

Between Disenfranchisement and Disillusionment: The African American Electorate and the
2016 Presidential Election.

The results of the 2016 presidential election held on November 8, 2016 are in. According to *Pew Research Center*, a nonpartisan fact tank which reports on issues, attitudes and trends shaping our global context, Republican nominee Donald J. Trump defeated Democratic nominee Hilary Rodham Clinton by an electoral count of 304 to 227 respectively.¹ This even though Clinton trumped Donald J., in the popular vote, receiving “65.8 million votes (48.25%) to almost 63 million (46.15%) for Trump.” To be sure, there was a general malaise about the election. CNN analyst Greg Wallace notes that voter turnout was at its lowest point in two decades. The 55% voter turnout was down from the 60% that showed up in 2012 or the 64% in 2008 and more akin to the 1996’s 53.5% voter turnout.² CBS News analysts Stanley Feldman and Melissa Hermann say that their “Exit Polls suggest Trumps’ win was in large part a repudiation of Hilary Clinton by a substantial number of white voters... Trump did best among white voters without a college degree, beating Clinton... 72 percent to 23 percent. [He]... won among white, non-college women 62 to 34 percent and among white college-educated men 54 to 39 percent.”³ These numbers reflect both race and gender politics: aside from some college-educated white women, most white voters prioritized “Making America Great Again” over race and gender concerns. In most Republican safe states and several key swing states including Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Iowa, Trump’s campaign clinched key votes that to secure his victory.⁴ [X]

African American voters’ role in this election was critical. Huffington Post analyst Clearance B. Jones highlighted this critical role as early as January 2016. Jones explains: “Within the Democratic party the demographics of an electoral college victory for President of the United States indicate that any candidates’ successful path to the nomination depends upon the magnitude of actual voter turn among African-Americans, Hispanic and Asians. The percentage of African-American voter population within several States in the South suggest that the African-American vote could determine the winner in the Democratic Presidential Primaries. African-

¹ “Trump’s victory another example of how Electoral College wins are bigger than popular vote ones” by Drew Desilver. December 20, 2016. *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/20/why-electoral-college-landslides-are-easier-to-win-than-popular-vote-ones/>, Accessed January 4, 2016.

² “Voter Turnout at Twenty Year Low in 2016” by Greg Wallace, November 30, 2016, *CNNPolitics*, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/politics/popular-vote-turnout-2016/index.html>, Accessed January 4, 2016.

³ “CBS News Exit Polls: How Donald Trump Won the U.S. Presidency” by Stanley Feldman and Melissa Hermann, November 9, 2016 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-how-donald-trump-won-the-us-presidency/>, Accessed January 4, 2016

⁴ See “The Day North Carolina became the center of the Political Universe” by Katie Glueck, *Politico*, <http://www.politico.com/2016-election/swing-states>, Accessed January 4, 2016, “The Odds Of An Electoral College-Popular Vote Split Are Increasing” by Nate Silver, Oct 31, 2016, *FiveThirtyEight*, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-odds-of-an-electoral-college-popular-vote-split-are-increasing/>. Accessed January 4, 2016, and “Election Update: Where Are The Undecided Voters? By Nate Silver, Oct 25, 2016, *FiveThirtyEight*, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/election-update-where-are-the-undecided-voters/>, Accessed January 4, 2016.

American voters,” he says, “are presented with a unique and historic opportunity to choose between a candidate based on traditional government experience or one candidate who seeks to “redeem the soul” of the Democratic party to direct its attention to the magnitude of wealth disparity and the power of money in election politics.”⁵ While one may disagree with Jones’ assessment of the candidates, his argument concerning the unique role of African American voters was not only prescient, but also historical. Late political scientist Hanes Walton Jr., has argued that “the adoption and implementation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act...[formed] something of a unified national African American electorate that impacts and influences both primaries and caucuses as well as general elections.” The critical mass has to date voted largely Democratic. Indeed, in spite of the “Republican Party hegemony in the South at the presidential level,” the African American electorate has played a key role in the elections of Presidents James “Jimmy” Carter (1977-1981), William J. “Bill” Clinton (1993-2001), and Barack H. Obama (2009-2016).⁶

In this paper, I want to explore what happened in the 2016 presidential election with respect to the African American electorate. I discuss three areas of investigation in the paper: the political candidates’ relationships with the African American electorate, African American voting behavior, and the causes of such behavior. I ultimately identify three causes for African American voting behavior – sexism, crime policy which disenfranchises African American persons as voting citizens, and a general disillusionment with American progressivism. I’ll begin with a few notes on the election.

