



OPINIONS
IN BLACK
AND WHITE

Seeing Things Through Different Lenses: The Opinions of Blacks and Whites

“We’re the same, but we’re different.” This seeming oxymoron may best describe the situation in which African Americans and other residents of Hampton Roads find themselves in 2001. For example, within Hampton Roads, African Americans and White Americans are equally likely to have graduated from college and equally likely to work full time when employed. However, White Americans earn more and are more satisfied with economic conditions. Both groups regard the quality of their schools, crime and drugs as extremely important concerns. However, their attitudes are very different on the need for affirmative action and on the quality of the performance of their police department.

This chapter focuses on African Americans in Hampton Roads – their economic, social and political circumstances, but especially their attitudes. To make the analysis more meaningful, wherever possible, African Americans in Hampton Roads are contrasted with Whites in the region. This generates the “We’re the same, but we’re different” description. **African Americans in Hampton Roads share many common attributes and attitudes with Whites, but these two groups are not identical. This is most visibly true in their politics and their views on the issues of the day. This underscores why it is risky to talk about “what the public thinks” about a particular issue in Hampton Roads. In fact, because the region’s population is so diverse, there are many public opinions.** The final result of an election or a poll may well be a single number or an average (for example, 34.8 percent of the citizens of Hampton Roads believe African Americans and Whites have the same amount of political power). However, such an average often disguises significant underlying differences in the attitudes of particular segments of the population. In the case at hand, only 16.2 percent of African Americans believe the aforementioned statement regarding political power, while 54.3 percent of White Americans do. Further, it is wise to note there is considerable diversity among African Americans in achievements and points of view. They are no more homogeneous as a group than most other “hyphenated” Americans.

Some Perspective

In 1968, The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders generated a report (the “Kerner Report”) that starkly contended, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.” This conclusion was hotly debated at the time, but continues to be cited, especially when significant economic and social differences between African Americans and Whites are identified. For example, the unemployment rate of African Americans generally has remained twice as high as that for other Americans. On the other hand, sometimes startling progress has been made in other arenas. An illustration is the political participation of African Americans in state politics. In 1968, there were no African Americans in Virginia’s House of Delegates or Senate. Today, there are 15. And, in 1989, Virginia elected its first African American governor, L. Douglas Wilder, who generously referred to himself as a “Son of Virginia,” even though in reality he had been forced to leave the Commonwealth decades before in order to earn his law degree.

The relevant point is this: As we survey and attempt to explain the attitudes of African Americans in Hampton Roads, it would be irresponsible to ignore Virginia’s centuries-long history of segregation and the immense baggage created by America’s sometimes tortuously slow progress toward equal treatment of all its citizens. It would similarly be foolish to deny the remarkable progress that has been made since the Kerner Report in 1968. These things influence what we see and hear today and provide context. That said, our interest in this examination is to depict the status and attitudes of African Americans in Hampton Roads today as they actually are. As a society, we will make more rapid progress toward “what ought to be” when we know more precisely “what actually is.”

The Basis For This Chapter

This chapter is based on an extensive public-opinion survey performed by Old Dominion University's Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and the University's Social Science Research Center. The findings reported here are based on telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,062 African American and White residents in Hampton Roads (African Americans, n = 543; Whites, n = 519). If individuals were contacted who did not identify themselves as either African Americans or Whites, they were not included in the survey. Thus, Asian Americans, Latinos and American Indians are not included unless they deliberately chose to falsify their ethnic background. "African American" here is used synonymously with "Black American," even though in truth they are not completely synonymous.

Sixteen jurisdictions within Hampton Roads were surveyed: the counties of Accomack, Gloucester, Isle of Wight, James City, Mathews, Northampton and York; and the cities of Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach and Williamsburg. Quota sampling was employed to ensure an adequate sample size and appropriate distribution of the sample across high- and low-minority census tracts. The African American population was over-sampled to ensure a sample size that would enable within-group comparisons. Hampton Roads' population was stratified by city, and respondents were called with the aim of achieving the stipulated quota.

Survey participants were contacted between May 20 and June 15, 2001. The sampling results have a margin of error of plus or minus 4.2 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level. That is, if another sample of the same size were repeated under the same conditions, 95 percent of the time the deviation from the results reported would be no more than 4.2 percentage points in either direction.

The survey focused on the following questions:

How do African Americans perceive the quality of their lives (defined in political, economic and social terms) within the city or county in which they reside in Hampton Roads?

How do African Americans in the region perceive themselves relative to the system of governance in their city or county, and to what extent is there a sense of empowerment in economic as well as political terms?

Are there differences in the behavior and perceptions of African Americans and Whites regarding quality of life and political participation?

At least two features of this study underscore its importance. First, this project apparently is the first of its magnitude to be conducted in Hampton Roads. Its concentrated focus on issues pertaining to race, quality of life and political participation is substantially different from previous studies of the region, none of which focused on differences in the perceptions of African American and White residents in Hampton Roads. Further, the sample is large enough to make meaningful inferences regarding the dynamics of race, class and gender within the African American community.

Second, this project provides baseline data needed for ongoing research to monitor perceptions of the quality of life in Hampton Roads. Data from the survey will facilitate in-depth, longitudinal studies of the implications of race and ethnicity for quality of life and political participation. Future research might, for example, concentrate on the effects of class on African American perceptions of quality of life, political participation, and attitudes regarding discrimination and equal opportunity. Moreover, the methodology and the results of this descriptive study will provide an essential empirical context for future research.

Key Findings

On a range of issues, the proportion of African American and White respondents rating each issue as "very important" or "important" was similar. This was the case with the following issues: jobs, schools, crime, drugs, taxation and environment. However, there are some areas where the two groups diverged. For example, the largest differences in ratings of importance assigned by African American and White respondents were on perceptions of (percentage difference is shown in parentheses):

the validity of affirmative action (24); HIV/AIDS (19); police brutality (19); recreation facilities (14); welfare (12); and housing (11).

With respect to perceptions of job opportunities, cost of living and earnings in wages, African American respondents were much less likely than their White counterparts to rate the economic conditions in these categories as "very good" or "good." And, of the African American respondents, only 48.4 percent report owning their homes, compared with 70.7 percent for Whites.

Seventy-two percent of all respondents indicated that they own a personal computer. Of the African Americans surveyed, 64.3 percent indicated that they own a personal computer, compared with 80.8 percent of Whites.

Seventy-four percent of all respondents indicated that they use the Internet. Sixty-nine percent of the African Americans responded this way, compared with 80 percent of the White respondents.

Even though the fact that the Million Man March of 1995 and the Million Woman March of 1996 did not grab the attention of White America, 97 percent of African American respondents reported they agreed with the principle of the marches.

Of the national African American leaders, Jesse Jackson (21.9 percent), Colin Powell (7.9 percent) and Kweisi Mfume (6.6 percent) are the three who the largest proportions of African Americans said best represented their views and opinions. However, respondents' choices regarding leadership showed the range of ideological diversity present among African Americans.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was identified by the largest proportion (20.8 percent) of African American respondents as the organization that best represents their political views. The NAACP was followed by churches (14 percent). Nearly 20 percent of the African American respondents reported that "none" of the organizations in their city or county best represents their political views.

While 68 percent of the White respondents indicated the location of the airport is "very good" or "good," only 50.3 percent of African American respondents concurred. As far as airport services are concerned, the Black-White gap widens, with 35.2 percent of African Americans and 50.1 percent of Whites rating them "very good" or "good."

Levels of satisfaction with public transportation were not high, with a bare majority (51.2 percent) reporting they were "very satisfied" or "satisfied." Low satisfaction with public transportation was coupled with respondents' strong endorsement of a light rail system. Overall, 70.2 percent responded favorably to the idea of their city or county supporting light rail in Hampton Roads.

African American respondents (75.8 percent) were far more likely than Whites (26.7 percent) to cast their ballot in support of Al Gore in the November 2000 presidential election. One percent of Black and White respondents reported that they cast their ballots for Ralph Nader. Approximately 76 percent of all respondents indicated that they voted in this election.

With the exception of Newport News, in no major city in the region do African American levels of satisfaction with their city's police department equal or exceed levels of satisfaction among White respondents. By race, a more than 20 percentage-point difference exists between the satisfaction levels reported in the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk and Portsmouth.

