

African-American or black?

Professor **Christina Greer** takes on race labels in the 21st century

Christina Greer grew up in Philadelphia in what she calls a homogenous (read: white) neighborhood, with homogenous friends. When she set off to Tufts University, she encountered a different world. A facilitator at a freshman retreat asked everyone to close their eyes and raise their hands if their parents had warned them to stay away from the black students. Everyone's hands, except the black students, went up. Greer was hooked on the subject of race. She went on to get a doctorate in political science from Columbia University and now teaches a class on race and ethnic politics at Fordham University. This summer she will come out with a book, "Black Ethnicities: Race, Integration and the Pursuit of the American Dream."



POINT PERSON



We tend to look at someone and say, "That person is African-American." But sometimes those words don't tell the story, right?

I understand people want to have this connection to Africa, sort of to symbolize both this African connection and this American connection. But is that really accurate when you have people from Africa who are now in America?

And yet, people say African-American trying to be politically correct.

Exactly. And that's fine. If some-

one calls me an African-American, I'm not going to yell at them. But I personally consider myself, and people who are descended from U.S. slavery, black American. Also, in my writing, if I called black Americans African-Americans, then I'd have to call Africans who are in America, African African-Americans. That could get a little confusing.

So I take it you celebrated Black History Month?

My husband and I have a huge party every year. Our friends come over and take a quiz. It's great. On our quiz we have questions, not just about African-Americans, but people like [Haitian] Toussaint Louverture.

Colin Powell also was from the Caribbean.

Yes. He's Jamaican. He shows up in my first chapter. I talk about how he was a special chosen one for the Republicans because part of what makes him so perfect for them, besides being a military man and a Republican, he was so smart and articulate, and good.

Articulate. That's a loaded word.

It's the universal back-handed compliment for all educated black people. I was talking to one of my really good friends from grad school, who's a white female, and she told me about when her now-husband, then-boyfriend, who's a black guy, met her parents for the first time years and years ago. Her parents are superliberal. Not a problem. Afterward, her

father called: "I really like him. He's so great. He's really articulate." So she tells her boyfriend, and he flies off the handle. She comes to me and says, *I don't know what's going on. I told him my dad really liked him. That he thought he was really smart, really funny, he's articulate.* I go, "Oh, boy!" She asked, "What did he say?" And this is one of my friends who's supersmart, very sweet ... brilliant mind.

Articulate, even?

Exactly. I asked her, how many times have you ever been called articulate in your life? She said never. And I said, *exactly.* Do you know how many times a day I get called articulate? No one *didn't* expect her to be articulate.

Do you think we're ever going to get to the point where there is no need for self-description or group labels?

I don't want to sound like a pessimist. But as long as you keep class resources relatively scarce, there will always be racial competition. Because this country refuses to deal with class, race becomes a proxy for class. All the social ills that people refuse to deal with in equitable ways, they try and turn into a race discussion when it's actually a class discussion. I have students who say, "Oh, white people are wealthy." And I say, have you ever been to West Virginia?

Poor white people, of which there are many in this country, don't like to be told that they're poor white people. And they're definitely not going to be told that they're poor white people by politicians. Because then they would have to actually give them something.

So [the politicians] just tell them that they're white, and that black people and Mexicans are taking all their resources. And that's why I can't give you more.

Are you contributing to the division in this country by having this discussion about how we self-identify?

I address that in the book's introduction. I say, this is not a book about who's smarter. It's not a book about who works harder. It's not a book about what group is better than the other. Because I definitely could see someone having a critique: Essentially, *this is our dirty laundry; why are you putting it out there for everyone to see?* But the reason I feel really strongly about having this conversation is because it's being had around dinner tables amongst black ethnic groups across the country. And the fact that the value of the diversity within this group isn't being recognized is an injustice to other scholars who are actually trying to find innovative ways to think about race and ethnic politics.

The best conversations are often the ones that are whispered but not said out loud. I can't close without saying thanks ... for being so articulate.

Aaaaaah ...



This Q&A was conducted and condensed by editorial writer Ralph De La Cruz. His email address is rdelacruz@dallasnews.com. Follow Christina Greer on Twitter at @Dr_CMGreer.

