Today we come to say once and for all that what happened here 40 years ago was simply wrong. It was evil, and we renounce it.  
– Governor Mike Huckabee on the Central High crisis  
(Huckabee 1997)

We have had a past of . . . setting one race against another, or one group of people against another. We will have none of that in the future.  
– Governor James Gilmore during his acceptance speech  
(Hsu and Nakashima 1997)

In 1997 and 1998, a new message could be found among some Republican gubernatorial candidates in the South. Both the Bush brothers in Florida and Texas, as well as Mike Huckabee in Arkansas and James Gilmore in Virginia, actively courted African American voters, a group that traditionally provides overwhelming support for the Democratic Party. While each candidate had limited success in winning the votes of African Americans, a compassionate-conservative message could be found in their campaigns.
This paper examines two of those campaigns in great detail: the 1997 Virginia and 1998 Arkansas gubernatorial elections. Using content analysis of the states’ capital newspapers, interviews with journalists, candidates, and campaign staff, and exit poll data, Republicans are shown attempting to make inroads with Black voters. Because of this new strategy utilized by some Republicans, Democrats can no longer automatically count on African American votes. By building a relationship of trust with Black leaders and with the African American community—stressing religion or their religious backgrounds and providing African Americans with some economic support—Republican candidates have the potential to win a larger percentage of the Black vote. While a solid majority of African Americans are likely to remain firmly entrenched in the Democratic camp, Republicans do have the potential to significantly alter Democratic coalitions.

African American Voting in the Past

Since the founding of the nation, African Americans have constantly battled to earn equal rights. No struggle was as difficult as obtaining the right to vote. Grandfather clauses, poll taxes, and unfair literacy tests sprung up throughout the Post-Reconstruction South, all of which hindered African American registration. While most African Americans were kept out of polling booths, Blacks who could vote normally cast their votes for the “Party of Lincoln” because the Republican Party freed the slaves. As a result of the stock-market crash in 1929 and the harshest depression this country has yet to encounter, many African Americans became disillusioned with the GOP’s laizzez-faire attitude toward helping the poor. Although African Americans did not support Democrat Franklin Roosevelt in overwhelming numbers during the 1932 presidential election, they eventually became ardent supporters of his New Deal programs (Boyer et al. 1993; Link and Link 1993).

African Americans were a major part of the massive New Deal coalition that lasted until the 1960s, although they were not nearly as united in their party identification as they became after the election of John Kennedy in 1960 (Miller and Shanks 1996). Because of the liberal northern Democrats’ insistence on including a moderate civil rights plank in the party’s national platform, as well as the passage of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the national Democratic Party became known as the party in favor of promoting civil rights. African Americans long forgot their allegiances to the GOP because of the party’s stand on slavery; by the 1960s, Blacks were firmly entrenched in the Democratic camp (Lamis 1988; Rae 1994; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Carmines and Layman 1997). They have not left the party since. In 1998, Democrats won close to 90 percent of Black voters in House and Senate elections and more than 80 percent of Black voters in gubernatorial elections (Voter News Service 1998).
Reasons Behind African Americans’ Allegiance to the Democratic Party

African Americans have not moved in numbers to the Democratic Party simply because the Democrats have reached out to them. Since the Goldwater campaign of 1964, Republicans have given Blacks little choice but to support the Democratic Party because of the GOP’s frequent pandering to racism, especially at the presidential level. Republicans have not always made explicit racial appeals, but their messages have often had an implicit racial tinge.

The GOP and Implicit Racial Messages

Many GOP candidates have used a coded language to quietly emphasize their positions on racial issues. Such implicit appeals may be achieved by couching their message in conservative rhetoric in hopes of splitting the Democratic coalition between Blacks and working class Whites (Edsall and Edsall 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; Kinder 1986; Himelstein 1983; Rovere 1965). The “Southern Strategy” of Goldwater and Nixon, emphasizing both states’ rights and law and order, was almost entirely about race, even if neither candidate ever explicitly mentioned the issue. Reagan attempted to stereotype welfare recipients as the Black welfare queen with multiple children, a large house, and a Cadillac (Edsall and Edsall 1992). Bush’s “Revolving Door” commercial and his indirect association with the infamous Willie Horton ad in the 1988 presidential election certainly had racial underpinnings (Kinder and Sanders 1996). Even George W. Bush, the father of compassionate conservatism, risked offending African Americans with his campaign visit to Bob Jones University and his endorsement of the death penalty.

Certainly accusations of race baiting have not been laid on only Republican presidential candidates. Black (1976) noted that after the Supreme Court’s verdict in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), almost all Southern gubernatorial candidates argued over who was the stronger segregationist. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the emergence of many new Black voters, Southern Democratic gubernatorial candidates began to realize the importance of courting the Black vote despite George Wallace’s campaign tactics in Alabama or Lester Maddox’s in Georgia. Southern Republican candidates began to see race as an issue that had the potential to split a winning Democratic coalition. Although explicit mentions of race by Republican gubernatorial candidates began to disappear (Black 1976, 304), a “more euphemistic language” began to emerge in their rhetoric similar to that being used by the party’s presidential candidates.