The numbers show that Clinton won over the majority of the African American electorate, receiving 88% of African American votes to Trump’s 8%. Yet these numbers easily conceal the difficulties that Clinton faced, the inroads accomplished by Trump, and the Trump victory. This struggle for African American votes was made evident in the media’s coverage of each candidate’s engagement with and reception by black churches and black church leaders. Although the African American electorate is by no means reducible to black churches and while black churches do not officially represent the political views of African Americans, black churches have and continue to play a vital role in black communities and thus may give insight into the pulse of the electorate. Clinton garnered support from a host of black pastors including Bishop Corletta Vaughn – pastor of Holy Ghost Cathedral, Chief Apostle to the ‘Go Tell It’ Evangelistic Ministry Worldwide and reality star of *Preachers in Detroit*. Clinton also saw support from pastor Jamal Bryant of Empowerment Temple AME and Rev. Dr. Leslie Callahan, pastor of St. Paul’s Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Rev. William Barber, head of North Carolina’s NAACP and the visionary mind behind “Moral Mondays” and the overarching

⁵ “The African American Vote and the 2016 Presidential Election” by Clarence B. Jones, *The Huffington Post*, January 26, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clarence-b-jones/the-african-vote-and-the-2016-presidential-election_b_9078174.html, Accessed January 6, 2016.

⁶ *The African American Electorate: A Statistical History Vol. I & II* by Hanes Walton, Jr., Sherman C. Puckett, and Donald R. Deskins, Jr. (CQ Press; Sage Publications, Inc., CA, 2012), p 607.

“Forward Together Freedom Movement”, also backed Clinton, and she received additional support from “Souls to the Polls”, an effort organized by local churches and community groups – primarily in swing states – to get entire religious congregations to voting booths after Sunday services. Yet such support didn’t shield Clinton from criticism from black churches, the most notable being those issued by a group of black pastors in an open letter. In late October, twenty five black pastors, many of them Democrats, expressed their dissatisfaction with Clinton’s stance on “education and employment, religious freedom, violence, and justice for the unborn.”⁷ The letter included signatures from Bishop Charles E. Blake, a White House Advisory Council member from Los Angeles and Church of God in Christ pastor, James E. Dixon, senior pastor of the Community of Faith Church in Houston, and Frank Madison Reid III, chair of the social action committee in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸

As with Clinton, Trump’s relationship to black churches may also be understood as symbolic of his relationship to the larger African American electorate. This past fall Trump visited a black church for the first time (Great Faith Ministries of Detroit), and while he faced a hailstorm of criticism from protesters outside the church, the smaller crowd inside welcomed and praised him. Pastor Jacquelyn Rhodes, visiting from her own New Light Christian Ministries in Detroit, explained how she had come to embrace Trump: “He wasn’t my first choice during the primaries” she said, “but I do support Donald Trump. I think he will have a plan for jobs. I think that’s what we need most of all in the city of Detroit.”⁹ In similar fashion, pastor Thomas Rogers Sr. of Antioch Road to Glory International Ministries, has also endorsed Trump, and even more, his entire congregation has followed suit. “I think that [Hillary Clinton] is very dangerous and reckless,” he told reporters, “and her past track record is a great indication that she is not fit to lead this country—or any other country.”¹⁰ Rodgers explained that Clinton had failed him on the issues of job creation and criminal-justice. The latter was particularly troubling, as Rodgers has seen the “three strikes” crime bill play out in the lives of parishioners, leading to mass incarceration and related social problems. “We want to break away from more of the same,” says Rodgers. Finally, one pastor, Bishop E.W. Jackson Exodus Faith Ministries in Chesapeake, VA,

⁷ “Black Pastors Blasts Hillary Clinton on Abortion” by Wayne Dupree, *WayneDupree.com*, November 1, 2016 <http://newsninja2012.com/black-pastors-blasts-hillary-clinton-on-abortion-in-open-letter/>, Accessed January 6, 2016

⁸ “Black faith leaders reproach Hillary Clinton on religious freedom as enthusiasm chills” by Bradford Richardson, *The Washington Times*, October 31, 2016, (<http://WashingtonTimes.com/news/2016/oct/31/black-faith-leaders-reproach-hillary-clinton-on-re/>) Accessed January 6, 2016.