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Some of our greatest cities, including New York and Los Angeles, are much safer today than they were 20 years ago, thanks to Republican leaders, such as former Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York. Forty years ago, conservatives and liberals disagreed about how to fight crime. Conservatives looked to more effective policing; liberals, believing that poverty caused crime, bet on redistributive social policies. The past decades have overwhelmingly vindicated the conservatives. The expansive government programs of the liberals' Great Society coincided with rapidly rising urban crime rates. Cities became safe again only when they embraced tougher — and smarter — policing.

Yet not all cities have gotten on the bandwagon, and safety remains a grave concern in many. The Republican Party should point to the success of the crime-fighting revolution and push for its adoption across urban America. Among the innovations that it could promote is New York's justly renowned Compstat system, which makes a police force more accountable by mapping crime, identifying hot spots and demanding that the precinct commanders responsible for those areas make them safer. Simply hiring more cops also helps.

Flourishing urban life depends on keeping the peace, and every American deserves to be able to walk down the street without looking over his shoulder. The GOP, historically the party of law and order, can convincingly make the case for urban crime reduction.

Republicans are also the natural champions of meaningful school reform, since they're far less likely than Democrats to be in thrall to the teachers unions that bear much of the responsibility for the failure of our urban public schools. The right has correctly promoted choice and accountability as key principles in making schools better. Great enterprises, from law firms to restaurants, spring up in cities because cities' agglomerations of people produce free-market maelstroms, which encourage vigorous competition and innovation. Imagine what would happen to the quality of food in New York if the city replaced its thriving, hypercompetitive restaurant scene with a single public canteen. That's exactly what cities have done by accepting monolithic public school systems. With no incentive to excel or improve, the schools can get away with selling a lousy product, and they do.

Charter schools — public schools that operate free from union contracts and other bureaucratic restrictions — can change that equation by breaking up the regular public schools' near-monopoly on education. They're essentially a variation on free-market economist Milton Friedman's idea of school vouchers. Because of the efforts of Republicans (and of some urban Democrats who've broken with the teachers unions), charters have begun to make inroads in cities. But they remain limited in number by law and lack the classroom space to meet the growing demand for their services.

The GOP has more to offer on education. The No Child Left Behind act, a good first step toward introducing accountability into the nation's poorly performing school systems, was a product of George W. Bush's administration. Further, the most important ingredients in good schools are their good teachers, and Republicans can point to the private sector for lessons in building a talented

workforce. Among those lessons: Good performance should be rewarded, workers' skills should be developed, and employers — in this case, schools — should be free to fire those employees who can't improve. Union contracts tend to make firing difficult.

Republicans have good ideas to share in other areas of urban policy as well. For example, improving city services while reducing costs is a priority in these budget-strapped times. My Harvard colleague Stephen Goldsmith, formerly the Republican mayor of Indianapolis, was a pioneer in letting private companies bid to provide services that had previously been monopolized by public workers. Properly managed, private provision can bring huge efficiencies and help reduce the dauntingly high labor costs in many cities.

Transportation congestion, which costs city drivers trillions of hours of time, is another major urban problem for which the right has a smart policy answer. The congestion can end only when America's cities stop following what is, in effect, a Soviet-style transportation policy. In the Soviet Union, the government sold eggs and butter at prices far below their market value. The result: long lines and empty shelves. The nominal prices were low, but you couldn't get your groceries. Today's cities similarly provide free access to a valuable commodity, city streets. The result: traffic jams, the automotive equivalent of long lines and empty shelves. Until we turn to a market-based solution — following the examples of London and Singapore, where drivers pay for the congestion they create — our cities' transportation arteries will stay clogged.

The shortage of affordable housing in cities also calls for a market-based solution. Urban housing becomes unaffordable when robust demand for space crashes against an unnaturally fixed housing supply. Over the past five decades, many cities, with San Francisco and New York heading the list, passed zoning restrictions that made it difficult to build. In many cities, too, the process that's necessary to get projects approved is long and complicated, deterring builders. All this depresses the supply of housing and raises its price.

To understand the power of unfettered supply to promote affordability, compare Republican Texas with Democratic Massachusetts. Bay State leaders constantly proclaim their passion for providing affordable housing for the poor. Yet Massachusetts remains one of the least affordable states in the nation for housing because its suffocating regulations restrict building, shoving up prices. By contrast, Texans, who rarely talk about affordable housing, enjoy lots of it. Texas' housing affordability isn't the result of any top-down government program; it reflects the might of the free market and the Texan aversion to regulation.