Regarding discrimination, 25.3 percent of all respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement, "Discrimination against Blacks is not a problem in my city or county." However, of the African American respondents, 12.2 percent "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement, compared with 39.1 percent of Whites.

White respondents tend to perceive that African Americans have greater economic and political power than Blacks believe to be true. For example, a smaller proportion of White respondents (40 percent) compared to Blacks (60 percent) believe that the economic position of Blacks is worse than for Whites. Survey results reveal further that Black respondents (16.2 percent) were substantially less likely than Whites (54.3 percent) to "strongly agree" or "agree" that, "Blacks and Whites have an equal amount of power in my city or county."

Does the federal government owe reparations to African Americans? Fifty percent of African American respondents "agreed," compared with 9.8 percent of Whites. Similarly, in response to the statement, "Black people are owed reparations by private corporations," 49.5 percent of African Americans "strongly agreed" or "agreed," compared with 15 percent of White respondents.

Who's In The Survey Sample

A total of 1,062 African American and White residents in Hampton Roads (Blacks, n = 543; Whites, n = 519) were included in the survey. Table 1 shows the distribution of African American and White respondents across the identified jurisdictions of Hampton Roads for the study sample and the actual population. For analytical purposes, the African American population was over-sampled. As illustrated in the table, the subsamples across jurisdictions closely match those in the actual population of Hampton Roads.

TABLE 1
Race Distribution for Sample and Actual Population
Across Municipalities as Part of the Entire Hampton Roads Area

Municipality	Study Sample		Actual Population	
	Percent of Blacks	Percent of Whites	Percent of Blacks	Percent of Whites
Accomack County	1.50	2.30	2.41	2.44
Gloucester County	0.60	2.10	0.71	3.03
Isle of Wight County	1.50	1.90	1.61	2.12
James City County	0.70	3.10	1.38	3.97
Mathews County	0.00	0.40	0.21	0.81
Northampton County	0.70	1.00	1.12	0.70
York County	1.30	3.70	1.50	4.53
Chesapeake City	15.80	12.50	11.32	13.38
Hampton City	13.10	9.20	13.04	7.29
Newport News City	16.20	11.20	14.03	9.68
Norfolk City	21.0	14.80	20.60	11.39
Poquoson City	0.00	0.20	0.02	1.12
Portsmouth City	9.00	6.70	10.14	4.63
Suffolk City	5.70	4.00	5.52	3.44
Virginia Beach City	12.50	26.6	16.06	30.51
Williamsburg City	0.40	0.20	0.32	0.96
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: The Social Science Research Center and The Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Old Dominion University 2001 Survey of Race, Quality of Life and Political Participation in Hampton Roads. All subsequent tables and graphs are derived from "The Survey."

Some Characteristics Of Those Surveyed

With respect to education, which is regarded as a key determinant of quality of life and political participation, African American and White respondents are closely matched in terms of the proportions of these groups that hold a college degree (23.6 percent and 24.7 percent, respectively). About one in three of the African American (35.2 percent) and White (30.4 percent) respondents said they have obtained "some college." Among the Black respondents, 10.9 percent held graduate or professional degrees, compared with 18.5 percent for Whites. Only 5.2 percent and 3.3 percent, respectively, of the African Americans and Whites reported having less than a high school diploma.

Employment and occupation are also important factors influencing citizen well-being and the communities within which they reside (see Table 2). Seventy-five percent of all African Americans reported being employed at some level as opposed to almost 71.7 percent of the Whites. Of the respondents who said they are employed, 87.1 percent of African Americans reported being employed on a full-time basis, compared with 86.3 percent of Whites. Of those who reported that they were

unemployed, 42.1 percent and 53.4 percent, respectively, of the African Americans and Whites reported they were unemployed due to retirement. At the professional/managerial level, 29.5 percent of the African Americans surveyed reported holding such positions, compared with 40.2 percent of White respondents. At the same time, African Americans hold a larger proportion of the lower-level technician/managerial (24.1 percent) and clerical positions (17.1 percent) than Whites, who, respectively, hold 14.3 percent and almost 10.8 percent of the positions in these occupational classes.

TABLE 2
Race and Profession

Profession	Percent of All Blacks in Sample	Percent of Whites in Sample	Total Sample
Professional/managerial	29.50	40.20	34.60
Lower-level technician/managerial	24.10	14.30	19.50
Clerical sales	17.10	10.80	14.10
Homemaker	0.50	1.60	1.00
Blue collar	11.00	11.90	11.40
Household service	6.30	4.90	5.60
Student, retired, other	1.20	6.50	3.70
Military	8.30	9.20	8.70
Refused to answer	2.00	0.80	1.40
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

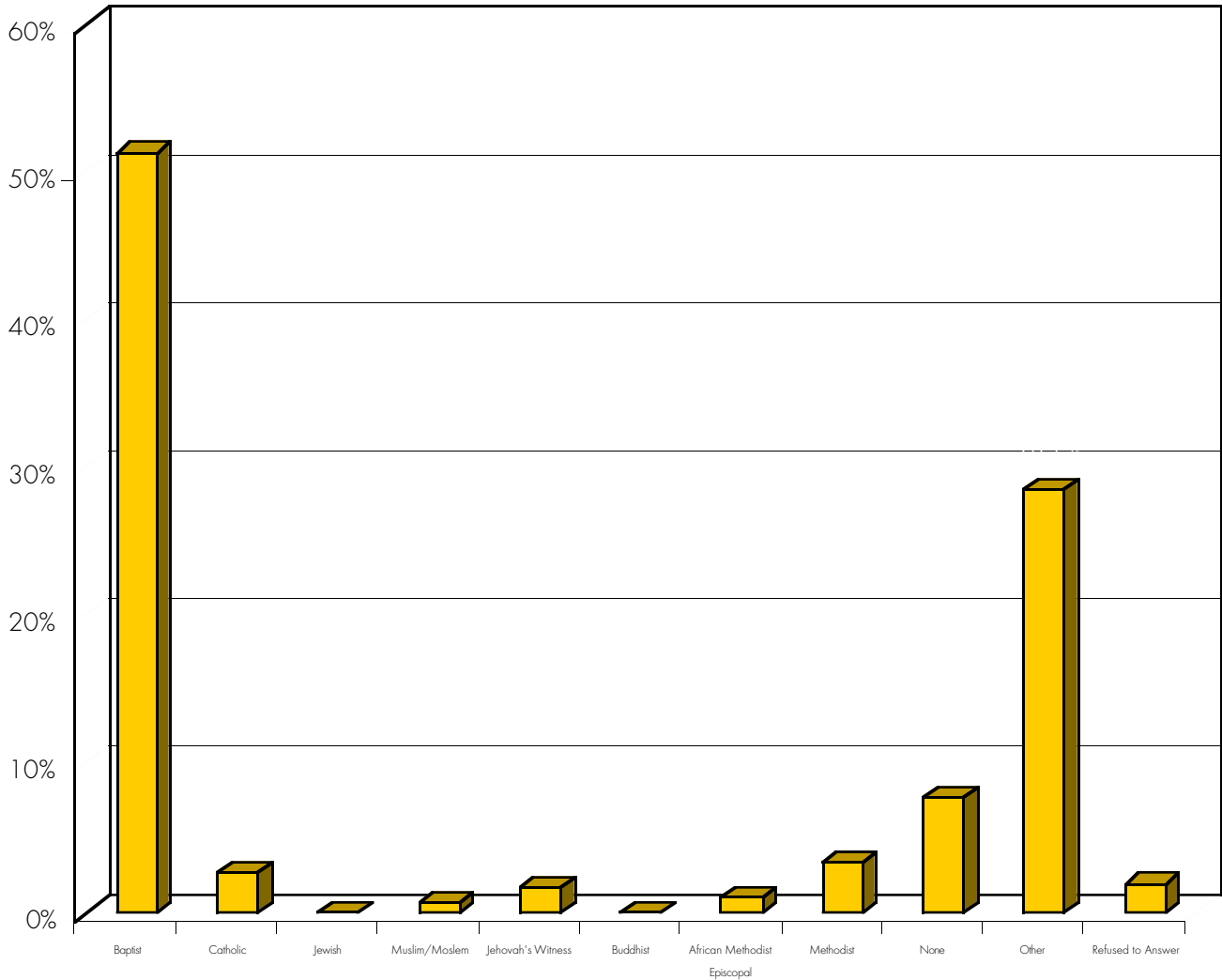
INCOME

Concerning the range of individual income, 30.2 percent of the African American respondents reported earning less than \$25,000 annually, compared with 21.3 percent of Whites. The representation of the two groups was more comparable in the \$25,001 to \$50,000 income range, with 46.6 percent of Blacks and 47.7 percent of Whites reporting individual incomes in this range. In the \$50,001 to \$75,000 income range, 12.9 percent of African Americans and 16.7 percent of Whites responded that this reflected their annual earnings. Relatively small proportions of African Americans (5.6 percent) and Whites (8.4 percent) reported individual incomes in excess of \$75,000 per year (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Race and Income

