

We've been here before

How Black and independent politics drive change



Dr. Lenora Fulani, who made history in 1988 as an independent presidential candidate, spoke at UNCG in 2018.

In the new afterword of Dr. Omar Ali's book, "In the Balance of Power: Independent Black Politics and Third Party Movements in the U.S.," Jacqueline Salit calls out the damage partisanship has done to American politics and American political culture.

"Today there is also a profound weakening of governing and political institutions, of parties and ideology and public trust," writes Salit, who was a major figure in the groundbreaking 1988 campaign of Dr. Lenora Fulani, the first woman and Black person to get on the ballot in all 50 states as a presidential candidate.

"The consent of the governed is slipping away. While the stranglehold of party loyalty is at an apex, the public desire for political freedom, for choice, for mobility, and for development among ordinary Americans is spreading."

Ohio University Press, which published the first edition of Ali's book in 2008, requested an updated second edition for this fall.

Ali, a historian of the global African diaspora, has been thinking a lot about political culture lately, and how it shapes and constrains our politics.

American political culture "is fundamentally based on a bipartisan system," he says, and "driven by ideology."

How we discuss societal problems, as well as how political – and then policy – responses are formulated to those problems, is

shaped by that culture. If you've ever had a Facebook discussion thread descend into partisan trash talking, you've seen this dynamic in action.

"We're made insane in this country, suspicious of differences, and closed-minded," Ali says. "The cure to that is creating new ways of being with each other, by being open and curious."

Many people are open to finding a new way to talk with each other about issues we face, he says, especially those among the roughly 43% of voters who identify as independents. "Independents tend to be less driven by knee-jerk partisanship, which keeps people divided."

Ali's book explores the history of Black and independent alliances in America, which date as far back as the 1840s, when the abolitionist Liberty Party arose as part of the anti-slavery movement.

Those alliances still matter today.

After George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in May, Black Lives Matter demonstrators demanded reforms in Minneapolis and in scores of cities, under both Democratic and Republican leadership.

This year – seven years after the Black Lives Matter movement began – African American protesters were joined in those



A 1973 voter registration drive at the Black Expo in Chicago



A 2014 protest in Chicago, decrying police brutality against Black Americans

demands by many other people of color and White people. Even large corporations spoke out against racial injustice.

In the new edition, Ali documents how, just as in the past, these independent Black activists are finding themselves driving political and policy change. City councils from Austin, Texas, to Asheville, North Carolina, have reorganized policing and community services budgets. The deaths of Black people at the hands of police became a subject in the presidential campaign.

“If you look at any piece of legislation, you have to go back at least 20 years prior, to the movement-building efforts that led to the shifting of the culture, and the pressures that were mounted from the outside, to have people on the inside – elected officials – make changes to the law,” Ali says. “African Americans, and Black independents in particular, have been at the forefront of every major reform movement in the nation’s history leading to progressive changes.”

by Mark Toczak • learn more at go.uncg.edu/ali | go.uncg.edu/in-the-balance-of-power

White working class *blues go red*

Working-class Whites surprised everyone in the 2016 election, right?

News programs touted the unexpected proportion who voted for then-candidate Trump, making the difference in states like Pennsylvania and Michigan.

But if you go back to 2000 as the Clinton era ended, says professor of political science Charles Prysby, a shift had already begun.

Before, Democrats did significantly better among White working-class voters than White middle-class voters. By 2012, the tide had completely turned.

Dr. Prysby lays out this research in the new book “Rich Voter, Poor Voter, Red Voter, Blue Voter: Social Class and Voting Behavior in Contemporary America,” published by Routledge.

While the trend was even more pronounced in Trump’s favor in 2016, Mitt Romney also did better among working-class White voters than he did among middle-class White voters, says Prysby. “Even though Romney was an entirely different kind of Republican than Trump.”

What happened? This voting demographic had been solidly Democratic since the 1930s.

No one factor is at play. It’s partly issues like immigration, abortion, and gay rights, as White working-class voters in the last 20 years have become more conservative on social issues. White working-class voters also no longer see the Democratic Party as better on economic concerns. They’re now more skeptical about the benefits of free trade. One of the Democrats’ key issues of the 1990s was future benefits of NAFTA. It turned out that issue helped Trump with this demographic in 2016.

The media often get it wrong when looking at social class, as well, Prysby says. They usually use education to measure social class: individuals with college educations are middle class, those without are working class. But a lot of clearly middle-class and even upper middle-class voters lack a four-year degree. Bill Gates comes to mind, he notes.

Income is a better measure. But there are caveats: marital status matters, because a two-adult household likely has a higher income than a single-adult household. And take a close look at younger voters. It is difficult to measure social class for young people, as they may not have completed their education or started their career. A twenty-something law school student may be cash poor, but is hardly working class.

When the media say it’s all about Trump’s appeal, they’re missing the full picture. “This shift in the relationship between social class and voting has been occurring throughout this century. It isn’t just a Trump phenomenon. And I think it’ll continue beyond Trump.”

by Mike Harris • learn more at go.uncg.edu/rich-voter-poor-voter