Recent political history makes it extremely difficult for many African Americans to seriously consider the Republican Party as an alternative. However, such a shift is not as unrealistic as some may believe. Today, the coded Republican messages can still be found in some campaigns such as Fob James’ 1998 campaign in which a brochure was produced that pictured his Republican primary opponent with two of the state’s Black leaders. But a compassionate, conservative rhetoric has emerged among a few Republican gubernatorial candidates as well. The coded racial appeals of years past are less frequent, and candidates certainly no longer make the blatantly
racist appeals that they did in the fifties and sixties. Instead, some Republican candidates seem to be making sincere attempts to reach out to voters of all skin colors.

The Democrats and Issue-Ownership

In addition to the implicit racial appeals that many Republicans have made, African Americans support the Democratic Party largely because of the party’s positions on important issues. In his often-cited article on issue ownership, Petrocik (1996) argues that there are certain issues that Democrats and Republicans should stress in their campaigns because they hold positions on these issues that are likely to be favored by the majority of the public. For the Republicans, these include civil and social order issues, defense issues, and opposition to big government. The Democrats claim ownership on issues such as civil rights, social welfare, and labor issues. According to Petrocik’s argument, the reason for African American support of the Democratic Party seems relatively clear. Since the 1960s, Democrats have widely been considered the party most in favor of promoting civil rights and social welfare issues, both of which are salient to many in the African American community. While Tate (1993) documented the decline in the number of African Americans who view civil rights as the most important issue facing the country, she notes that Blacks view social welfare issues, such as welfare and unemployment, as being the most vital. Recent National Election Study data support her claim. In 1996, 40 percent of African Americans responded that social welfare is the most pressing problem the country faces today.

Republicans and the Black Vote

Because of the Democratic Party’s strength among African Americans on issues of civil rights and social welfare—as well as the fact that Republicans are often considered to be less supportive on these issues and unwilling to establish relationships with the African American community—it is difficult for the GOP to seriously contend for the Black vote. Even with the growth in the Black middle class, African Americans still vote along racial rather than class lines (Dawson 1994; Tate 1993; Tuch, Sigelman, and Martin 1994; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Welch and Combs 1985; Jackman and Jackman 1983). This group cohesion is extremely hard for Republicans to overcome.

Republicans do not necessarily have to concede the Black vote, but their approach to winning over a significant portion of that group must change. First, it is essential that Republican candidates build relationships with Black leaders and reach out to the African American community in order to overcome the perception that the GOP does not have Blacks’ interests in mind. More than anything else, this factor is the most important aspect of Republicans’ attempts to make headway in the African American community. Certainly, this relationship with the African American community cannot be accomplished overnight; it must be perceived as being sincere and will likely take several years to develop. However, as Mike Huckabee’s success
will illustrate, with time it can be accomplished.

Second, Republicans do “own” an issue that resonates with many in the African American community: religion. Few groups are more religious in this country than are African Americans (Myrdal 1944; Morris 1984; Harris 1994). The Black church has played a prominent role in Black culture, and many African Americans’ lives revolve around the church. Because of the importance that Blacks place on religion, many are in favor of school prayer and many oppose abortion. Seventeen percent of African American respondents argue that abortion should never be permitted compared to only eleven percent of White respondents (Rosenstone, Kinder, Miller, and the National Election Study, 1996). And, according to the 1996 National Black Election Study data, just fewer than 50 percent of African Americans report that they attend church every week or almost every week; only five percent report that they never attend (Tate 1997). This fact gives Republicans an opportunity to stress religious issues or their own religious backgrounds to win over some Black voters. In fact, such religious issues are especially appealing to Republican candidates because they will not alienate their conservative White base.

Finally, Republicans can attempt to seize ownership of issues that Democrats have traditionally championed in order to appeal to Black voters. While this is certainly not an easy task, it is exactly what followers of compassionate conservatism are attempting to do. Republicans cannot just adopt the rhetoric of the Democratic Party on issues such as education and healthcare without offending their conservative base. However, survey evidence shows that, if couched in the right terms, Whites—even conservative Whites—favor assistance to the poor (Sniderman and Piazza 1993). Republicans must be careful how they appeal to Black voters on these issues, but the potential exists for Republicans to make some headway with the Black electorate while not losing too many of their core supporters.

A New Type of Republican Candidate: Mike Huckabee and Jim Gilmore

To examine how Republicans have tried to win African American votes, this study investigates the campaign strategies of two Republican gubernatorial candidates: Mike Huckabee of Arkansas in 1998 and Jim Gilmore of Virginia in 1997. These two campaigns make strong case studies because they took place in states that have medium-sized Black populations—16 percent and 19 percent respectively. Unlike states with small Black populations where candidates are less likely to actively court the Black vote, African Americans in Arkansas and Virginia are numerous enough to influence the outcome of elections. If Republican candidates simply conceded the Black vote to their Democratic opponent, the Republican candidate would be forced to win an overwhelming portion of the White vote. As a result, the Republican candidates in both states are more likely to make appeals to members of the African American community for their votes.

In addition to their moderate-sized Black populations, Arkansas and Virginia are interesting states to examine given the history of racial issues in their gubernatorial elections. While neither state has as brutal of a history as their neighbors in the Deep
South, tension over racial issues has played a major role in each state’s gubernatorial elections from the 1950s forward. In Arkansas, the infamous Little Rock incident occurred in 1957 when Governor Orval Faubus refused to integrate Central High. In Virginia, Senator Harry Byrd coined the term “massive resistance” in the 1950s and led the effort to keep the state’s schools segregated. Interestingly, both were Democrats. In both states, the governors eventually closed the public schools instead of integrating them.