Individual Income	Percent of All Blacks in Sample	Percent of All Whites in Sample	Total Sample
Less than \$25,000	30.20	21.30	26.00
\$25,001 - \$50,000	46.60	47.70	47.10
\$50,001 - \$75,000	12.90	16.70	14.70
\$75,001 - \$100,000	3.90	6.20	5.00
More than \$100,000	1.70	2.20	1.90
Don't know	1.00	0.80	0.90

**GRAPH 1A
AFRICAN AMERICANS' RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS**

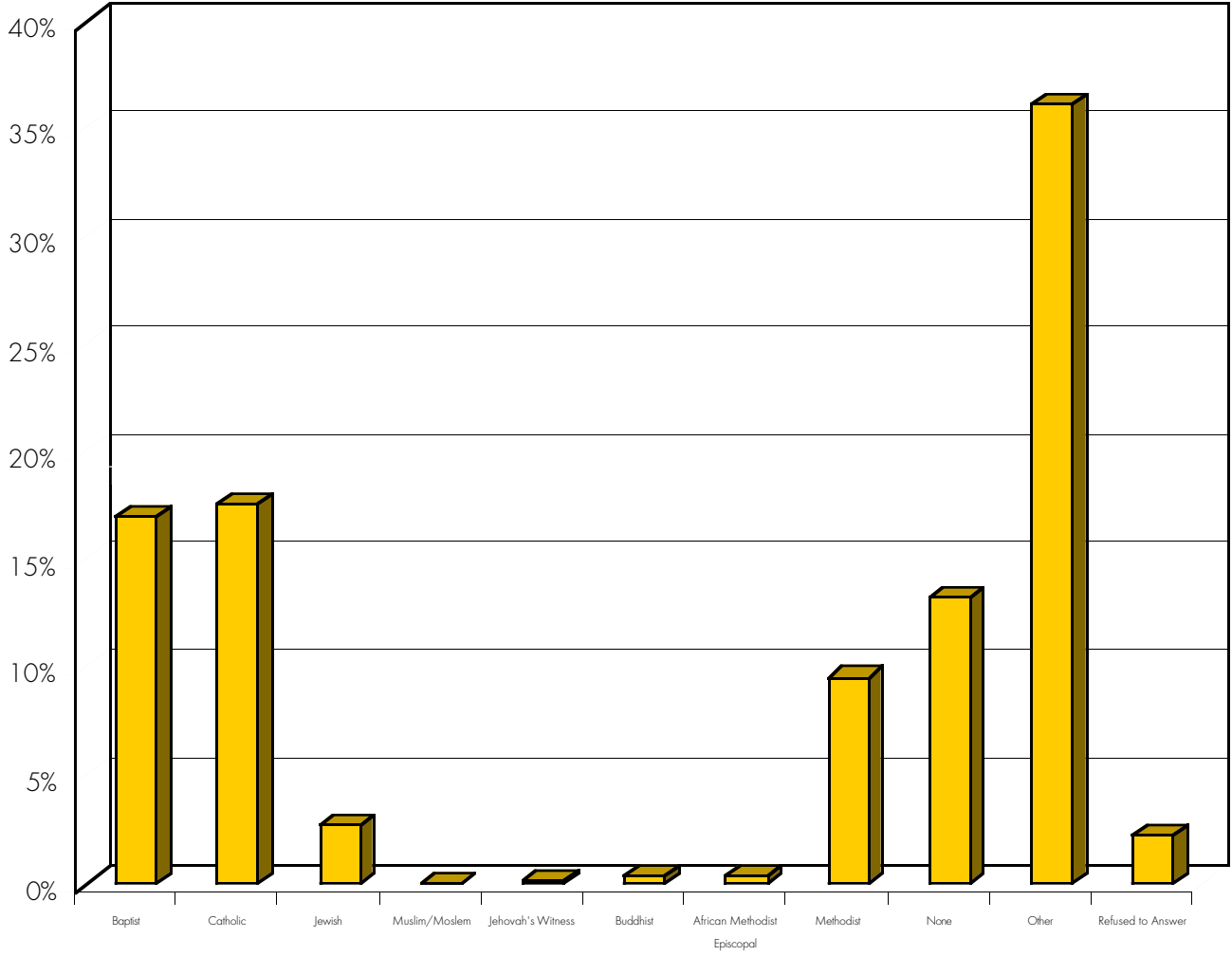


Source: The Survey

RELIGION

Regarding religion, African American respondents were affiliated as follows: Baptist (51.4 percent); Other, including especially small and sometimes nondenominational churches (28.7 percent); None (7.9 percent); Methodist (3.5 percent); Catholic (2.8 percent); Jehovah's Witness (1.8 percent); African Methodist Episcopal (1.1 percent); and Muslim/Moslem (.7 percent). Two percent of the Black respondents refused to answer (see Graph 1A).

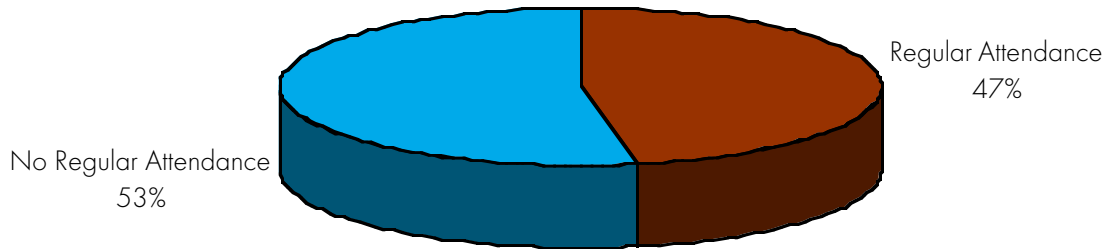
**GRAPH 1B
WHITES' RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS**



Source: The Survey

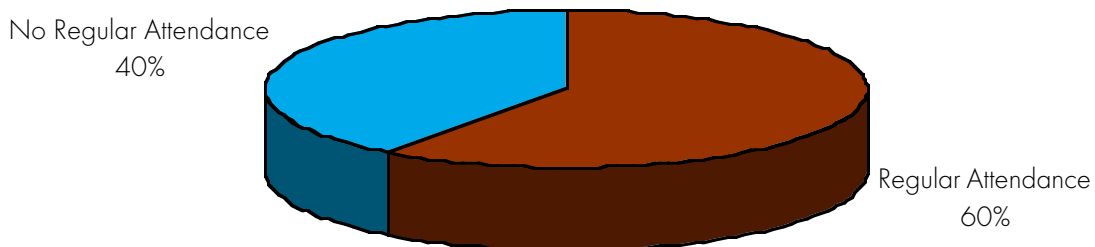
Religious affiliation among White respondents was as follows: Other, including such denominations as Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians and “nondenominational” (36.2 percent); Baptist (17.1 percent); Catholic (17.7 percent); None (13.3 percent); Methodist (9.6 percent); Jewish (2.7 percent); 0.4 percent each for Buddhist and African Methodist Episcopal; and Jehovah’s Witness (.2 percent). It is apparent that the religious preferences of White Americans are more widely distributed than are those of African Americans. Of the White respondents, 2.3 percent refused to answer (see Graphs 1A and 1B).