The Republicans' abandonment of the city is good neither for their party nor for urban America. The GOP clearly needs a heftier percentage of the urban vote, but winning it by means of fiscal pandering or redistribution isn't the way to go — partly because such a strategy would cost rural and suburban votes and partly because it would be wrong. A better approach is to offer the good ideas that cities desperately need. Republicans have plenty.



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ing federal criminal investigation, he easily won re-election in November. The Medrano clan is working toward having a perpetual lock on a southern Dallas City Council seat, a school board position, or both.

One thing these and other political dynasties in southern Dallas have in common is their political affiliation. They are tried-and-true Democrats, as are the voters who keep putting them into office. (Southern Dallas is hardly unique — Republican Rep. Ralph Hall, the 89-year-old whose district is north of Dallas, has served in Congress since 1980, longer than any other member of the Texas delegation. But the problem is more acute in southern Dallas because it is an under-served, under-represented population.)

The 2008 and 2012 elections were good examples. Northern Dallas was a rich mix of white, black and Hispanic voters representing all ranges of incomes, and neither party could claim a lock on voters. All candidates at all levels had to work for the votes they got. Southern Dallas was almost entirely low-income blacks and Hispanics. Only two census tracts voted Republican; the rest — in an area the size of Atlanta — voted overwhelmingly Democratic.

As long as southern Dallas keeps voting in predictable patterns, residents can expect the same kind of predictable, ho-hum representation.

It's so predictable that the Republican Party seldom bothers to post viable candidates in southern Dallas races. Why bother?

Let's be clear, the GOP has done itself no favors on the popularity front. Its harsh stances on health care, social welfare programs and comprehensive immigration reform have worked wonders to deter southern Dallas voters — heavily dominated by blacks and Hispanics — from ever voting Republican.

Conservatives balked at civil rights legislation in the 1950s and '60s. When President Lyndon Johnson pressed ahead with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, white conservatives in Texas quickly swung Republican and have stayed there since. Correctly or not, in the eyes of minority voters, the GOP stands for obstructionism and white-skewed unequal opportunity: Why vote for them?

What southern Dallas voters have yet to seriously ask themselves, though, is what are their current representatives doing to really improve their quality of life? I don't mean raffles and block parties.

Housing quality in southern Dallas is abysmal. The majority of underperforming Dallas schools are in the south. A quarter of households live below the poverty level, compared with 14 percent in northern Dallas. Per capita income is a third of the northern level. Unemployment rates exceeding 20 percent are common; such rates are nowhere to be found in the north.

That's been the general profile for decades. How, exactly, have these political dynasts



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earned their exalted status? What have they done to lift southern Dallas out of its hole?

Southern Dallas voters need to demand accountability. And the best way to get it is to threaten the incumbent with imminent job loss if he or she doesn't bring jobs, development and noticeable quality-of-life improvements. The best way to make this threat credible is to get other highly qualified candidates to vie for the job and for voters to stop rubber-stamping their ballots with the incumbent's name or voting straight-party Democratic.

That's a tall order for the Republican Party. That means finding candidates who can stay faithful to the party platform while, somehow, articulating positions that resonate with a largely poor, minority and liberal electorate. But it can be done.

Wedge issues abound in southern Dallas. The Hispanic population, which makes up about 53 percent of residents, is heavily Catholic and probably isn't comfortable with Democratic positions on abortion rights.

Attitudes appear to be waxing conservative regarding the notion of personal responsibility. If a teenage girl gets pregnant, she is expected to be a parent to the child rather than get an abortion. It's increasingly hard to find a black church minister who believes that abortion is the best choice for a woman with an unwanted pregnancy. A third of family households in southern Dallas are headed by a single parent. The personal-responsibility message of the Republican Party, if presented the right way, can have an impact.

The fact that Republicans in Washington are swinging in favor of comprehensive immigration reform could give the party something to brag about with Hispanic voters around election time. Expanded free trade with Latin America is an accomplishment Republicans can proudly claim. The issues of school choice and getting tough on crime also are areas worth attention.

Republicans claim to best represent the interests of American business. The party needs to bring some of that business clout to minority communities. The candidate who promises to do this for southern Dallas — and can credibly demonstrate follow-through ability — might have a good chance at the polls when contrasted against the unimpressive job-creation record of long-time incumbents.

Someone needs to stir things up, and I can guarantee that the lethargic lineup of Democratic incumbents-for-life aren't going to change a thing without a serious challenge from outside their political machinery. If southern Dallas residents really want change, they should get rid of the one-party system that's helping to hold them down.



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