More recently however, it has been the Democratic candidates in the two states that have been supported in overwhelming numbers by Black voters. In Arkansas, Governors Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, Bill Clinton, and Jim Guy Tucker were all considered progressive on racial issues. In fact, as Table 1 indicates, in the two gubernatorial elections prior to 1998, the Democratic candidate won 86 percent and 91 percent of the Black vote respectively.

Table 1. African American Voting and Turnout in Recent Arkansas and Virginia Gubernatorial Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Turnout (% of the Electorate)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: All cross-tabulations were weighted using the weight variable provided with the data set.

***Mason-Dixon conducted the 1993 Virginia Gubernatorial Election Poll. However, they were unable to provide me with the raw data for that election. Instead, the numbers were taken from Lorraine Woellert, November 4, 1993, “In Only Loss, Allen Stuffed by Democrats in N. Virginia,” The Washington Times, C6. Turnout numbers were unavailable.
The Republican Party in Virginia was at one time the more liberal of the two major parties on racial issues, yet this has also started to change in recent years. First elected governor in 1981, Chuck Robb was quite popular with Black Virginians because of his progressive stance on race. At the same time, he stressed moderately conservative positions on economics that appealed to many of his White constituents. In 1989, Democrat Douglas Wilder, who became the first Black governor elected in the history of the United States, also appealed to Black voters. According to a CBS News/New York Times exit poll, Wilder carried 90 percent of the Black vote (CBS News/New York Times Virginia Gubernatorial Exit Poll 1989).

To assess the campaign strategies used by the Republican candidates, the content of the states’ capital newspapers from January 1st of the election year until Election Day in November was analyzed. Table 2 lists the results of the content analysis for both Huckabee and his Democratic opponent, Bill Bristow. Table 3 contains the results of the content analysis for both Gilmore and his opponent, Don Beyer. As the tables indicate, both Republican candidates primarily highlighted issues on which Petrocik (1996) argued the GOP claimed ownership: taxes for Huckabee, setting the agenda in 13 percent of his articles, and taxes and crime for Gilmore, setting the agenda in 31 percent and 11.7 percent of the articles respectively. In addition, both Republican candidates heavily stressed their education proposals. While education is an issue for which Democrats claim ownership, it is too salient in voters’ minds for Republicans to ignore. Republicans may be able to neutralize the Democrat’s issue ownership by putting forth proposals comparable to those of their Democratic counterparts.

Interestingly, none of the four candidates made racial issues a central part of his campaign. Gilmore set the agenda on race in four percent of the articles while Huckabee did so in only 0.3 percent on one article. Bristow never mentioned race, and Beyer did so in only 2.1 percent of his articles. The vast portion of Gilmore’s discussion of racial issues dealt with stopping the burning of Black churches, an issue that has an important religious dimension and is hardly controversial even among most Whites. It is not surprising that the GOP candidates largely ignored racial issues, since these issues tend to alienate socially conservative Whites that comprise a substantial part of any Republican winning coalition. However, just because the Republicans did not discuss racial issues does not mean that they ignored Black voters. Using interviews with the candidates, campaign staff, and journalists, as well as newspaper articles, it will be shown that Huckabee and Gilmore each spent considerable time building relationships with the African American community, making religion or their religious backgrounds a central part of their campaign, and offering some “compassionate” programs that appealed to many Blacks, but they did not alienate conservative Whites.
### Table 2. Percentage of Newspaper Articles Mentioning Various Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Huckabee</th>
<th></th>
<th>Bristow</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horserace</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs/Economic Development</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues Specific to Arkansas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Huckabee</th>
<th></th>
<th>Bristow</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics in Govt</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckabee’s Book</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckabee’s Ethics</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Abuse</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of articles for Huckabee = 307; Total number of articles for Bristow = 167. The percentages are compiled by dividing the number of articles dealing with an issue (or in which the candidate set the agenda) by the total number of articles for the specified time period.

Source: The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

**Mike Huckabee: Building a Relationship of Trust**

When asked what role racial issues played in the 1998 Arkansas governor’s race, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* reporter Rachel O’Neal (1999) responded, “I don’t recall any racial issues in the governor’s race.” O’Neal was correct: racial issues played almost no role either explicitly or implicitly in either campaign. In fact, only three articles during the entire period of this study make any reference to racial issues. An article concerning affirmative action revealed that both Huckabee and his Democratic opponent, Bill Bristow, opposed the issue, while another made note of a
Table 3. Percentage of Newspaper Articles Mentioning Various Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Gilmore</th>
<th></th>
<th>Beyer</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
<td>% of Articles</td>
<td>% Articles (Set Agenda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse race</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs/Economic</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issues Specific to Virginia

|                     |            |            |            |            |
| Car Tax             | 34.3 | 25.8 | 23.7 | 18.2 |
| Childcare           | 0.3 | 0 | 1.4 | 1.0 |
| Govt. Spending      | 2.1 | 2.1 | 3.1 | 0.3 |
| Resignation         | 5.2 | 0.6 | 2.4 | 1.4 |
| Tobacco             | 12.3 | 4.3 | 6.9 | 2.7 |
| Transportation      | 3.1 | 0 | 3.4 | 1.4 |

Note: Total number of articles for Gilmore = 326; Total number of articles for Beyer = 291. The percentages are compiled by dividing the number of articles dealing with an issue (or in which the candidate set the agenda) by the total number of articles for the specified time period.