**GRAPH 2A
AFRICAN AMERICANS' RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE**



Source: The Survey

**GRAPH 2B
WHITES' RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE**



Source: The Survey

Fifty-three percent of African Americans reported attending a religious service every week, compared with 39.5 percent of the White respondents. **Religious practice apparently plays a larger and more influential role in the African American community than elsewhere in Hampton Roads. The traditionally dominating role of many African American church pastors in guiding and influencing their flocks, and the key political roles many African American churches play in elections, are both causes and effects of this. African Americans look to their churches for many things in addition to spiritual guidance, and their higher rates of attendance reflect this.**

MARITAL STATUS

Finally, most survey participants (51.9 percent) reported being married, with a higher proportion of Whites (59 percent) indicating they were married, compared with 45.1 percent of African Americans. Further, a particularly large proportion of Black respondents (36.1 percent) reported they were single and never married. Only 23.9 percent of White respondents indicated the same.

Economic factors may be the root of these differences. Objectively, a greater proportion of African Americans may not earn an income they regard as sufficient to undertake marriage. And, as some analysts contend, it is possible that governmental economic (dis)incentives associated with marriage discourage some from taking this step.

Quality Of Life And Economic Conditions

A principal focus of the survey was to assess individual perceptions of quality of life and economic conditions in Hampton Roads. For purposes of comparison, some items were drawn from the 1996 survey “Black Political Attitudes in Atlanta.” The limitations of comparing Hampton Roads with the city of Atlanta are acknowledged; however, the results do not differ to a large degree.

In this section are the results that show the level of importance assigned by respondents to a range of issues pertinent to quality of life and general well-being.

HOUSING

Table 4 summarizes respondents’ ratings of the importance of issues that affect the general quality of life of citizens. Generally, a high proportion of respondents rated all of the issues presented as “very important” or “important.” However, inspection of the ratings of African American and White respondents reveals some important differences. For example, 97 percent of the African American respondents rated housing as “very important” or “important” compared with 85.9 percent of the White respondents. A very high proportion of the Black respondents (98 percent in the 1996 Atlanta survey) also indicated that housing was an important issue. **The greater importance attached to housing by African Americans perhaps reflects the much lower proportion of Blacks who are homeowners and the occasional hassles African Americans encounter when they attempt to obtain financing for a home, or deal with a realtor or potential neighbors.**

RECREATION FACILITIES AND WELFARE PROGRAMS

A significant difference existed in ratings of the importance of recreation facilities (a 13.3 percentage-point difference) assigned by African Americans and Whites. Lacking nearby recreation, and concerned about issues of crime and drugs, many African Americans may be especially sensitive to the availability of good parks, well-kept and supervised playgrounds, and gymnasium facilities.

WELFARE PROGRAMS

African Americans regard welfare programs as of greater importance than do Whites, by a margin of 12.1 percent. Stereotypes aside, it remains true that a larger proportion of African Americans utilize the welfare system than Whites and hence one might expect their greater interest in it. Further, Whites may have a greater degree of comfort with, and disinterest in, a social support system they only read about and do not expect to encounter.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

It is in the realm of affirmative action, however, that respondents’ ratings reflected the greatest percentage-point difference (24.2). This finding is indicative of the current ongoing debate among racial and ethnic groups (and sometimes along gender lines) concerning the constitutionality of affirmative action. Despite the sizable difference in the ratings of Black and White respondents on the importance of affirmative action, more than two out of three (69.4 percent) of the White respondents indicated that affirmative action is “very important” or “important.” However, 93.6 percent of African American respondents identified affirmative action as “very important” or “important.”

Whites tend to be supportive of affirmative action policies that benefit all those deemed needy, regardless of race, and tend to disapprove of affirmative action policies designed to benefit all African Americans, regardless of their circumstances. For example, Whites tend to support college scholarship programs aimed at students with financial need, even when the majority of recipients are African American. They tend not to favor similar programs that support only African American students, regardless of financial need. This distinction is an important one and undoubtedly will be the focus of considerable debate in Hampton Roads and nationally over the next few years.

TABLE 4
Percentage of Respondents Rating Issues as Very Important or Important

Issues	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Jobs	99.4	96.5	98.1
School	99.2	98.7	81.7
Crime	98.2	97.7	98.0
Drugs	97.1	95.9	96.5
Housing	97.0	85.9	91.6
HIV/AIDS	96.5	76.9	83.7
Taxation	96.1	92.1	86.1
Police Brutality	95.6	76.3	86.1
Teen Pregnancy	95.1	86.5	90.8
Environment	94.2	93.7	93.9
Affirmative Action	93.6	69.4	81.7
Welfare	92.1	80.0	86.2
Recreation Facilities	90.2	76.9	83.7

HIV/AIDS

A large difference (almost 20 percentage points) exists in the proportions of Black and White respondents rating the issue of HIV/AIDS as “very important” or “important.” While 96.5 percent of African American respondents indicated that HIV/AIDS is a “very important” or “important” issue, only 76.9 percent of the White respondents concurred. The figure for African Americans is consistent with findings reported in the 1996 Atlanta study, which revealed that 98 percent of African American respondents viewed HIV/AIDS as an issue of importance. HIV/AIDS may be a stealthy issue in the White community, stereotypically con- signed to gay and lesbian relationships, but this is not so in the African American community.

THE POLICE AND POLICE BEHAVIOR

Moreover, on the issue of police brutality in Hampton Roads, a difference of more than 19 percentage points exists between the proportions of African Americans (95.6 percent) and Whites (76.3 percent) rating this issue as “important” or “very important.” Consistent with findings for African Americans in Hampton Roads, the Atlanta study revealed that 96 percent of the Black respondents viewed the issue of police brutality as important. Differences in the rating of police are more starkly revealed when satisfaction levels are examined on the basis of the cities with the largest populations in Hampton Roads. Evidence from other metropolitan areas suggests the typical White person does not have nearly as many negative encounters (self defined) with police as do African Americans. To African Americans, the police are less often friends and helpers and more often adversaries, particularly if phenomena such as “Driving While Black” are taken into consideration.

Table 5 reports by race the proportion of survey respondents that indicated they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the police department in their city.

As Table 5 indicates, with the exception of Newport News, in no major city in the region did results show African American satisfaction with their city’s police department being equal to or in excess of the satisfaction levels of White respondents. By race, more than 20 percentage-point differences exist between the satisfaction level reported in the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk and Portsmouth. Norfolk African Americans are the least satisfied with their police department, perhaps reflecting recent incidents involving African Americans.

TABLE 5
**Percent of Respondents Reporting That They Are “Very Satisfied”
or “Satisfied” With Their City’s Police Department**

Issues	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Norfolk	57.9	85.7	69.1
Portsmouth	61.2	88.6	72.6
Chesapeake	65.1	91.3	76.8
Virginia Beach	69.1	83.3	78.7
Suffolk	70.9	85.7	76.9
Newport News	71.6	62.0	76.7
Hampton	77.4	89.6	82.3

MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES

“Quality of life” encompasses an individual’s reasonable sense of comfort, social stability and expectations within the context of his or her existence in a political world. For example, citizens expect city and county governments to provide certain basic services and to maintain infrastructure. Accordingly, Hampton Roads respondents were asked to either rate the quality or indicate the extent of their satisfaction with a variety of local and regional services. Respondents were also asked to rate economic conditions in their local communities and the region.

Table 6 reports the percentages of respondents stating they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with various municipal services and public infrastructure. The public housing category reflected the lowest percentage (40 percent) of respondents indicating they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied.” Only 36 percent of African Americans expressed satisfaction with public housing, compared with 44.4 percent for Whites. Nearly all citizens, African American and White, are rather satisfied with their libraries and their sanitation/garbage collection services.

Once again, African Americans reported higher levels of dissatisfaction with their city and county police forces than did Whites. Whites’ satisfaction with their police departments rivaled the high levels they reported for their libraries.

