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“Are You Better Off Today?”

During the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan invited voters to inquire whether they were better off than they were four years earlier (1976) when President Jimmy Carter was elected. Given that Reagan won the election, presumably, at least for most Americans, the answer to the question was a decisive “no.” The implication was that, if a president is not successful in improving the quality of life for Americans during a four-year term, then a second term is not warranted.

Is it time for Black Americans to ask the same question concerning their quality of life? Are we better off today (2012) than we were in 2008? During 2008, I wrote two commentaries about the prospective and actual Obama presidency. In both cases, I intimated that we should keep it simple and assess developments during an Obama presidency with respect to two economic statistics: Unemployment and income. While household income statistics by race are not available for 2012 at this time, we can compare developments on the unemployment front for Black Americans over the past four years. Are the unemployment statistics more favorable today than they were four years ago?

Comparing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) over the period January 2009, when President Obama took office, and April of 2012, shows that, overall, the Black unemployment rate rose from 12.7% in January of 2009 to 13.0 percent in April of 2012.

These overall statistics muddy the picture somewhat concerning unemployment for Black males versus females. Actually the Black male unemployment rate fell from 14.3% in January of 2009 to 13.6% in April of 2012. On the surface, this looks like an improvement. However, the reality is that the unemployment rate is lower in April of 2012, in large measure, due to a drop in the labor force participation rate, which fell from 70.5% in January 2009 to 67.3% in January of 2012.

For Black females, the unemployment rate rose from 9.3% in January of 2009 to 10.8% in April of 2012. The other negative aspect of this story is that the Black female labor force participation rate also fell from 63.9% in January of 2009 to 62.8% in April of 2012.

Clearly, on the unemployment front, conditions have become less favorable for Black Americans. While conditions may seem to have improved for Black males, the statistics are hiding a significant rise in the number of Black males who have given up on finding work and who have become so-called “discouraged workers.” Black females have certainly seen a deterioration in their unemployment status, and have also seen a rise in the number of discouraged workers.

We will revisit this issue of whether Black Americans are better off in 2012 when household income statistics by race become available. However, on the unemployment front, we can clearly answer in the negative. Black Americans are not better off today than they were four years ago.

The big question is whether this clear evidence on the deterioration in Black America's quality of life will be sufficient to sway Black America's voting behavior? The good thing about living in American is that you always have a choice.

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