The outcome of the 2016 presidential election may represent the beginning of a sea change in American politics. This change is all the more remarkable because by ignoring the plight of millions of Americans, elites—including pundits, political operatives, politicians, journalists, social scientists, other scholars, and some leading Democrats—badly miscalculated Donald J. Trump’s chances of capturing the White House. They also failed to understand that his path to victory hinged on his ability to tap into the frustrations of a growing number of Americans who are ready for a radical change in leadership.

Trump recognized that whites in rural areas, people of color in urban communities, and many in the middle class who find holding on to that socioeconomic status a tenuous enterprise have some common anxieties. Trump’s political gamble was that Americans from these demographics and others, despite deep roots in the Democratic Party, would cast their ballots for him.

How did so many miss the swelling political tide of discontent? One window into this newly emerging electoral reality is to examine what happened with the African-American vote.

It was fully expected that African Americans would vote for Secretary Hillary Clinton. Although African Americans are only slightly more than 13 percent of the population, the 2008 and 2012 presidential races made it clear that they are a central part of the victory equation for Democrats running for president. In fact, in those election cycles, black voter turnout surpassed that of whites. Democrats in 2016 knew they needed African Americans to vote at close to the level they did for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012—he won 95 and 93 percent, respectively, of the black vote—and they seemed to presume that would happen.

As 2016 wore on, it became clear that African Americans overall lacked enthusiasm for Clinton. A *New York Times* headline in April told the story: “Hillary Clinton Gets Tepid Response at Black Activist Conference.” But instead of aggressively courting the black vote, the Clinton campaign continued to count on it. That calculus alarmed some black politicians, but they were unable to do anything about it. The Democratic leadership was “not doing enough in the black community. I have been screaming for months about this and nothing has changed and now look what’s happening,” Congresswoman Alcee Hastings of South Florida remarked shortly before the election. Around the same time, analysts were reporting that black turnout for early voting in Michigan was lower than had been expected, and that mistrust of Clinton was a significant factor.

All of a sudden the black vote appeared to be in play. In the final stretch of the campaign, the president and first lady campaigned vigorously for their party’s nominee—perhaps more than any other occupants of the White House ever had—and they focused on mobilizing black and other non-white votes.

Their efforts may have helped the Democratic nominee. Clinton received 88 percent of the black vote while Trump received 8 percent. But this distribution was significantly shifted from four years earlier, when Obama received 93 percent of the black vote to Romney’s 6 percent.

The Republican percentages are small, but they may be important social indicators. Some African-American voters were distrustful of Clinton and her political machine. There was also deep concern among some of those voters about how much the Obama presidency had delivered to their communities. Trump’s two-percentage-point lead over Romney with black voters could just be due to a renormalization of black voting for a Republican ticket. For instance, 11 percent

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of black voters cast their ballots for the Republican presidential nominee in 1992; 12 percent did so in 1996; 8 percent in 2000; and 11 percent in 2004.\(^\text{10}\)

Trump’s campaign was different, however. He was so broadly portrayed as a racist and sexist, and his own rhetoric sometimes fueled those accusations. Furthermore, Trump was polling at zero percent among black voters in Ohio and Pennsylvania during the summer.\(^\text{11}\) This fairly perilous situation did not bode well for his electoral viability with blacks nationwide. His improvement over Romney may indicate a return to black voting in the pattern of prior elections, but Trump’s willingness to take on the plight of blacks living in urban areas through his New Deal for Black America makes him unique among Republicans seeking the presidency in recent times.\(^\text{12}\)

The Great Recession hit blacks particularly hard. Between 2007 and 2010, the median household income for blacks fell as much as 10 percent; for whites it was down 5.4 percent. In 2010, 38 percent of blacks between 18 and 64 years of age had pensions covered by their jobs—more than an 8-percentage-point drop from 1979. To put this in sharper perspective, pension erosion for blacks has been twice the rate for whites. In 2010 and 2011, the annual unemployment rate for blacks hit 15.9 percent. For whites, the Great Recession ushered in an unemployment rate of 8.0 percent. The overall poverty rate in the United States was 15.1 percent in 2010. Among blacks, it was 27.4 percent.\(^\text{13}\)

In other words, African Americans have not fared well under a Democratic president who is also African American. Nor have millions of them seen anything


close to prosperity under the urban Democratic machines that have been firmly entrenched for decades and decades.

Despite the growing despair among African Americans, much of the Democratic leadership and bipartisan elites have looked the other way—until Donald Trump. The political establishment was quick to denounce the Republican presidential nominee as callous and racist when he said the following in a speech in Akron, Ohio, on August 22:

> Our government has totally failed our African American friends, our Hispanic friends, and the people of our country. Period. The Democrats have failed completely in the inner cities…. Poverty. Rejection. Horrible education. No housing, no homes, no ownership. Crime at levels that nobody has seen. You can go to war zones in countries we are fighting and it’s safer than living in some of our inner cities that are run by the Democrats. And I ask you this, I ask you this—crime, all of the problems—to the African Americans, who I employ so many, so many people, to the Hispanics, tremendous people: What the hell do you have to lose? Give me a chance. I’ll straighten it out. I’ll straighten it out. What do you have to lose?

That politically incorrect bolt not only may have contributed to the outcome of the 2016 presidential election but it may represent a future direction for black voters from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. L. Douglas Wilder, a former governor of Virginia and the first African American to be elected governor in the United States, said of Clinton: “For her to go out and say to the African-American community, ‘I want you to elect me so that we can continue the legacy of Barack Obama,’ what exactly is it that you want to continue? You cannot win this election without the African-American vote. Hillary obviously has the necessary qualifications….But tell me how what you’ve done relates to what [the black community] needs.”

Whites in rural areas helped put Trump over the top, but African Americans are concentrated in large numbers in the swing states of the upper Midwest, Pennsylvania, and Florida. The fact that thousands of black voters sifted through the noise about Trump being a racist and were persuaded by his message suggests that they could become a numerically significant component of a potentially powerful coalition of those for whom the American Dream appears too distant to even consider. If Trump delivers jobs and economic growth to Americans, this coalition may emerge and millions of African Americans may return to the party of Lincoln.
