the nation's states—including New York, Pennsylvania, California, and Florida—have closed primaries, which exclude tens of millions of registered independents.
- Congress is structurally organized along bipartisan lines, with Democratic and Republican partisan-staffed congressional caucuses. (The offices of the House and Senate committees are similarly organized.)
- The Federal Election Commission, which was created in 1975 by Congress to oversee the electoral process, comprises three Democrats and three Republicans who serve six-year terms.
- The two major parties work in tandem on redrawing district lines (gerrymandering) every ten years based on the U.S. Census in order to ensure that one or the other party secures victory.
- Finally, election boards and commissions at the state and municipal levels are largely limited to appointees of the Democratic and Republican parties, with the effect of major party candidates sometimes being favored in vote counts over those who are running as independents or with a third party.

By writing rules and regulations that all but guarantee the reelection of one or the other major party candidate at the local, state, and federal level, the two major parties largely decide not only who gets on the ballot, but what issues get discussed and what policies get enacted.³

The response to bipartisan monopoly, and the divisive politics it feeds upon, is becoming ever more clear: according to the *Washington Post*, “Gallup polls suggest that voters’ willingness to reelect incumbents is at one of the lowest levels in half a century. Independent voters comprise about 10 percent of the electorate, but the percentage of persuadable independents [that is, those who “lean” independent in polls, not strongly identifying as independent] has shot up to about 30 percent. In the 27 states that register voters by party, self-declared independents grew from 8 percent of the registered electorate in 1987 to 24 percent in 2004.”⁴ In April 2006, an NBC News/*Wall*

Street Journal survey reported that 43 percent of voters identified themselves as independent of the two major parties.⁵

While half of the African American electorate regularly does not vote, and upwards of 90 percent of those who do vote have consistently voted for Democratic Party candidates since the mid-1960s, over 30 percent now self-identify as independent, up from 17 percent a generation ago.⁶ Independent self-identification among black voters is evident among the youngest to the most senior, but especially among African Americans eighteen to thirty-five years of age. Moreover, African Americans, like all Americans, increasingly say they “vote for the individual, not the party.”⁷ This palpable independence and antipartisan attitude reflect the growing diversity in views and opinions in the black electorate.



The rise in black independence in the early twenty-first century should not be overstated. However, evidence in the form of national surveys and local polls, complemented by anecdotes and individual testimonies, continues to gather. Over the last two decades, black voters—be they conservative, liberal, progressive, or a combination thereof, depending on the issue—appear to be more willing to vote for insurgent, independent, and third-party candidates. Breaking out of the “lesser of two evils” dilemma expressed by most U.S. voters when asked how they vote or will vote, African Americans have been positively stating their views in national surveys. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies reports that there is now “a discernible shift among African-Americans towards political independence.” The *New York Times*, along with black-focused newspapers and magazines, from the *Amsterdam News* to *Black Enterprise*, have similarly written about this shift under way. Meanwhile, black radio and television commentators and guests, from those on New York’s WLIB and Atlanta’s WAOK to Gil Noble’s nationally televised *Like It Is* and BET (Black Entertainment Television), in addition to lesser-known sources, discuss the growing chasm between African Americans and the Democratic Party.⁸

The resurgence of black Republican candidates across the country may be another sign, albeit indirect, of growing political independence among African Americans. In the summer of 2006, otherwise Democratic-loyal black voters in Maryland balked at their party leadership’s choice for not supporting congressman and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume as the nominee for U.S. Senate against the GOP’s choice, the black Republican Lieutenant Governor Michael Steele.⁹ In 2002, Steele, running for lieutenant governor, had drawn a significant number of black votes, enough to give the victory in the governor’s race to his running mate, Robert Ehrlich, over the Democratic incumbent, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. The Democrats that year were

faulted for taking the black vote for granted. Steele remained popular enough in 2006 to receive 44.2 percent of the vote in his bid for the U.S. Senate, though it was not enough to win the seat. (It was the best performance by a Republican Senate candidate in Maryland since 1980.) In neighboring Pennsylvania, the same year as Steele's gubernatorial run, black Republican and former American professional football player Lynn Swann ran for governor, receiving nearly 40 percent of the vote, including black support. The response to both candidacies would serve as modest signs of black interest in black Republican candidates.¹⁰

