

“What Would an Obama Presidency Mean for Black Americans?”

The nation is moving with breakneck speed through the primaries and caucuses, to the summer political conventions, and on to the November presidential election. Black and White Americans alike are excited about the candidates that they support, and are contemplating what a successful campaign will mean.

Let's be real about it, from an economic perspective, we support the candidate that we believe will help improve our bottom line. This could mean tax breaks for our firms, or it could mean better and cheaper health care or education for our families. If we believe a candidate can enhance our economic outcomes, then we are likely to support that candidate.

When it comes to Obama, do Blacks believe that he can enhance their economic outcomes? To argue that a President Obama could improve Black Americans' bottom lines would imply either that he would create circumstances under which “all boats are lifted” or that he would adopt policies that were biased in favor of Blacks. The latter would be a direct turn-off to White voters. Therefore, because we continue to observe significant White support for Obama, we must discount the latter scenario.

So we return to “lifting all boats.” But lifting all boats could mean no relative improvement in Black versus White economic outcomes. Can Blacks continue to settle for that? Aren't Black Americans interested in closing gaps: Educational, employment, income, and wealth gaps?

What is the probability that an Obama Presidency can result in closing of economic gaps between Blacks and the rest of America? Any attempt to answer the question directly would be mostly speculative. However, we might use history as a source of insight into this question. For example, we can ask “To what extent have Black political administrations produced permanent and significant improvements in economic outcomes for Black Americans?”

This question can be considered in the context of the Douglas Wilder gubernatorial administration in Virginia (1990-94) and the mayoral administrations of Coleman Young of Detroit (1974-94), Thomas Bradley in Los Angeles (1978-93), Harold Washington in Chicago (1983-87), and David Dinkins in New York City (1990-93).

While perfect data are not readily available to perform the analysis, we take median Black and White household income data from Decennial Censuses that are prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau data for the census prior to and following the aforementioned administrations.¹ What we find is that Black-White median household income gaps evolved in the following ways:

¹ Median income data by race are not available from the Decennial Census prior to 1980. Therefore, we use 1980 as a starting point for those Black political administrations that began prior to 1980.

Black Political Administrations and Census Years	(A) Increase/Decrease (-) in Black-White Median Household Income Gap (State/City)	(B) Increase/Decrease (-) in Black-White Median Household Income Gap (National)	(C) Difference in Increase/Decrease (-) in Black-White Median Household Income Gap (B-A)
Douglas Wilder: (1990 and 2000)	-2.9%	-7.8%	-4.9%
Mayor Coleman Young (1980 and 1990)	8.8%	-2.2%	-11.0%
Mayor Thomas Bradley (1980 and 2000)	-0.4%	-9.9%	-9.5%
Mayor Harold Washington (1980 and 1990)	2.5%	-2.2%	-4.7%
Mayor David Dinkins (1990 and 2000)	3.1%	-7.8%	-10.9%

Source: The 1980 – 2000 U.S. Decennial Census of Population and other income data from the U.S. Census Bureau

These results paint a clear picture. While the national trend has been toward a closing (reduction in) of the Black-White income gap for each period under consideration, Black gubernatorial and mayoral administrations have produced differing outcomes: Two administrations (Wilder and Bradley) are associated with improvements (decreases) in the Black-White income gap, while three administrations (Young, Washington, and Dinkins) are associated with increases in the gap. Arguably, one could contend that, in the case where the Black-White income gaps widened, outcomes would have been worse had a Black political administration not been in power.² Nevertheless, we must ask “What effect would an Obama Presidency have on the Black-White income gap?”

While this commentary is not intended to persuade voters to support or oppose specific candidates, it is designed to caution voters to seriously consider what it really means to support a candidate. If the concern is electing a presidential, gubernatorial, or mayoral candidate who will improve ones economic outcomes (including reducing the Black – White income gap), then the evidence is that there is no guarantee that a Black candidate will serve that purpose.

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² It is also germane to note that while the Decennial Census data do not represent perfect bookends to the political administrations under scrutiny, it is logical to expect that improvements in Black – White income gaps that are associated with political administrations would be sustained—at least in the short run.