⁹ “Protest and Prayer: Donald Trump Visits Black Church in Detroit” by Ryan Felton, *The Guardian*, September 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/03/donald-trump-protest-black-detroit-church>, Accessed January 6, 2016.

¹⁰ “Entire Black Church Endorses Donald Trump for President by Angela Bronner Helm, August 14, 2016, *The Root*, <http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2016/08/entire-black-church-endorses-donald-trump-for-president/>, Accessed January 5, 2016

was so offended by Clinton's anti-Christian Wikileaks¹¹ that he that he went on a "non-partisan five state tour to turn out the Christian vote in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and Florida."¹² In these swing states, Jackson urged "Christians to unite across racial and denominational lines to stop Clinton and protect their Constitutional freedom..."

The battle for the heart of black churches, and by extension, for the votes of the African American electorate, had a direct impact on the election. According to CBS, the majority of African American voters cast their ballots for Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton, with Clinton receiving 88% to Trump's 8%.¹³ Analysts Stanley Feldman and Melissa Hermann offer a more thorough breakdown: "black college graduates voted for Clinton at a smaller margin than black voters as a whole. Black women without college degrees were the most strongly in favor of Clinton, giving her 95% of their vote (compared to 91% for black women with a degree), while black men with a college degree gave only 78% of their vote to Clinton and 16% to Trump." *News.Mic*, another online magazine, concurs with CBS's 88% Democratic and 8% Republican assessment.¹⁴ It notes in addition that "Clinton earned 94% of black women's votes (Trump earned 4%) and 80% of black men's (Trump got 13% of those)." Black youth 18-29 gave her 83%, ages 30-44 gave her 87%, and 45+ 90%. Some didn't cast votes for either party - in the 18-29 range, 8% didn't cast, and from 30-44, 6% didn't cast. At first glance, it is evident that Clinton easily defeated Trump in the African American electorate, but a closer analysis reveals that Trump made enough inroads into the electorate to effect a ~5% decline in African American support for the Democratic Candidate since 2012. In 2012, 87% of black men and 96% of black women gave their support to Obama, and ultimately comprised part of an electorate that gave him 93% support. Today, most African Americans support the Democratic presidential candidate, but slightly more black men, black women, and black youth are either disengaged from the presidential election or feel that the Republican Party represents their interests better than the past two elections. [X]

John Yob, CEO of Michigan-based polling firm Strategic National, noted this surprising trend of increased African American support for the Republican Party during early voting.¹⁵ "We're

¹¹ "WikiLeaks Exposes Hillary's True Hatred for Christians" by Walter White, *The Political Insider*, October 11, 2016 (<http://www.thepoliticalinsider.com/hillary-emails-wikileaks-exposes-hatred-christians/>), Accessed January 6, 2016.

¹² "Black Pastor Urges Christians – 'Hillary's Deplorables' – to Vote for Donald Trump." By Steven Ertelt, *LifeNews.com*, Oct. 31, 2016, <http://www.lifenews.com/2016/10/31/black-pastor-urges-christians-hillarys-deplorables-to-vote-for-donald-trump/>) Accessed January 6, 2016.