Black Republican support is neither isolated nor insignificant in terms of independent black politics. In 1994, Michael Dawson observed, "Many African Americans view their only choices—the same choices they have considered for nearly half a century—as support for the Democratic party, support for a radical third-party or other independent political efforts, and abstention."¹¹ While this may have been true a decade ago, it appears as though voting for Republican candidates may be a new tactic to add to the mix of choices being exercised by African Americans to exert their independence from the Democratic Party. The Joint Center reports a relative increase in black Republican self-identification in recent years alongside a relative decrease in black Democratic self-identification. However, these changes are taking place alongside an overall, and faster-growing, rise in independent self-identification among African Americans.

Valeria Sinclair-Chapman, a professor of political science at the University of Rochester, has recently written about how when African Americans, including younger adults, become more affluent, they look beyond the Democratic Party by enrolling as unaffiliated or, in smaller numbers, as Republicans.¹² Dawson has also noted that political abstention, which is higher among African Americans than among other groups of Americans (and is a direct function of greater poverty rates among African Americans), is also a choice. As he puts it: "Political behavior also includes the decision *whether or not to vote*."¹³



In 2008 Americans came out to vote in the presidential primaries in record numbers. African Americans rallied around the insurgent candidacy of Illinois Senator Barack Obama in what was a protracted contest for the Democratic nomination against the party's establishment figure, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York. Along with white independent voters, African Americans helped tip the balance of power in favor of Obama in over a dozen states, especially those with open primaries, propelling the Illinois Senator's candidacy. Obama went on to become the first African American in U.S. history to secure the presidential nomination of a major party. It was with his candidacy that African Americans and white independents looking for new political options

would help make history. America's black and independent alliance would open up new possibilities. Fulani, a pioneer in building diverse alliances—and having made history herself as the first woman and African American to get on the ballot in all fifty states—commented on the movement surrounding Obama: “New political voices are emerging, searching for a new paradigm, new partnerships and a new way of doing politics.” In response to an endorsement by Rev. Jesse Jackson—who won thirteen primaries and caucuses in 1988 as an insurgent Democratic candidate—Obama acknowledged, “It is because people like Jesse ran that I have this opportunity to run for president today.”¹⁴

Independents and insurgents have laid the groundwork for the “Obama phenomenon” since 1988. Meanwhile, black and white Democratic leaders (often joined by their Republican counterparts) have worked to limit the diversification of black political options and alliances. From the beginning of his campaign, however, Obama defied partisan convention by reaching out to Republicans and independents, in addition to Democrats, eventually forcing black Democratic officials to follow his lead. Longtime Clinton ally Rep. John Lewis was among those compelled to switch his endorsement as a party delegate under pressure from his constituents, who voted overwhelmingly for the insurgent. By tapping America's rich vein of independent voters, offering “a new way of doing politics,” while the bipartisan establishment (the Republican administration and Democratic-led Congress) struggled with abysmal public ratings, Obama helped to give expression to black America's independence. His message of hope—less partisan, more inclusive—resonated not only among Democrats dissatisfied with the old party establishment, but among disaffected Republicans and independents of all backgrounds. For many of Obama's followers, the Illinois senator seemed to embody the essence of King, standing tall like a modern-day Lincoln by imploring the nation to unite in changing the partisan-driven politics of Washington. In the process, he brought out millions of new voters, especially younger ones, and became a leader to inspire a broad-based movement for political reform.