Source: The Richmond Times-Dispatch

moving speech that Huckabee gave a year earlier to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High. Huckabee also brought up his Central High speech when asked why he thought he was a strong option for African American voters.

Although candidates did not campaign on explicit racial issues, race still played a salient role in the election because of Huckabee’s attempts to court Black voters through non-racial issues. In fact, voting along racial cleavages was quite surprising. According to a Voter News Service exit poll, the incumbent Republican governor received 48 percent of the Black vote; this number is astronomical when compared to some of Huckabee’s Republican counterparts in Southern states with larger proportions of Blacks, such as Fob James in Alabama and Guy Millner in Georgia who received five percent and ten percent of the Black vote respectively. As Table 1 indicates, Huckabee did much better than the Republican candidate, Sheffield Nelson, in the previous two Arkansas gubernatorial elections. Nelson received only 13.7
percent of the Black vote in 1990 against Bill Clinton and a mere 8.8 percent of the Black vote four years later against Jim Guy Tucker.

Huckabee’s incredible showing among Black Arkansans can be attributed to several factors. First and most important, he has spent much of his career developing relationships with the African American community, an area where he thinks Republicans have much room for improvement. Huckabee told the author:

[Republicans] have assumed they can’t get the minority vote, and so they either don’t go out to get it or they wait until an election year and then they go out and act like they can court it, and it’s really about building trust and relationships (Huckabee 1999).

He believes that it takes time for a Republican to create trust with his or her Black constituency:

What [African Americans] wanted was just someone to be as honest with them as you can be. And so rather than change my message, I never have; I think that has been a real key. But I have given a lot of attention [to the Black population] and I’ve gone back again and again and again, whether or not there were results early, believing that if I was persistent enough and consistent enough, the message would get through. I think it was proven in the last election that that was correct (Huckabee 1998).

Huckabee’s Liaison for Minority Affairs, Joe Franklin, referred to Huckabee’s message as one of fairness. “When he came into state government,” said Franklin (1999), “the factor of fairness came through loud and clear, so race was not really an issue.” According to Franklin, this sense of “fairness” came from several different aspects of Huckabee’s record in office. He referred to the many small meetings that the governor held with leaders of the African American community to give them an opportunity to express their concerns. Unlike other politicians who might view these meetings only as symbolic, Huckabee actually took action in creating programs like ARKids First, which gave healthcare to many poor Black children. Franklin also noted Huckabee’s desire for inclusion as an important factor in building trust with the African American community. “He wanted the administration to work toward inclusiveness as far as people being hired, people in the cabinet, and people being involved in economic opportunities,” said Franklin (1999).

Governor Huckabee’s speech commemorating the desegregation of Central High was further evidence of his relationship building with the African American community. Commentators viewed his speech as being emotional and inspiring (Brummett 1997). Certainly the Republican could have simply said that what occurred 40 years ago was wrong without having been moved by the event. However, Huckabee brought a candor and sincerity to his speech that could only be delivered by someone
who felt strongly that an end must be put to the racial divisions in this country. Even the liberal *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* writer John Brummett, one of Huckabee’s harshest critics, was moved by the governor’s oration. “It was Huckabee whose words best fit the occasion,” wrote Brummett (1997) after the event, “being honest and direct, not soaring, but fired as if from a pistol, and striking right between the eyes.”

*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* reporter Rachel O’Neal did not believe that the speech had much of an influence on Huckabee’s success with Black voters. “I doubt the speech had much impact,” she stated. “Voters have short memories and the speech was about a year before the election” (O’Neal 1999). However, not everyone agreed with O’Neal’s assessment. Franklin said it was a symbolic moment not only for African Americans, but for all Americans, and one that was not likely to be forgotten. “No matter who you are,” said Franklin (1999), “African American, another minority, or [W]hite . . . everybody could relate to what he was saying in that speech.”

Unfortunately, the effects of Huckabee’s speech on the African American community could not be tested directly because of the lack of survey data relating to the speech. While it may be a stretch to argue that many African Americans voted for Huckabee simply because of the Central High speech, it certainly did not hurt his standing in the African American community.

The fact that Huckabee is a Baptist minister also played a role in his success with a Black population in Arkansas that has strong religious convictions. Huckabee, who refuses to go to churches for political reasons because he feels it is “inappropriate” (Huckabee 1998), visited many Black churches to spread a religious message. He feels that his religious background helped some with his popularity among Black voters. “I’ve gone and participated in programs [in Black churches] and I’m very comfortable in those settings, and I think that is certainly an advantage,” said Huckabee. “I’m not afraid of the language of Zion so to speak and not intimidated or feel out of place there,” he continued. “In fact, I feel very much at home.” Black Arkansans trusted Huckabee because of his religious background. According to a Voter News Service exit poll, almost 40 percent of the Black respondents identified themselves as part of the religious right, more than half of whom voted for the Baptist minister (Voter News Service 1998).