¹³ "CBS News Exit Polls: How Donald Trump Won the U.S. Presidency" by Stanley Feldman and Melissa Hermann, November 9, 2016 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-how-donald-trump-won-the-us-presidency/>, Accessed January 4, 2016

¹⁴ "Here's a breakdown of how African Americans voted in the 2016 election" by Alison Durkee, November 14, 2016, *News.Mic*, <https://mic.com/articles/159402/here-s-a-break-down-of-how-african-americans-voted-in-the-2016-election#.ocmQ4qHLN>

¹⁵ "Polls Show African American Vote for Donald Trump is Double Mitt Romney's" by Neil Munro, *Breitbart.com*, November 5, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/05/trump-gains-african-american-support/> Accessed January 5, 2016

showing Donald Trump doing far better among African-Americans than any other Republican in modern memory,” he exclaimed. “Trump ‘has done an excellent job in campaigning for the votes of African-Americans.” Political analyst Neil Munro of *Breitbart*, an opinion and policy analysis magazine, has also noted this trend, attributing Trump’s success in large part to his campaign efforts, especially in swing states. “Trump’s gain among African American voters is happening in many states, alongside an overall reduction in African American enthusiasm and support for Obama’s designated successor. That drop-off in support from Obama’s 93% level will likely reduce the turnout for Clinton.” Indeed, the African American electorate did up their support for Trump, led by preachers like Dr. Darrell C. Scott of New Spirit Revival Center in Cleveland, OH and Mark Burns, televangelist and pastor of Harvest and Praise Worship Center in Easley, SC. And so it came to pass that in a moment that anticipated the nation’s first female president on the heels of its first black president, as well as extended progressive social policy, the Democratic candidate’s African American base transferred some of its allegiance to a Republican candidate known for “blackface” tweets, associations with the KKK, and whose entire platform, according to Senator Elizabeth Warren, is based on “racism, sexism, and xenophobia.”¹⁶ What just happened? How do we make ethical sense of the 2016 vote?

First, we must acknowledge that sexist attitudes and practices played a role in the politics of the African American electorate’s decision. Indeed, sexism is deeply rooted in the American psyche. Political scientist Caroline Heldman reminds us of a longstanding “bias against female candidates due to the masculinity the office embodies [as well as] gender biases in media coverage that diminish female candidates.”¹⁷ “Clinton’s bid,” says Heldman, “was the tenth time a woman ran for the office, and she was faced the same gender bias...as the previous nine.”¹⁸ This included more negative coverage for female candidates, more media focus on women’s dress and appearance, and sometimes, outright sexism. Clinton also had to run for office in a culture where leadership is defined as masculine, a view that placed her in a “double-bind” of sorts: on the one hand, Clinton was easily seen as too aggressive when performing as male politicians have historically, and on the other, too weak when refusing to play to politics of patriarchy. In light of the data from the 2016 election, Heldman found that while “women held their numbers in the Obama Coalition,...men in the Coalition broke to vote for Trump and third party candidates in surprising numbers. Overall, men’s support for the Democratic candidate dropped from 45% in 2012 to 41% in 2016 [a drop of 4%], while women’s support held firm overall.” Heldman’s findings rang true in the African American electorate. While 96% of

¹⁶ “Elizabeth Warren: Trump ‘built campaign on racism’” by Sophie Tatum, May 4, 2014 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/04/politics/elizabeth-warren-twitter-donald-trump/index.html>, Accessed January 4, 2016.

¹⁷ “The 2016 Election: Sexism and the Failure of Men on the Left” by Caroline Heldman, *Pop Politics*, November 14, 2016, <https://carolineheldman.me/2016/11/14/the-2016-election-sexism-and-the-failure-of-men-on-the-left/> Accessed January 6, 2016.

¹⁸ See also “From Ferraro to Palin: Sexism in the coverage of vice presidential candidates in Old and New Media” by Meredith Conroy, Sarah Oliver, Ian Brekenridge-Jackson and Caroline Heldman, *Taylor and Francis Online*, June 2, 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21565503.2015.1050412>, Accessed January 6, 2016.

African American women supported Clinton (a 2% drop from 2012), only 80% of African American men supported her, down from 87% in 2012. The figures suggest that African American men effected the largest drop in percentage of support among people groups including white women, white men, black women, and Latino men. The 7% decline in support was second only to Latino women's 8% decline. Is it possible that African Americans bit the hand that would have fed them? [X]