Black independents were ahead of the nation's curve when it came to Obama. South Carolina independent black leader Wayne Griffin urged “Independents for Obama” long before the Senator's campaign captured the imagination of so many Americans.¹⁵ The radio advertisement Griffin ran just prior to his state's primary, which featured him speaking, made the case most directly:

Independents can vote on Saturday, and we've got a lot of reasons to do so. The Democratic Party establishment, now run by Bill and Hillary Clinton, sees the country in terms of old labels, old coalitions, and old tactics. They think change comes from the top. But the change I'm a part of is coming from the bottom. It's coming

from ordinary people, young people, and politically independent people. Barack Obama has spoken out for that kind of change, and that's why so many independents like me are supporting him. If we want to change the direction of our country, we have to change the way we do politics. It's that simple.¹⁶

When the “first black president,” former president Bill Clinton, launched his attack on Obama in South Carolina in the days leading up to “Super Tuesday” (February 5, 2008, when two dozen states held their primary or caucus), he was not only seeking to advance the presidential nomination of his wife, Senator Clinton, but attempting to stifle the emerging black and independent alliance that was already beginning to make itself felt in the primaries and caucuses; Obama had already demonstrated his support among white voters, and independent white voters in particular, beginning with his win in Iowa—the first in the nation. Meanwhile, African Americans were coming out in disproportionate numbers for him. (In effect, the “first black president” was attempting to block the way for the election of the first black president.)

The Democratic establishment received a severe rebuke by African Americans, who overwhelmingly supported Obama: the senator received 78 percent of the black vote in South Carolina. He would go on to receive 86 percent of the black vote in Georgia, 84 percent in Alabama, and 77 percent in Tennessee, as well as 82 percent in New Jersey and 74 percent in Connecticut. Black independent support for Obama was particularly high: in Georgia, for instance, where 12 percent of African Americans who participated in the primary were self-declared independents, 97 percent cast their vote for the insurgent. In Massachusetts, 33 percent of black voters who participated in the primary self-identified as independent; in Tennessee, 17 percent; and in Connecticut, 22 percent.¹⁷ Momentum turned to movement, and Obama's candidacy was on its way with massive campaign rallies, record-breaking fundraising (in terms of total amounts raised per month and numbers of contributors), and unprecedented voter turnout. The nearly eighteen million people who voted for Obama in the primaries would succeed in defeating the most powerful element of the Democratic Party establishment—the Clinton machine.

At the conclusion of the primaries, Obama graciously credited Senator Clinton for having shaped him and his campaign. Less discussed, however, was how he had been influenced by those at the base of the movement he was helping to lead—that is, by African Americans looking to break out of the Democratic Party establishment and independents looking to move the country beyond partisan politics. Obama was a beneficiary of those two forces, a product and proselytizer of those two voting groups.¹⁸ Where the movement goes will be known only in coming months and years. Will African Americans and independents continue to exert pressure not only on the Democratic Party but

on the Republican Party beyond the general election? Or will they, like so many other movements before them, get co-opted by the bipartisan establishment? Could we be moving into an era of *postpartisan* politics? Much of this will depend on what African Americans and independents do on the ground to keep up the pressure.

The respected Democratic pollster Douglas Schoen is among those who have begun to argue that a collapse of the two major parties is under way. He points to multiple signs of political independence in the overall U.S. electorate, including a noticeable dealignment among voters relative to the two major parties. Given the historical resilience of the two major parties, it may be too early to make such a call. But should such a collapse take place, African Americans—and black independents in particular—will likely be an important part of that process.¹⁹

What is clear is that the post-civil rights Democratic Party and its lock on the majority of black voters are being questioned, if not challenged, in multiple ways. Whether self-consciously abstaining, voting for independent and third-party candidates, voting for black Republicans, or voting for black Democratic insurgents, African Americans are increasingly pursuing different political options. In the early twenty-first century, African Americans, as part of a tradition dating back to the very founding of the republic, are creating new political practices relative to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In 2008, it looks like the remaking of a black and independent alliance.