TABLE 6
Percentage of Respondents Reporting That They Are “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied” With City and County Services and Public Infrastructure

Service/Public Infrastructure	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Libraries	86.2	87	1 86.7
Sanitation/Garbage Collection	84.5	86.3	85.4
Parks and Recreation	76.1	83.6	79.8
Post-secondary Education	71.1	76.1	73.6
Police Department	67.9	85.9	76.7
Sheriff’s Department	67.1	78.8	72.8
Health Department	62.8	63.8	63.3
Public Schools	61.0	55.4	58.3
Streets and Highways	59.9	61.5	60.6
Public Housing	36.0	44.4	40.0
Public Transportation	54.5	47.8	51.2

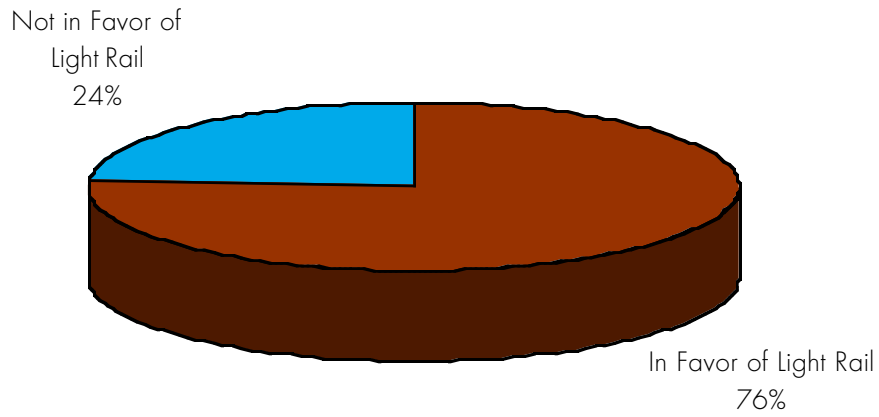
THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION QUESTION AND LIGHT RAIL

Levels of satisfaction with public transportation reported by all respondents (see Table 6) were relatively low, with only a bare majority (51.2 percent) reporting they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied.” Other ratings include those for public housing and public transportation, followed by streets and highways (60.6 percent), public schools (58.3 percent) and health department (63.3 percent).

Citizen disquiet with public transportation in Hampton Roads was underlined by a surprisingly strong endorsement of a local light rail system. Overall, 70.2 percent of those surveyed responded favorably. Of the African Americans surveyed, 76.1 percent responded favorably to the establishment of light rail, compared with 64 percent of Whites (see Graphs 3A and 3B). The words “surprisingly strong endorsement” are used here because elected officials, particularly in Virginia Beach, have opposed light rail on the grounds that a majority of their citizens are not in favor of it. It must be that these individuals have been listening to a vocal minority rather than to the large, and perhaps less demonstrative, majority of citizens who apparently favor light rail.

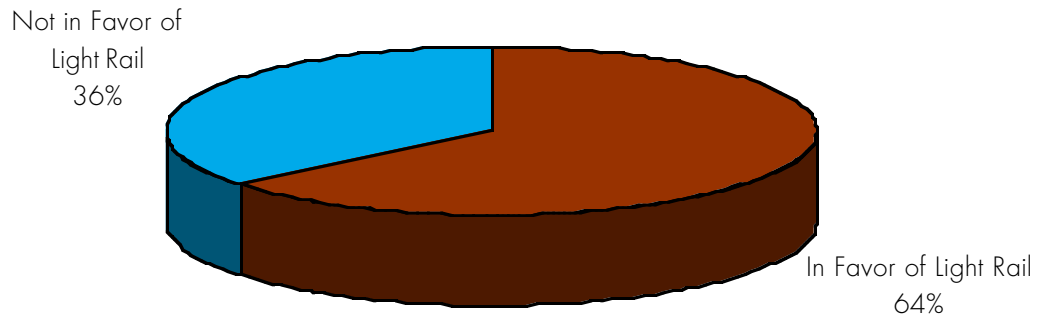
The light rail finding evokes memories of last year’s State of the Region report, which found a small majority of Hampton Roads citizens were in favor of a merger of cities within the region. Several elected officials reported being dumbfounded by that result, as they had heard only from individuals who opposed merger. This year’s light rail finding underscores the importance of elected officials casting their nets widely when they attempt to divine public opinion. Experience suggests some elected officials may be overly sensitive to those who either are boisterous or have special interests at stake and perhaps back up that interest with a check. Determining the will of the public is never an easy task; however, the substantial surveys undertaken the past two years as a part of the State of the Region report indicate there is a degree of disconnect between the public and some elected officials.

GRAPH 3A
AFRICAN AMERICANS' OPINIONS OF LIGHT RAIL TRANSPORTATION



Source: The Survey

GRAPH 3B
WHITES' OPINION OF LIGHT RAIL TRANSPORTATION



Source: The Survey

AIRPORT LOCATION AND SERVICES

Table 7 shows the ratings of key regional facilities and economic conditions. While 68 percent of White respondents indicated that airport location is “very good” or “good,” only 50.3 percent of African American respondents concurred. With respect to airport services, the Black-White gap is even wider, with only 35.2 percent of African Americans and 50.1 percent of Whites rating services “very good” or “good.”

WAGES, JOBS AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Differences exist in the proportions of African Americans and Whites who rate job opportunities (29.4 percent and 55.1 percent, respectively), cost of living (27.5 percent vs. 44.9 percent) and earnings in wages (14.3 percent vs. 27.5 percent) as “good” or “very good.” In general, perhaps because they are, on average, better off economically, Whites express more satisfaction with job opportunities in Hampton Roads and with their wages.

Even so, consistent with last year’s State of the Region report, a significant number of Hampton Roads residents are not thrilled with their economic situation. This disenchantment probably reflects the region’s lower than average rates of population and income growth. In fact, Hampton Roads trails Richmond, Northern Virginia and the entire Commonwealth in terms of most measures of economic health. In addition, it is worth noting that during the decade of the 1990s, Virginia trailed both the entire United States and nine of 16 Southern states in terms of the growth of its real, inflation-adjusted gross state product. Neither Hampton Roads nor Virginia has been a boom area. This directly affects economic welfare. Slow economic growth means fewer available jobs and less rapidly growing wages. Hence, even though the cost of living in Hampton Roads is demonstrably lower than it is in regions such as Northern Virginia, and Hampton Roads per capita income is 98 percent of the national average when cost of living differences are considered, the typical Hampton Roads resident seems unimpressed. He/she is often full of discontent insofar as economic conditions are concerned.

Sizable proportions of African Americans (73.3 percent) and Whites (78.6 percent) “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement, “I enjoy my job.” The finding that a relatively high proportion of African American respondents (50.9 percent), in comparison with White respondents (29.3 percent), “disagree” or “disagree strongly” with the statement, “The money that I earn in my job is sufficient for my needs,” corroborates the results presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7

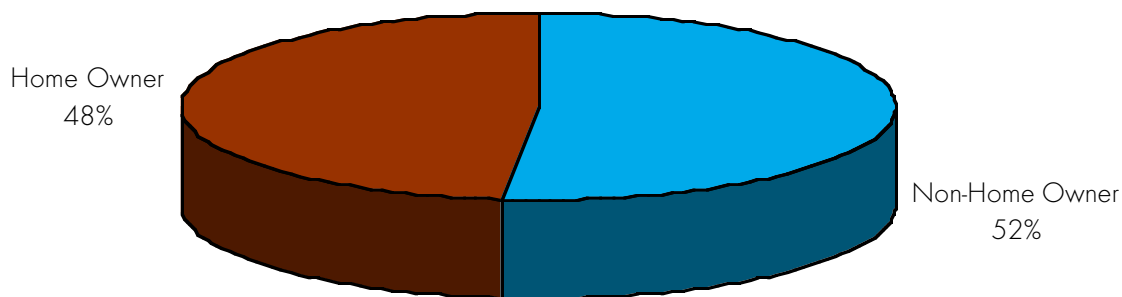
Percentage of Respondents Rating Regional Infrastructure and Economic Conditions as “Very Good” or “Good”

Infrastructure/Economic Conditions	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Airport Location	50.3	68.0	59.0
Airport Services	35.2	50.1	42.4
Job Opportunities	29.4	55.1	42.0
Cost of Living	27.5	44.9	35.9
Earning in Wages	14.3	27.5	20.8

HOME OWNERSHIP

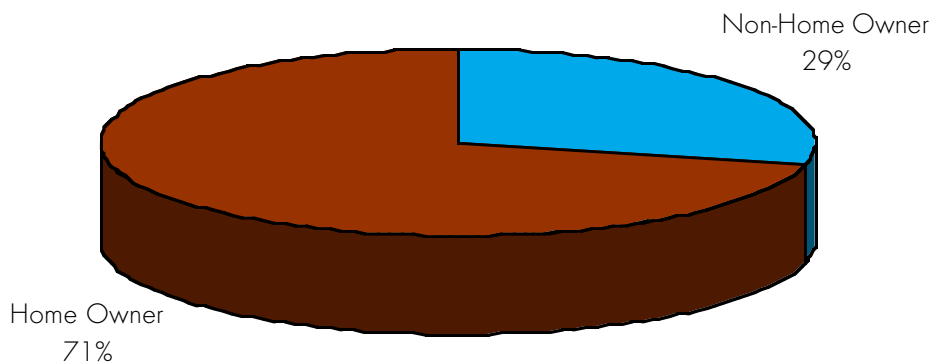
Homeownership, a hallmark of the American dream, has been a more elusive goal for African Americans than for Whites. Of the African American respondents, only 48.4 percent reported owning their homes, compared with 70.7 percent of Whites (see Graphs 4A and 4B). What is not clear is whether the causes of this large gap are due primarily to income and asset differences between African Americans and Whites, or whether housing and financial markets retain some of the discriminatory characteristics they clearly exhibited in previous years. This is a subject worthy of additional exploration, given the size of the disparity between the home ownership rates of the two groups.