Huckabee did not make religious issues a central part of his campaign, however. He rarely talked about issues such as abortion, prayer in school, or opposing gay rights. However, it could be noted that he did come under some scrutiny when he made a comment about the importance of “Christian public schools” (O’Neal 1998). Still, Huckabee’s religious background is known by most Arkansans, and his visits to Black churches to speak about religion and not politics allowed many religious African Americans to see that the governor had their interests in mind. Even so, Huckabee’s religious background and visits to Black churches by themselves certainly would not have been enough to convince Blacks to support him. Religious fundamentalists such as Frank White and Woody Freeman previously ran for governor with almost no success with Black voters. This again supports the argument that building a strong relationship with the mainstream African American community is the most important
variable in determining Republican success with African American voters.

Huckabee not only spent a great deal of time in Black churches but also in other areas campaigning with large African American populations. “[Huckabee] went to Helena, West Helena . . . Forest City, West Memphis,” said Franklin (1999), “areas where a Republican wouldn’t think about visiting much less try to make a speech. He was making visits to reach out to different groups, and you could see the change in different audiences.” In the eastern part of the state where Huckabee made most of his appearances before large Black audiences, he carried 64 percent of the vote (Voter News Service 1998b).

Finally, Huckabee’s record during his first two years in office contributed to his success with the Black electorate. One of the governor’s prize programs was the creation of ARKids First, which is a Medicaid program designed to provide basic coverage for children whose parents make too much money to qualify for complete Medicaid. The goal of the program is to extend healthcare coverage to the working poor that are not eligible for Medicaid and are too poorly paid to get adequate medical coverage. This program has helped many poor Blacks, especially in the eastern Delta. Franklin (1999) called the acceptance of ARKids First among both Blacks and Whites in the state “astonishing.” Newspaper reports agreed with Franklin that the success of ARKids First increased Huckabee’s standing with Black Arkansans (State’s Number of Uninsured Fall, 1999). While healthcare may not have dominated Huckabee’s campaign coverage (see Table 2), it was clear that was the issue he wanted to stress. Huckabee heavily promoted ARKids First in three of his six campaign commercials, including one that focused solely on the program. The incumbent also discussed the ARKids First program in a newsletter sent primarily to Black families called One Arkansas. In addition to the ARKids program, Huckabee also signed into law a bill that raised the state’s minimum wage, and he vigorously opposed a proposition that would lower property taxes referring to it as “the most ominous threat to the structure of education that we’ve ever had” (Lieb 1998). Both of these acts also were likely to be popular with Blacks.

Huckabee appeared quite proud of his accomplishments with the African American community. He stated in May of 1998:

Blacks have been able to achieve not only significant improvement in terms of high-level appointments that I have made. I have been repeatedly in Eastern Arkansas (where a high percentage of the state’s Black population resides). We’ve made policy changes that positively affect African American voters. I think the positions that I have taken, whether it’s Central High or on other occasions, have given people a real comfort that they cannot be so much thinking about the party as the person and the principle (O’Neal 1998a, A1).

Huckabee’s efforts to build a strong relationship with Arkansas’ African American community, his religious background, and his record in office have all contributed to
the Republican’s astonishing success with Black voters.

While Huckabee has done much to promote a positive relationship with the African American community, his opponent was hurt by some of his positions on issues, most notably affirmative action. The fact that Bristow opposed affirmative action may have limited his ability to resonate with Black voters. Had Bristow been in favor of affirmative action programs, it would have provided him with a stark contrast to Huckabee. While incumbent Huckabee’s religious background and time in office made him popular with African Americans, he did not support affirmative-action programs. Though Blacks were 16 percent of Arkansas’ population, a Voter News Service exit poll indicated that they only composed nine percent of the voter turnout, an indication that, even with Huckabee’s reaching out to Blacks in the state, many African Americans were not excited about either candidate. As Table 1 indicates, this was a stark contrast to Black turnout eight years earlier when African Americans made up an astounding 27 percent of the electorate. In 1994, Blacks comprised 17 percent of the gubernatorial vote.

The difference in Black turnout between Huckabee’s election in 1998 and the previous two gubernatorial elections indicates that, while he was successful, Republican success with Black voters may occur only under certain conditions. Republicans may be able to win African American votes by reaching out to the African American community, emphasizing religion, providing economic programs targeted at least partially at Blacks, and when issues that would traditionally cause high Black turnout—such as affirmative action—are absent. Because of the small number of Blacks who turned out, it is impossible to see how they voted in terms of income levels. It is possible, however, that Huckabee’s success came from middle and upper-class African Americans. If this was the case, Republicans might not only be benefiting from the low turnout of African Americans; they might actually be taking away from the Democrats a significant portion of those few Blacks that are voting.

Nevertheless, Huckabee’s approach to winning the Black vote was successful. Let us now turn to another recent Republican gubernatorial candidate who, like Huckabee, made a concerted attempt to win over Black voters.

**Jim Gilmore: Building New Bridges**

Though race certainly was not a dominant issue in the 1997 Virginia gubernatorial election, it did play more of a role than in Arkansas. Referring back to Table 3, 4.6 percent of The Richmond Times-Dispatch articles about Republican Jim Gilmore, four percent of which he set the agenda, and 3.4 percent of the articles about his Democratic opponent Don Beyer, 2.1 percent of which Beyer set the agenda, covered racial issues. However, in the broad context of the election, racial issues had a limited impact on the outcome. Yet one can still make several interesting observations about the role of race in the election.

