

**RACE RELATIONS IN THE EIGHTIES:
A POLLING REVIEW**

By John Brennan

History will be made this month when Virginia inaugurates Douglas Wilder as its first black governor. Partisanship aside, Wilder's election last November, crafted with 40% of the state's white vote, was good news in race relations. It showed that a minority candidate can now wage and win an election in even a conservative state that was part of the Old Confederacy.

But as the new decade begins, Wilder will be sharing the limelight in the arena of race and politics with quite another kind of candidate: Louisiana state representative David Duke. A former Ku Klux Klanner who has advocated separation of blacks and whites, Duke recently announced he's a candidate for his state's Republican nomination for U.S. Senate. That sent chills through national Republicans who have so far been unable to discredit him. The fact that the political spectrum contains both Wilder and Duke illustrates the continuing problems of race that still challenge American society a quarter century after the breakthrough civil rights legislation was first passed.

How far have we come in improving race relations during the 1980s? In an attempt to answer that question, ABC News and the *Washington Post* conducted an extensive poll on the subject September 28 through October 2, 1989. The survey repeated many questions from a similar study done by the two organizations in March 1981, allowing a direct comparison from the decade's beginning to end. The survey gives some cause for optimism, but the news is by no means all good. Despite clear signals that black-white relations have improved in the last decade, judgments about how well the country is doing racially still depend very much on the race of the beholder.

THE WHITE PERSPECTIVE

On the positive side, America seems to have become a more integrated and more racially tolerant society during the 1980s, with a growing number of mixed neighborhoods, more socializing between blacks and whites, and more white Americans holding generally tolerant racial views. And though in some cases the changes have been marginal, most always they've been in the positive direction. For example, 68% of all those polled last October live in

at least a partially integrated neighborhood, up from 55% eight years ago. Just 35% of whites live in all-white areas now, down from 47% in 1981, and the percentage of blacks occupying all-black areas has fallen from 30% to 19% over the same period. The number of whites with black friends has gone from 54% to 66% in eight years, while 8-in-10 blacks now have white friends compared with 69% in 1981. And 43% of the whites living in mixed neighborhoods say the children of different races should socialize together. Back in 1981, just 31% agreed with that.

For more data on racial attitudes, see this issue's Public Opinion Report.

Increased integration has been accompanied by seemingly more tolerant attitudes on the part of whites. Two-thirds, for example, now agree that it should be illegal for someone to refuse to sell a house to a black. Less than half (44%) believed that eight years ago. And whereas almost three-quarters (73%) of whites thought black problems were caused by blacks themselves in 1981, a smaller 56% majority believe that now. On a racial tolerance scale developed from ten questions asked on both the 1981 and 1989 polls, just 31% of whites now fall into the "low racial tolerance" category. That's 17 points lower than at the decade's start. The percentage of all whites in the high tolerance part of the index rose from 11% to 21% while those rated as being moderately tolerant increased from 41% to 48%. Some of the biggest drops in intolerance were in the South and among conservatives. The regional shift pointed to a continuing decline in North-South differences on race issues.

THE BLACK PERSPECTIVE

If the '80s were a period of increased racial harmony and improved conditions for blacks, many blacks remain deeply troubled and want more tangible signs of progress. Only 47% say things have gotten better during the eighties, while a slim majority either thinks things stayed the same (30%) or got worse (22%). In 1981, 60% of blacks said that the quality of life for blacks had improved during the 1970s. Black Americans clearly aren't satisfied with things as they are. Three-quarters of them still feel the group is not achieving equality as fast as it should because "most whites don't want [it] to." Most still think discrimination continues in wages, housing, and job opportunities. In education, though, most blacks polled think they are treated fairly. Blacks are noticeably more likely than whites to believe that

integration at many levels of society—in schooling, worship, housing and friendships—is important. Yet only one quarter of blacks living in integrated neighborhoods say black and white adults in their areas mix a great deal, no change from 1981.

It's important to point out that not all blacks feel badly about the important aspects of their personal lives. Recent surveys by Gallup and Yankelovich show that most blacks are satisfied with their housing, living standards and work. Most have experienced no direct discrimination in education and work. And while 44% of blacks in the 1989 ABC/*Post* survey think anti-black feeling among whites is on the rise nationally, just a quarter feel such sentiments are up in their local area.

Blacks are self-critical. A quarter (24%) state that most blacks harbor racist views of whites. And 6-in-10 still feel that, despite discrimination, if they tried harder as a group they could be just as well off as whites. Nonetheless, an increasing number (52% vs. 41% in 1981) believe needy blacks deserve special assistance from the government because of past discrimination. Whites reject this view by 64% to 30%, pointing up one of the major—and apparently increasing—areas of disagreement between the two races.

BLACK AND WHITE DIFFERENCES

Though they clearly differ when it comes to specific race questions, black opinion on a host of public policy issues is quite similar to that of whites. The 1989 ABC/*Post* survey, for example, found little difference between the races on self-declared political ideology. Thirty percent of whites called themselves liberal, 41% moderate and 27% conservative. The figures for blacks were 29% liberal, 37% moderate and 33% conservative. Even on whether South Africa should be termed a terrorist state—an issue where racial feelings might be expected to be high—the two groups didn't diverge much, according to a July 1988 ABC/*Post* survey. Whites opposed that idea by a 54% to 33% margin, but among blacks opinion divided evenly -- 47% - 44%

It's on pocketbook questions, and questions dealing with government's role in society, that one sees the deepest fracture lines between white and black opinion. Blacks and whites report starkly different personal economic conditions. Ongoing ABC News/*Money Magazine* consumer surveys—the

last completed, December—find a persistent 20-point difference in white/black feelings on pocketbook issues. In the latest survey, for example, 59% of whites rate their personal finances good or excellent, but only 39% of blacks are so optimistic.

The widest policy differences come on questions of government's role in helping the individual. Blacks overwhelmingly agreed (by 74% to 23%) in the July 1988 survey that it is government's role to guarantee people a job, a policy most whites oppose (by 54% to 43%). And while a 54% to 40% majority of whites favored smaller government with fewer services, an 80 to 16 percent majority of blacks generally backed expanded government.

Many blacks still seem to feel unrepresented, despite recent black political gains. This feeling was probably aggravated by their dislike of the man who held the White House for most of the '80s. Ronald Reagan's approval rating among blacks averaged about 25% during this time in office, and a January 1986 ABC/*Post* survey actually found 56% of blacks saying they felt the former president was a racist. George Bush may be in a unique position to bolster the average black American's faith in government, since his job ratings in the group are running noticeably higher than Reagan's. Sixty percent gave Bush a positive job score in ABC/*Post*'s October 1989 poll. Three-quarters of that approval was "soft," though, and the president's positive rating on the economy was a lackluster 44% with blacks.

Bush, clearly a more palatable Republican for blacks than his predecessor, still has his work cut out for him in convincing them that the Republican party has their best interests in mind. During the Reagan years GOP policies moved sharply away from the activist government philosophy so widely endorsed by blacks. The group remains overwhelmingly Democratic. As the next decade begins, American society may be more or less racially polarized than eight years ago, depending upon what corner of the house you're in. But the American political parties charged with bridging those divisions continue to be split along racial lines.

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