**GRAPH 4A
AFRICAN AMERICANS' HOME OWNERSHIP STATUS**



Source: The Survey

**GRAPH 4B
WHITES' HOME OWNERSHIP STATUS**



Source: The Survey

OVERALL LEVELS OF SATISFACTION WITH THEIR LIVES

The indicators of quality of life and economic conditions presented in Tables 5, 6 and 7 show a divergence in the economic realities perceived by African Americans and Whites in Hampton Roads. **The existence of race- and gender-based economic and social inequality in America notwithstanding, when asked, “In general, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?”, the overwhelming majority (92.5 percent) of respondents reported they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied.” Of the African American respondents, 89.2 percent reported they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their lives, compared with 95.9 percent of Whites.** Further, the relatively high proportion of respondents (83.8 percent) that indicated their health is “good,” “very good” or “excellent,” indeed might be linked to the relatively high degree of satisfaction they have with their lives.

TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITY AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The recent surge in computer and Internet usage has not touched all segments of society equally. Racial and ethnic differences exist in computer ownership and computer and Internet usage. Seventy-two percent of all respondents indicated they own a personal computer. Of all African Americans surveyed, 64.3 percent indicated they own a personal computer, compared with 80.8 percent of Whites.

Concerning Internet usage, 74 percent of all respondents said they use the Internet. Sixty-nine percent of the African Americans responded this way, compared with 80 percent of Whites. While home (84.4 percent) is the principal place where respondents use the Internet, African Americans are somewhat less likely (78.1 percent) than Whites (90.1 percent) to have such access.

National data suggest that observed differences between ethnic groups in terms of computer and Internet usage are based primarily upon income levels and technological readiness. That is, African Americans and Whites of comparable incomes, education levels and ages tend to exhibit similar rates of computer and Internet usage. Nonetheless, given the key role computers and the Internet play in society, and ethnic differences in incomes and education, access will continue to be a critical policy question at nearly all levels of society. It remains to be seen whether computer and Internet access will come to be regarded in the same fashion as telephone access.

Ideology And Political Participation

The survey revealed interesting racial differences with respect to ideology and political participation. Survey results also uncovered some important revelations about the internal dynamics of the African American community. To assess ideology and political participation, several questions were asked regarding party identification, political philosophy, and registration and voting. To delve more deeply into the ideological terrain of African Americans, respondents in this group were asked questions regarding their support of the principles of the Million Man March and the Million Woman March, and their agreement with the views of national Black leaders and organizations.

LIBERAL, CONSERVATIVE OR MODERATE?

Respondents were asked the following question: “Politically speaking, do you consider yourself a liberal, moderate or a conservative?” **While the proportion of African Americans who label themselves “liberal” is greater than it is for Whites (29.3 percent vs. 20.6 percent), Whites (36.8 percent) were somewhat more likely than Blacks (30 percent) to regard themselves as “moderate.” In general, African Americans in Hampton Roads reside on the left side of the political spectrum and are politically more liberal than Whites.**

PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Party identification is a key indicator of political ideology. In contrast to Whites (24.7 percent), a far greater proportion of African Americans (65.7 percent) reported that they consider themselves to be Democrats. Identification with the Republican Party among Whites (38.9 percent) dwarfed the 5.3 percent of African Americans who reported that they consider themselves Republicans. Of course, it often has been observed that some African Americans are closet Republicans. They vote for

Republican candidates, but do not wish to say so, as such a confession might subject them to ridicule. Witness several Virginia elections during the 1990s in which Republican candidates garnered 15 to 20 percent of the African American vote. Thus, “there may be more Republicans in the weeds,” as one commentator put it, but they are not likely to disclose that fact in a telephone survey.

The proportion of survey respondents who consider themselves Independent differs substantially between African Americans and Whites in Hampton Roads. Of the Whites surveyed, 25.8 percent consider themselves to be Independent, compared with only 15.5 percent of African American respondents. The typical White person more often considers himself to “be in play” politically and takes the attitude that candidates must compete for his vote. African Americans, on the other hand, tend more often to vote straight tickets, in this case Democratic, and are not seen by most candidates as being “swing votes.” Whether this is good or bad for African Americans is a subject for debate. African American loyalty to the Democratic Party since the time of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt has evolved into positions of clout and influence in the Democratic Party, both nationally and locally. However, in a state such as Virginia, where Republicans have triumphed in nearly every recent election, this may have disadvantaged African Americans. In general, Blacks do not sit on the innermost councils of the Commonwealth’s political power brokers, whose memberships are largely Republican and White. Query whether a more independent approach and a “you can’t take our vote for granted” attitude on the part of African Americans would generate better results.

PRESIDENTIAL VOTING BEHAVIOR

Survey results revealed a wide chasm in the voting behavior of African Americans and Whites in the November 2000 presidential election. African Americans (75.8 percent) were far more likely than Whites (26.7 percent) to vote for Al Gore. Indeed, given post-election polls, the 75.8 percent African American proportion seems a gross underestimate. President George W. Bush apparently won only about 10 percent of the African American vote in Virginia. The survey may have elicited an after-the-fact “I voted for the winner” reaction from some African Americans, or mirror an understandable reluctance on the part of respondents to tell anyone how they voted. A paltry 1 percent of all respondents reported that they cast their ballot for Ralph Nader.

THE MILLION MAN AND MILLION WOMAN MARCHES

Agreement with the principles of the Million Man March and the Million Woman March was assessed. While these events did not arouse much interest outside of the African American community, they espoused beliefs widely known and agreed to among a large proportion of the African American population. Nationally, accounts of the level of participation in the marches ranged from about 400,000 to almost 1.5 million. Significantly, virtual unanimity is reflected among African American respondents in this study, with 97 percent reporting that they agreed with the principles of the Million Man March and the Million Woman March.

The views of respondents toward the leaders that purportedly represent them at the national and local levels also were assessed. This indicator of ideology is useful for discerning within-group differences. The following questions were asked:

Which national Black leader best represents your views and opinions?

Who do you believe is the most politically influential living Black person in America today?

The range of ideological diversity among African Americans in Hampton Roads is reflected in respondents’ identification of the national Black leader who best represents their views and opinions. The large proportion of respondents who indicated that they “don’t know” (33.7 percent) could indicate that there is no one currently expressing their views, in which case we may be on the cusp of a majority change in African American opinion. Or, this result might represent a lack of knowledge about African American political leadership. Still another possibility is African Americans simply think it doesn’t make any difference whom their leaders are. A final possibility is the respondents were reluctant to identify their “heroes” to the interviewers.

Table 8 records these responses. The top responses were the Rev. Jesse Jackson (21.9 percent); Secretary of State Colin Powell (7.9 percent); NAACP leader Kweise Mfume (6.6 percent); Minister Louis Farrakhan (3.1 percent); the Rev. Martin Luther King III (2.9 percent); the Rev. Al Sharpton (2.6 percent); U.S. Congresswoman Maxine Waters (1.3 percent). In addition to Powell, other African Americans not aligned with the Democratic Party were identified as being representative of the views and opinions of some African American respondents. These individuals included Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas (0.6 percent), presidential adviser Condoleezza Rice (0.4 percent) and U.S. Representative J.C. Watts (0.2 percent). These rather puny numbers suggest the Republican Party has some distance to travel before a large proportion of African Americans visibly align themselves with conservative African American leaders. African Americans may think conservatively on many issues, and secretly vote for Republican candidates in an election, but most continue to be reluctant to identify themselves publicly with the Republican Party.