The most intriguing racial aspect of the campaign was the lack of endorsement by former Governor Douglas Wilder of either candidate. Wilder, the first African American governor in the country’s history, is popular and influential with many
Virginia Blacks, but he has often been at odds with the Democratic Party (Whitley 1997b). Many Virginia Democrats have complained that Wilder is a media hound and a self-promoter who wants to hold too much power within the party. In the 1993 gubernatorial election, he waited until late in the campaign to endorse Democrat Mary Sue Terry. In 1994, he used the same tactic in the Senate race between Chuck Robb—a long-time Wilder foe—and Oliver North. Initially, Wilder caused more problems in 1994 when he ran as an independent before bowing out of the election. Party members and political pundits argue that Wilder loves to cause controversy and likes to have the Democratic candidate actively seek his support instead of the former governor automatically endorsing the party’s candidate as usually happens in most states. Virginia Commonwealth University political scientist Avon Drake stated that Wilder practiced the politics of “extreme self-centeredness” (Wilder’s Non-endorsement, Not Neutrality 1997). Almost everyone assumed Wilder would delay his endorsement for Beyer until close to Election Day.

Wilder stunned the Virginia political community, however, when he announced in late October that he would not endorse either candidate, arguing that both would make excellent governors. As Gilmore’s Policy Director, Lee Goodman (1999) stated, “Wilder’s non-endorsement was tantamount to an endorsement for Jim Gilmore.” Gilmore’s active courting of Wilder was a big reason for the former governor’s non-endorsement. As with Huckabee in Arkansas, Gilmore devoted much of his political career to developing a positive relationship with minorities. “Gilmore had spent over four years reaching out and building bridges in the African American community,” said Goodman (1999). “He never ran away from the African American community.”

One of the issues that Gilmore worked on for several years and which he talked about during the campaign was stiffening the penalties for the burning of Black churches and other hate crimes. In fact, Wilder criticized Beyer, the state’s lieutenant governor, for allowing Gilmore’s proposal to prohibit insurance companies from canceling policies for churches burned by arson to die in the legislature (Whitley 1997a). The Republican spent a great deal of time on the campaign trail visiting Black churches and presenting them with money that had been raised through his office to help repair or prevent arson damage. Gilmore also ran a television commercial later in the campaign in which a woman discussed how the Republican stepped in when an insurance company told leaders at the Black Glorious Church of God that their policy had been canceled.

Gilmore’s protest against church burnings dominated most of the race coverage during the campaign. His emphasis on the church was similar to the tactics used by Mike Huckabee in his campaign. It is another example of how emphasizing cultural issues, such as religion, can appeal to the African American community. It also won Gilmore the endorsement of about a dozen Black ministers.

Gilmore reached out to Black voters in other ways as well. For example, he spoke at an NAACP meeting and declared that he “[would] stand for civil rights, civil liberties, and human rights” (Stone 1997). He then presented the chapter with a large framed replica of the first free election ballot held in South Africa in 1994.
Huckabee, Gilmore’s rhetoric encompassed more than just one meeting. In fact, he developed a relationship with Black voters for several years. Wilder’s greatest praise for Gilmore came when the Attorney General organized a meeting with other Southern attorneys general—where Wilder was the keynote speaker—to discuss action that could be taken against a recent wave of church bombings in the region. It was this kind of initiative that appeared to influence Wilder and other Black Virginians.

Gilmore’s racial record impressed Wilder so much that the candidate held several private meetings with the former governor. “Doug Wilder and Jim Gilmore began to genuinely get along,” said Goodman. “I think the two identified with each other, and I believe they appreciated each other.” He added, “If Jim Gilmore had not spent four years building bridges with the African American community, I would not perceive Doug Wilder sitting down with [him]” (Goodman 1999).

One issue for which Gilmore was not likely to win the support of African Americans was affirmative action. Like Huckabee, Gilmore opposed special preferences, but unlike in Arkansas, the Democratic candidate supported affirmative-action programs. Even so, the issue only became salient for a few days when the Republican Lt. Gubernatorial candidate, John Hager, said he opposed affirmative action. While Gilmore did not support special preferences, he was quite careful with how he addressed the issue. Before releasing an official statement on the subject, he sent his response to Wilder for review. Gilmore took a typical anti-affirmative-action position, arguing that the best way to help minorities is by providing them with an equal education early in life. “Here is my fundamental belief,” stated Gilmore, “You do not create opportunity for success in college or in the working world by imposing quotas. You create that opportunity by equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed” (Nakashima and Allen 1997).

However, Gilmore appeared to avoid the issue, perhaps because he feared it would diminish his position with the African American community. The question begs to be asked, why then did Beyer not make affirmative action an issue in the campaign? The answer lies in the demographic makeup of the state. Virginia’s Black population is only about 19 percent, meaning that there are fewer Black votes to be won by stressing the issue than in states such as Mississippi or Georgia. In fact, in a state in which one poll indicated that 70 percent of its citizens opposed affirmative action, Beyer would have likely alienated his working-class White base by stressing it (Hsu 1997). Like Gilmore, Beyer’s options were limited. The Democrat could not make affirmative action an issue because “bringing up affirmative action merely solidifies people who already are supposed to vote for you,” said Goodman (1999), “but you lose conservative White voters.”