Another factor in the election was the general distrust of Clinton by many in the African American electorate due to her views on crime and punishment. Wayne Bradley, state director of African American engagement for the Michigan Republican Party, traces the "tremendous trust deficit with Hillary Clinton" to criminal policy, and specifically to the anti-Crime laws established by Bill Clinton in the 1990s.¹⁹ Certainly, Bradley's own view bespeaks the sexism that contributed to Clinton's declining support, but it also highlights and critically engages a concern that runs deep in the African American community: the nation's policy on crime. Hanes Walton Jr. also criticizes U.S. criminal policy. For him, mass incarceration is the latest version of a long history of African American oppression. This history can be traced from the recent War on Drugs back through Segregation, the Black Codes of the Confederacy to the Slave Codes of the New World colonies. "Each system," he says, "has been a way of generating convicts, felons, and ex-felons in the African American community..."²⁰ Walton goes on to explain that the key political consequence of such measures is the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Due to government neglect, these numbers are unavailable, but it is highly likely that the very criminal policies that Clinton embraces contributed to a shrunken base of support, fewer electoral votes, and ultimately to her defeat. Is it possible that Clinton bit the hand that would have fed her?

Finally, it seems that the results of the 2016 presidential election disclose dissatisfaction with American progressivism within the African American electorate. American progressivism was birthed in the early twentieth century as a response to the ills of modern industrial society. Its aim was to offset the impact of capitalist forces on modern life by making the government more accountable to citizens and less corrupt; by curbing the power and influence of the wealthy. Progressivism also promised social welfare for everyday citizens – unemployment benefits, accident and health insurance, and social security for the disabled and elderly – if only we could patiently endure the progress and evolution of capitalist society. Indeed, progressivism is one of the main reasons that African Americans have found common ground with the Democratic Party during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet in analyzing the discourse and voting behavior of the 2016 African American electorate, it is clear that many have grown weary of progressivism's call to "wait," as well as the historical gradualism which funds it. As was the case with the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for years now we have heard the word "wait". "It

¹⁹ "Polls Show African American Vote for Donald Trump is Double Mitt Romney's" by Neil Munro, *Breitbart.com*, November 5, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/05/trump-gains-african-american-support/> Accessed January 5, 2016

²⁰ Hanes Walton

rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “wait” has almost always meant “never.” It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration.”²¹ Certainly, we live in an era after King, where some progress is evident. Yet such progress has been intentionally offset by various government strategies of oppression, most recently the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. As a result, many are not only disenfranchised, but also disillusioned with the American democratic experiment and are asking “deeper questions about the willingness of the political establishment to make long-term investments in African American communities.”²²

So then, we have the following situation before us: Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump in the popular vote, but was defeated overall by electoral votes. President Trump is poised to take action in the White House. During his first 100 days, he plans to remove environmental and energy restrictions put in place by Obama and initiate a process of continuous deregulation – for every one policy of regulation he establishes, Trump says that he will remove two.²³ Beyond his first 100 days, he plans to build a wall along the Mexican border, establish a “deportation force”, place new restrictions on Muslims and immigrants, and repeal Obamacare. More, this takes place in a context where African Americans have been issued empty political promises with full prisons, gerrymandering politicians with a clear-cut school-to-prison pipeline, and are thus caught between disenfranchisement and disillusionment. Where do we go from here? It seems that given this context, we must relinquish our backbiting and turn to a vital area of interrogation for (political) theology, namely *sovereignty*, or supremacy. In turning a critical eye to sovereignty, however, we turn not to the monarch of early modern times, but to the contemporary mode into which it has transmigrated, namely neoliberal ideology, which dominates the thinking not only of President Trump, but much of the Democratic Party and American populous as well. We must also turn a critical eye to the social practices of authoritarian governance which constitutes neoliberal regimes, especially in the spaces of urban development, mental health, medical care, and education.

²¹ “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr. August 1963,

https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf Accessed January 7, 2016

²² “African American Voter Turnout Down This Election”, *MSNBC*, Weekends with Alex Witt, November 5, 2016, <http://www.msnbc.com/weekends-with-alex-witt/watch/african-american-voter-turnout-down-this-election-801919555877> Accessed January 5, 2016

²³ “Donald Trump Outlines Policy Plan for First 100 Days” by Tim LoBianco, *CNN Politics*, November 22, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/21/politics/donald-trump-outlines-policy-plan-for-first-100-days/index.html#> Accessed January 6, 2016