Among African American respondents, 25.4 percent and 22.3 percent, respectively, identified Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell as the two most politically influential African Americans in the United States. A somewhat smaller proportion of Whites identified Jackson (21.8 percent) as the most politically influential African American, but a substantially larger proportion endorsed Powell (39.3 percent) as the most politically influential African American in America today. He may be, even though his influence probably is not as large among African Americans as it is among Whites. Sizable proportions of African American respondents identified Farrakhan (5.3 percent), Mfume (5 percent) and Sharpton (2.2 percent) as being most influential. Significant proportions of White respondents also identified Farrakhan (5.3 percent) and Thomas (1.5 percent) as the most politically influential Black leader in America. White Americans apparently believe Minister Farrakhan is more influential among African Americans than African Americans themselves do.

TABLE 8
Black Leader Who Best Represents African Americans' Views

Political Leader	Percent of Sample
Minister Louis Farrakhan	3.1
Rev. Jesse Jackson	21.9
Rev. Martin Luther King III	2.9
Rev. Joseph Lowery	0.0
Kweise Mfume	6.6
Sec. Colin Powell	7.9
Hugh Price	0.2
Condoleezza Rice	0.4
Randall Robinson	0.0
Rev. Al Sharpton	2.6
Rep. Maxine Waters	1.3
Rep. J.C. Watts	0.2
Justice Clarence Thomas	0.6
Other	16.8
Don't know	33.7
Refused to answer	1.8
TOTAL	100.00

THIS ORGANIZATION REPRESENTS MY POINT OF VIEW

Respondents were asked which national organization best represents their point of view. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was identified by the largest proportion (20.8 percent) of African American respondents as the one group that best represents their political views. The NAACP was followed by the “Church” (14 percent) and “other community-based organizations” (11 percent) as best representing the political views of respondents (see Table 9). While 19.9 percent of the respondents reported that “none” of the organizations in their city or county best represents their political views, 30 percent indicated that they “don’t know” which organization best represents their views. It is possible that the large proportion reporting “none” may be indicative of the occurrence of ideological realignment among African Americans. Alternatively, this may only represent a degree of boredom with things political. These findings may be important for the conduct of national, state and local political campaigns in Hampton Roads.

However, when asked, “What do you believe is the most politically influential Black organization in America today?”, 75.3 percent of African American respondents identified the NAACP. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with results showing that Kweisi Mfume, NAACP president and CEO, was viewed by only 5 percent of the African American respondents as the most politically influential Black person in America. Mfume, a former U.S. congressman from Maryland, has only served in the position a few years and has not had enough time to build the reputation that previous incumbents of his position, such as Roy Wilkins, did so skillfully over many years.

TABLE 9

Organization that Best Represents African Americans’ Political Views

Organization	Percent of Sample
NAACP	20.8
Urban League	1.3
Church	14.0
Nation of Islam	0.7
New Black Panther Party	0.4
Other community-based organizations	11.0
Southern Christian Leadership Conferences	0.4
None	19.90
Don’t know	30.4
Refused to answer	1.1
TOTAL	100.00

I’M A MEMBER OF THIS ORGANIZATION

African American respondents reported holding formal membership in the following organizations: Church (58.2 percent), NAACP (16.6 percent) and Urban League (4.1 percent). The latter two membership percentages no doubt will come as news to these organizations. The Urban League of Hampton Roads, as an example, in its best years has had only several hundred actual members – not the 20,000 this survey result implies. Perhaps the empathy many African Americans have for such organizations is mistakenly confused with membership. Nearly 12 percent reported holding membership in “other community-based organizations” (11.8 percent). It is notable also that 29.3 percent of those surveyed did not hold any formal organizational memberships. This may be the African American variant of “bowling alone.”

VOTING BEHAVIOR AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Although arguably challenged in the November 2000 presidential election, one of the hallmarks of the American system of governance is the one person, one vote system. **Among Hampton Roads respondents, an extraordinarily high proportion (90 percent) reported that they were registered to vote. Of the African Americans surveyed, 87.5 percent said they were registered, compared to 91.9 percent of Whites. Once again, these proportions are at variance with actual facts, for the actual percentage of eligible Hampton Roads voters who are registered is much lower.** Respondents may not wish to admit they are not registered to vote, or that they do not vote, even though that is the truth. Among the respondents not currently registered, 44.1 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Whites revealed that they had been registered to vote at some point in the past.

Voting in elections and working for a political campaign provide strong indications of political participation. Approximately 76 percent of all survey respondents indicated that they had voted in the last presidential election. Seventy-one percent of African Americans responded this way, compared with 81 percent of Whites. Both of these percentages exceed what actually was true.

Regarding their participation in a political campaign, only 16.6 percent of African Americans reported having done so at some point, compared with 25.4 percent of Whites.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACK SITUATION

The disjunction between African American and White perceptions of the American social reality presents a significant barrier to the public-policy effort to eradicate social inequality. It is commonly agreed that success in using political processes to eliminate Black inequality would be more likely if a biracial consensus existed on the nature and cause of the Black predicament and, further, there were agreement on appropriate policies to do so. No such consensus exists, as the survey results demonstrate.

Table 10 shows the proportion of respondents who “strongly agree” or “agree” with several statements relating to African Americans. **As the table shows, 25.3 percent of all respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement, “Discrimination against Blacks is not a problem in my city or county.” However, when analyzed by race, the results reveal a significant gap between the perceptions of Blacks and Whites. Of the African American respondents, only 12.2 percent “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement, compared with 39.1 percent of Whites.** This is an important difference, for perceptions of the prevalence of discrimination against African Americans, women and others have obvious implications for one’s support of affirmative action and other programs working to eradicate social inequalities.

The African American reparations movement has a long history dating back to the post-Reconstruction era. In recent years, the movement appears to have gained additional attention and a bit of momentum. When a prominent White politician such as Chicago’s Mayor Daley endorses a resolution supporting the idea that reparations should be paid to African Americans, then one knows the topic has become discussable even though it is a political “dead letter” at this point.

Broadly speaking, African Americans and Whites perceive different realities with respect to economic achievement. For example, 60 percent and 40 percent of African Americans and Whites, respectively, believe that the economic position of

TABLE 10

Perceptions of the African American Predicament: Percentage of Respondents Who Strongly Agree or Agree

Statement	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Discrimination against Black people is not a problem in my city/county.	12.2	39.1	25.3
Black people are owed reparations by the government.	50.0	9.8	30.4
Black people are owed reparations by private corporations.	49.5	15.0	32.7

Blacks is worse than that of Whites. Hence, while some Whites support the notion that reparations are owed by the government and private corporations, there are far more African Americans in Hampton Roads who support this idea, presumably because they attribute the lack of economic success of African Americans to slavery and historic discrimination. With respect to whether reparations are owed by the government, 30.4 percent of all respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” However, while 50 percent of African American respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the government owes reparations to African Americans, only 9.8 percent of Whites concurred. The results concerning corporations parallel those for government. In response to the statement, “Black people are owed reparations by private corporations,” 49.5 percent of African Americans “strongly agreed” or “agreed,” compared with 15 percent of the White respondents. To place these numbers in context, the 1996 survey of Black political attitudes in Atlanta revealed that 50 percent of the respondents agreed with the idea that the government owes Black people reparations.

SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT

The sense of political empowerment citizens possess is a vital part of the fabric of the American political enterprise. Empowerment boils down to the feeling that one’s opinions, presence and votes make a difference. Not only does empowerment affect individual political behavior, but it also has important implications for the stability of the political system and its

capacity for conflict mediation or resolution. Citizens who feel a sense of empowerment are more likely, for example, to participate in the political process and to resolve differences and conflicts with others within the framework of the system. Table 11 summarizes the responses of survey participants to a number of statements addressing various dimensions of empowerment.

The differences between African Americans and Whites depicted in Table 11 are striking in that Whites believe African Americans have more power and influence than African Americans believe they have. By way of illustration, survey results show African Americans (16.2 percent) are substantially less likely than Whites (54.3 percent) to “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement, “Blacks and Whites have an equal amount of power in my city/county.” Similar proportions of African Americans (24.1 percent) and Whites (54.5 percent) either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement, “Government leaders in my city/county are especially sensitive to the needs of Blacks.”