Even with Gilmore’s hard work in the African American community and Wilder’s non-endorsement, the Republican only received 14 percent of the Black vote. While this number is still impressive, it was much smaller than Huckabee’s 48 percent in Arkansas. So why did a positive racial campaign by the Republican in Virginia fall short of Huckabee’s success in Arkansas? Probably the most important distinction between Gilmore and Huckabee is that Huckabee was a popular incumbent. He had
a record as governor on which he could run. While a popular Republican incumbent—George Allen—and his four years as attorney general helped Gilmore, this could not compare with Huckabee’s incumbency advantage.

In addition, Gilmore did not have the influential economic issues such as ARKids First and the increase in the minimum wage that Huckabee could highlight. Gilmore centered almost his entire campaign around the elimination of the state’s unpopular car tax. While some claimed that abolition of the car tax helped Blacks, others argued that it was designed to appeal mostly to Whites in northern Virginia. Either way, African Americans did not appear to have the same response to Gilmore’s tax cut as they did to Huckabee’s healthcare program. Huckabee had a program that provided tangible benefits clearly directed at a group that includes many African Americans, yet it was not likely to upset middle-class voters. Gilmore did not have such a program.

The last important difference between the two elections is that in Arkansas neither candidate supported affirmative action. While Beyer did not discuss the issue in depth during the campaign, he favored affirmative-action programs, and Black voters likely knew his stance on the subject. Had Beyer not supported affirmative action, Gilmore’s numbers with African Americans might have risen substantially. Beyer’s position on other issues, such as his relatively liberal economic agenda, his promise of a fair share of business for minority contractors, and his decision to meet with African American farmers to help them obtain loans because of emergencies, certainly kept Gilmore from receiving more Black votes as well. Again, this raises an important point: the Democratic candidate can have a large influence over how well Republicans fare with Black voters. Comparing Black voter turnout indicates that African Americans comprised a smaller portion of the electorate in 1997 compared to 1989 (see Table 1). It is important to remember that there was an African American running for Governor in 1989, but there were no statewide Black candidates in 1997. Turnout statistics indicate that African Americans might not have been extremely enamored with Beyer, but one certainly must be cautious when making this claim. In fact, candidates who take positions such as Beyer’s position on affirmative action, which appealed to many Blacks, may severely limit Republicans’ chances of winning significant percentages of African American voters. Democratic candidates such as Bill Bristow, who opposed affirmative-action programs and failed to excite many Black Arkansans with his proposals to improve education and wages, left the door open for Republican success within the African American community.

Nevertheless, Gilmore made a strong effort to court Black voters. Even the Virginian-Pilot, which endorsed Beyer, admitted, “We have been impressed by Gilmore’s willingness to speak out on racial matters not historically championed by Republicans” (Pilot Endorsement, Beyer for Governor 1997). Like Huckabee, Gilmore attempted to build trust and to develop a relationship with the African American community. Also, like Huckabee, he made religion a major part of his message to the African American community. Unlike Huckabee, however, Gilmore did not have an effective, progressive economic issue that really excited African Americans.
The Future of African Americans and the Republican Party

The solid Democratic support by African Americans has led most Republicans to ignore the Black vote, hoping that Blacks do not turn out in large numbers on Election Day. However, this trend may be starting to change slowly as the two case studies here indicate. It has long been perceived that Democrats “own” the issues that are most popular with Blacks; therefore, they automatically win the Black vote. But Republicans do have ownership of religious issues, which also appeals to many African Americans, especially in the South. GOP candidates can make some inroads with the African American community because of their religious background, like Mike Huckabee did in Arkansas.

However, if Republicans want to win the support of Black voters, simply stressing their opposition to abortion or their support of school prayer is not enough. Republicans have run on these issues for years with little success in the African American community. As former Alabama Governor Fob James illustrated in his reelection bid in 1998, simply declaring one’s love for God is not enough to persuade Blacks to leave the Democratic Party. James only received five percent of the Black vote. Republican candidates must build relationships with the African American community over many years like Huckabee and Gilmore did. African Americans have to perceive them as truly being “compassionate conservatives” and not just pandering to Black voters. Nor does it hurt Republicans to support a relatively uncontroversial program, such as Huckabee’s ARKids First. This program provides healthcare to thousands of Black and White children without alienating Huckabee’s core of conservative voters. Likewise, Gilmore’s speaking out against Black church burnings would obviously be popular among Blacks and would offend or threaten very few Whites.

The future of the Republican Party and Black voters still portends a struggle, especially if Blacks continue to view it as a party that is not tolerant of minorities. While personalities like Huckabee and Gilmore may help to change minorities’ perceptions of the GOP, the entire party has certainly not followed suit. Until the Republican Party as a whole begins to do things such as expand their public policy agenda and support more Blacks for public office, the GOP’s relationship with African Americans is not likely to change substantially.

