

Political empowerment fading for black Americans in the Age of Obama

October 16 2012, by Gerry Everding



Hailed by some as the "end of race as we know it" and the beginning of a "post-racial" America, the 2008 election of Barack Obama sparked a measurable bump in feelings of political empowerment among black Americans.

But those sentiments have faded considerably over the last year or so, according to a new analysis of political [survey data](#), with the sharpest declines in perceived political power coming among blacks who identify themselves as conservatives or "born again" Christians.

"The election of a black American to the U.S. presidency did seem to empower African Americans, causing an increase in levels of perceived freedom," writes James L. Gibson, PhD, the Sidney W. Souers Professor of Government and professor of African and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

"But that increase seems to have been epiphenomenal, with perceived levels of freedom after 2009 soon reverting to their prior level. The boost in empowerment that earlier research has documented may be of little long-term consequence. Instead, ideology and [religiosity](#) are now fairly strongly connected to perceptions of freedom among black Americans."

Gibson's findings, based on national surveys conducted between 2005-2011, suggests many black Americans still feel less free than whites when it come to engaging in political activities, including such icons of American democracy as the right to assemble and speak out on sensitive political issues.

His analysis, titled "Being Free in Obama's America: [Racial Differences in Perceptions of Constraints on Political Action](#)," is published in a forthcoming special issue of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

"For many Americans, perceived freedom to act seems to be a necessary condition for political participation," Gibson says. "Black Americans are much less likely than whites to perceive that their government will allow them to engage in ordinary (but non-voting) forms of political participation."

While some pundits characterize the black electorate as a monolithic voting block ready to back Obama no matter what, Gibson's analysis reveals a black America fractured by surprisingly diverse political

viewpoints.

Key findings include:

- Electing an African American to the presidency raised black perceptions of political freedom, but only for a fairly short period. By 2011, perceptions of freedom among blacks were at the same level as in 2005.
- Black Americans still perceive much greater constraints on their political freedom than do white Americans, especially in situations where political actions could be perceived as questioning government authority.
- 67.7 percent of whites assert that the government would allow them to make a speech in public, whereas only 45.7 percent of [African Americans](#) hold this view.
- 14.8 percent of whites assert that hardly anyone feels free to speak their mind; 22.1 percent of blacks hold this view.
- Perceptions of freedom among Christian fundamentalists (irrespective of race) are among the most constrained in contemporary American politics.
- Black perceptions of [political](#) freedom have decreased significantly among fundamentalist blacks, especially those who consider themselves to be "born again."
- Conservative blacks and liberal blacks perceived equivalent levels of freedom prior to the election, but after, conservative blacks felt markedly less free than liberal blacks.
- Blacks are equally divided, with half who perceive constraints on their freedom and half who do not.
- By far, the most powerful predictor of levels of perceived freedom is education: Poorly educated [black Americans](#) do not believe that they have the freedom to participate fully in politics.

"Given the objective reality of participation wars in contemporary American politics, it is hardly surprising that some would perceive serious constraints on the [freedom](#) available to them, and that even the election of a co-ethnic to America's highest office would have little long-term ability to inoculate against those constraints," Gibson concludes.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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