TABLE 11
Percentage of Respondents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing
With Statements Regarding Race and Sense of Empowerment

Statement	Percent African American	Percent White	Total
Black elected officials in my city/county sell out to Whites.	26.9	*	*
Blacks and Whites have an equal amount of power in my city/county.	16.2	54.3	34.8
Government leaders are especially sensitive to the needs of Black people.	24.1	54.5	39.0
Black elected officials in my city/county do not have power to change things for Black people.	38.5	25.0	27.0
My city/county government is run for the benefit of all the people.	45.8	70.7	58.0
People like me don't have a lot to say about what government does.	46.6	41.4	44.0
Local government is run largely by a few big interests.	69.8	53.3	61.8
Black politicians represent the interests of White citizens.	*	62.4	*
Black elected officials can change things for Black people if they want to.	63.5	72.0	66.7

* Only the group responding to the survey item is reflected in the results.

These general attitudes always are portrayed by respondents who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that, “Black elected officials in my city/county do not have the power to change things for Blacks in my city or county.” Of the African American respondents, 38.5 percent “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement, compared with 25 percent of Whites. On the other hand, large proportions of the African American sample (63.5 percent) and the White sample (72 percent) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the view, “Blacks elected to office in my city/county can change things for Black people if they want to.” Against that, however, about one in four African American respondents (26.9 percent) believed that, “The Black elected officials in my city/county sell out to the White power structure.” By contrast, the 1996 Atlanta survey revealed that 58 percent of the African American respondents believed that Black elected officials sell out to the White power structure.

It is worth noting that Atlanta has elected African American political leaders (for example, the mayor) for a longer period of time than any city or county in Hampton Roads. Perhaps African Americans in Atlanta have suffered from some disillusionment over

the behavior of their elected African American leaders, or the leaders have found it difficult to accomplish their agendas and remain in power without the support of the White power structure. Still another hypothesis is that Hampton Roads is a region of several small and medium-sized cities and semi-rural counties. Arguably, the governments in these jurisdictions could be smaller, less bureaucratic and more responsive than is the case in big-city Atlanta. In any event, African Americans in Hampton Roads are considerably more hopeful, and much less cynical, about their leaders and those leaders' ability to change things, than their counterparts in Atlanta.

Nearly 70 percent of African Americans are also more likely to "strongly agree" or "agree" than Whites (53.3 percent) with the statement, "I believe that my local government is largely run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." White respondents (70.7 percent) were more likely than their Black counterparts (45.8 percent) to concur with the statement, "I believe that the government in my city/county is run for the benefit of all the people." Sixty-five percent and 24 percent of respondents, respectively, in the 1996 Atlanta survey concurred with these statements. Once again, African Americans in Hampton Roads (as well as Whites) are more inclined to believe government operates for their benefit than is true of the Atlanta citizenry.

CONCLUSIONS AND A FEW RECOMMENDATIONS

What have we learned? On many issues, African American and White residents of Hampton Roads see things the same. Foremost are issues such as schools, crime and jobs. Both groups are quite impressed with the provision of several public services, for example, libraries and less glamorous tasks such as garbage removal.

But, on a range of other issues, African Americans and Whites see things quite differently. African Americans are considerably less likely than Whites to believe problems of discrimination continue to be important for African Americans and more likely to be dissatisfied with their economic condition. Consequently, African Americans are much more supportive of affirmative action principles, and almost five times as many Blacks as Whites believe government and corporations should pay financial reparations to African Americans. To some extent, these findings reflect the reality that African Americans earn lower incomes than Whites in Hampton Roads and are less likely to own their own homes. African Americans are also much more likely than Whites to regard HIV/AIDS as an important problem. And, religion appears to play a larger role in the lives of Hampton Roads' African Americans than it does in the lives of Whites, at least as measured by their frequency of church attendance and the influence the church has in their lives.

Relative to Whites, African Americans typically are much less satisfied with their police departments. The gap between the two groups is especially large in Norfolk, but virtually nonexistent in Newport News. Whether the different perceptions African Americans have of their police departments are based upon real or imagined differences in treatment, there is no doubt many African Americans feel these differences intensely.

Among public services, public housing is given low grades by both African Americans and Whites. Regional transportation also receives its share of criticism. Public officials would do well to heed what was perhaps the survey's most surprising result – namely, that approximately 70 percent of the citizens of Hampton Roads support the development of a light rail system for the region. This strong endorsement does not square well with the opposition of some elected officials to such a development. These officials often cite public opinion as the basis for their opposition.

Both African Americans and Whites in Hampton Roads are less cynical about their elected officials and their governments than the citizens of Atlanta, which we have used as a comparison. Many African Americans believe their elected officials and their governments can improve the lives of the typical African American. This is an agreeable and fortuitous finding for the region.

Not surprisingly, we found that African American churches have maintained their traditionally strong roles in the Black community. African Americans continue to utilize their churches for many purposes, in addition to religious nourishment. Consequently, African American pastors are influential molders of public opinion and oftentimes function as political leaders. Those who seek to understand African Americans must first understand Black churches.

Among African American leaders nationally, the Rev. Jesse Jackson continues to hold great influence. Where predominantly African American organizations are concerned, the NAACP is the most influential. However, almost one of every three African Americans indicated either they did not know or, alternatively, that none of these individuals or organizations best represented their views. It is possible this "I don't know or don't care" response represents nothing more than a degree of anomie or boredom; it also is possible that we find ourselves on the cusp of major shifts in African American opinion.

The relatively low level of home ownership among African Americans (48.4 percent vs. 70.7 percent for Whites) suggests the need for a close examination of all aspects of housing markets in Hampton Roads. Are so many African Americans not homeowners because of income and asset deficiencies, or are there procedural and discriminatory barriers to their home ownership? Given the importance of home ownership to community stability, this is a topic that should not be ignored.

This survey confirmed the strong support of African Americans for the Democratic Party. There is much dispute whether this causes African Americans to have more clout and political influence, or instead to “sell their votes for cheap and be taken for granted.” Whites, on the other hand, while definitely leaning toward Republicanism, seem much less committed to party politics. A much larger proportion of Whites regard themselves as political independents. Many political observers believe this is the best strategy because it forces candidates to court Whites in Hampton Roads in every election. Whatever the truth here, the differences outlined between African Americans and Whites in the political arena were among the strongest found in any area of the survey.

Finally, these survey results for Hampton Roads are consistent with those reported for the Atlanta region in 1996 and for the nation as a whole in the July 11, 2001, edition of The Washington Post. Once local issues are taken into account, African Americans in Hampton Roads live in much the same worlds as their counterparts in Atlanta and nationally. The Post concluded, “Whether out of hostility, indifference or simple lack of knowledge, large numbers of White Americans incorrectly believe Blacks are as well off as Whites in terms of their jobs, incomes schooling and health care.” Yet, reality is otherwise.

Whites in Hampton Roads tend to overemphasize the progress African Americans have made economically, politically and socially. Believing African Americans to live and operate in circumstances roughly equivalent to those of Whites, the typical White person concludes that “a level playing field” (that is, an absence of affirmative action and preferences) is the best societal policy. This is particularly true for policies that apply to all African Americans, regardless of their status. Whites tend to be more supportive of preferences that focus on specific individuals who exhibit need, whatever their race, rather than policies that assist all African Americans, regardless of their circumstances. This view of the world has gained more currency in recent years and may in fact prevail on the U.S. Supreme Court. If so, we shall have many more opportunities to debate its relevance.

Notes Of Appreciation

Special thanks are due Old Dominion University’s Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, directed by Michael L. Clemons, and Old Dominion’s Social Science Research Center, directed by Jeffrey Y. Harlow. The institute and the center carried out the public-opinion survey that was the basis for this chapter. Drs. Clemons and Harlow were instrumental in analyzing the data from the survey and in delineating what the results mean.

We also express our thanks to the Center for Political Studies and Analysis at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Ga., for generously providing Drs. Clemons and Harlow with unfettered access to its survey instrument and a summary of item results from its 1996 Survey of Black Political Attitudes in Atlanta. The Atlanta study included 1,112 cases and collected data on 123 variables.