Even if Republicans are capable of doing so, their ability to resonate with Black voters may be somewhat limited. As many race scholars have argued, a strong group heuristic exists among African Americans and the Democratic Party that is difficult for Republicans to break (Tate 1993; Dawson 1994). In addition, even the “father” of the “compassionate conservative movement,” George W. Bush has shown himself to be indifferent to Black voters by campaigning at racially intolerant places such as Bob Jones University and refusing to take a stand on removing the Confederate flag from South Carolina’s capitol dome. And certainly not everyone has bought into Bush’s “compassionate” claim (Hawpe 2000; Bright 2000; Wilkie 1999; Another “F” for “W,” 1999). As Huckabee (1999) noted, even if the candidate has a strong background with the African American community, party image can become a problem.
for many African American voters. Even Gilmore, who so actively courted the Black vote, failed to win a large percentage of Black voters. Therefore, ending the Democratic domination of African American voters will not be easy, even if Republicans make a sincere, concerted effort to do so. However, if Republicans continue to nominate candidates like Huckabee and Gilmore, more African American voters may defect to the Republican Party. Honest efforts to make the GOP more attractive to Black voters, such as the one being led by the Ohio Republican Party, will further help the GOP with the African American community. This is certainly not to say that a major realignment is on the horizon among Black voters; the Democratic Party has too strong of a record on racial and social welfare issues for that to happen, and far too many in the Republican Party are still perceived as intolerant of those issues. But, it is important to note that the seemingly impossible has already happened once—the party of Lincoln lost the Black vote in the 1960s—and the potential for Republicans to close the racial voting gap does exist.

Because of many Republicans’ conservative positions on economic issues that are often counter to what most African Americans believe, one could question whether it is necessarily positive for Blacks to have Republicans seeking their votes. If Blacks begin voting for Republicans in larger numbers because of the candidates’ religious backgrounds for example, it is possible that economic programs from which many Blacks benefit could be threatened. For instance, Republicans could fight the legality of gay marriages but dismantle social-welfare programs. Both of these actions would be consistent with their conservative viewpoints, but the latter will hurt many African Americans.

However, I believe that positives will emerge if the GOP begins to seriously pay attention to Black voters. Throughout the present analysis, I came across many Blacks that appeared frustrated with the Democratic Party because they felt that the party took their votes for granted. If Republicans start to win over substantial numbers of African Americans from the Democratic Party, it will force the party to be more responsive to Black voters. While Democrats may not reach out to Blacks through explicit racial issues—because as Sniderman and Carmines (1997) noted, it is electorally dangerous to do so—they will still be forced to listen to Black voices and to put greater emphasis on the social welfare and economic issues that African Americans support. Furthermore, Republicans cannot win Black votes by simply discussing religion: like Huckabee and Gilmore they must build relationships with the African American community and offer at least a progressive economic proposal as well. If the Republican Party follows in the footsteps of the two GOP candidates analyzed here, it can mean nothing but an increased voice for African Americans in the future.
Appendix

The content analysis was performed using the web-based version of Lexis-Nexis. Any combination of the candidates’ names, e.g. James Gilmore, James S. Gilmore, Jim Gilmore, was selected as the keywords. The time frame of the analysis was from January 1\textsuperscript{st} of the election year until Election Day. The author read and coded all relevant articles. In order to exclude irrelevant mentions of the candidates—a particular concern regarding Huckabee since he was an incumbent—the study included only articles dealing with the campaign. For example, in many cases, articles simply mention that a candidate attended a local football game or provide a list of names that the governor appointed to some state agency. If the article made no mention of the candidate running for governor or of the campaign, election, and/or opponent, it was excluded from the analysis. Articles that did not contain content relevant to the election when published were not included in the study unless that content later became an issue. For instance, Mike Huckabee often talked about his ARKids First program, but not in the context of the election. As Election Day grew closer, this program became one of the governor’s major campaign themes. In this case, the early, non-campaign related articles were included because Huckabee was positioning himself to make ARKids First an issue. These articles were coded so that the salience of the issue is accurately reflected.

When analyzing each article, an issue mention may be as broad as saying that crime reduction was a major goal of the candidate or as specific as individual crime proposals, such as the abolition of parole. An issue mention was coded for an article even if the article only mentions the issue briefly. For example, if the article only states in one sentence that a candidate had stressed the hiring of more teachers, then the article was coded as discussing education. Most articles refer to more than one issue and were coded accordingly. If the article contained information about a candidate’s position on education and welfare, then both issues were given an article mention.

To better understand the strategies employed by each candidate, candidates’ attempts to set the agenda on a particular issue were noted. This analysis allows explanation of which themes the candidate believed were most important in building a winning coalition. In order to understand which candidate was setting the issue agenda, articles were coded based on simple mention of an issue or whether the candidate either promoted the issue or was responding to an attack from the opposing candidate. For example, a candidate was considered to have set the agenda if an article stated that he “proposed” a certain initiative. Likewise, if the article mentions that the candidate “focused” on a certain issue or if the issue was cited as one of the campaign’s themes, the candidate was coded as setting the agenda. On the other hand, any article that talked about the candidate “responding” to his opponent, listed candidates’ responses to a newspaper questionnaire or debate, or just referred to an issue without stating the candidate’s position was coded as a mention, not as setting the agenda.
References

Huckabee: Never Again Be Silent When People’s Rights Are at Stake.” 1997. The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. September 26, 14A.


