

A Study of Georgian Students' Attitude and Knowledge about the Post- Civil Rights Era in the United States

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Abstract

This mini survey was aimed to find out general attitude of Georgian students about African-Americans in the United States comprising post-Civil Rights era and 1990, preceding the amazing period of the presidential elections of 2008. After having surveyed 158 students of the International Black Sea University (IBSU), we came to the conclusion that the students are not fully aware of the life conditions and achievements of African Americans from the post-Civil Rights era to the 1990s.

Keywords: *Georgia; African Americans; Attitude*

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Introduction

The years since terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in 2001 have been turbulent ones for the United States. The Presidency of George W. Bush will probably always be associated with those disastrous events. The global war on terrorism initiated by the president, the war in Afghanistan and the controversial war in Iraq, have intensely outlined the character of world politics in the beginning of the new millennium.

The United States remains the world's transcendent power. During the period of the Cold War, many analysts worried that the decline of the United States in the world image, would make it more like an “ordinary” country. However, today it's evident that the United States remains far from conventional. It is the world's fourth-largest country in geographical size and the third in population. It is supplied with vast natural resources, wealth, technology, overwhelming military might – powerful among the domestic market economics of the Global North and throughout the world.

Americans and their leaders usually share the opinion that the United States is set aside from others. According to the one historian, “the nation was explicitly founded on particular sets of values, and these made the United States view itself as different from the nations of the Old World from which it originated” (McCormick, 1992). Since the United States is set apart and is unique, its foreign policy is different from the policies of other states. The United States has special responsibilities and obligations toward others, Georgia among them since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been faithfully supporting Georgia's first post-soviet experiment with democracy. As the United States Vice President Biden mentioned in his speech to Georgian Parliament on July 23, 2009, in Tbilisi, Georgia: “Georgia today is one of the highest per-capita recipients of U.S. aid in the entire world. The United States fully supports Georgia's aspiration to join NATO, supports the journey to secure, free and democratic Georgia” (Biden, 2009). The United States always had great impact on the Georgian people, even under the Soviet system; especially today in the “Information Era”, the “Age of Interdependence”, and the “Global Village” Georgian people have many questions and concerns about the United States. They want information and answers that will help them better understand various aspects of American life, ranging from history, society and culture to

economics and foreign policy.

Therefore we believe that Georgians, particularly students and the educated segment should know the history of our strategic partner, specifically the prominent period of 1970-1990s, pre-miracle period of 2008, when the first African American was elected president of the U.S.

Survey Analyses

We conducted a social survey to analyze the perceptions of Georgian students and compared it with Factual conditions and achievements of African Americans from the mid-1960s to the 1990s.

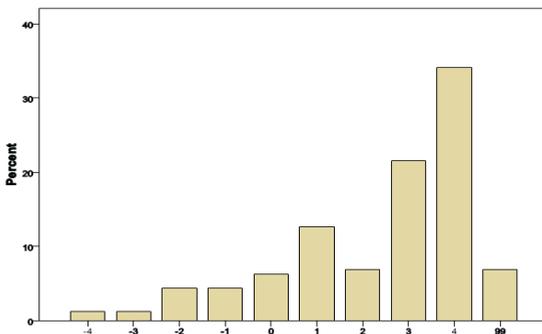
We asked 158 students of the American Studies Direction and of the International Relations Direction of the International Black Sea University (IBSU), about their general attitudes and perceptions concerning the advances made by African Americans in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; we also asked some general questions about African Americans and gave students specific factual questions related to the pre-Civil Rights era and the history of the United states. The survey was anonymous.

What is crucial here is that the students revealed great interest towards the issue of African Americans and expressed desire to be informed about this specific topic in the future.

It seems that Barack Obama's election as the nation's first black president triggered the interest among our students.

When the students surveyed were asked whether the election of an African American president would affect racial issues in a positive way, nearly 37 percent expressed absolute agreement, whereas 22 percent had an optimistic anticipation.

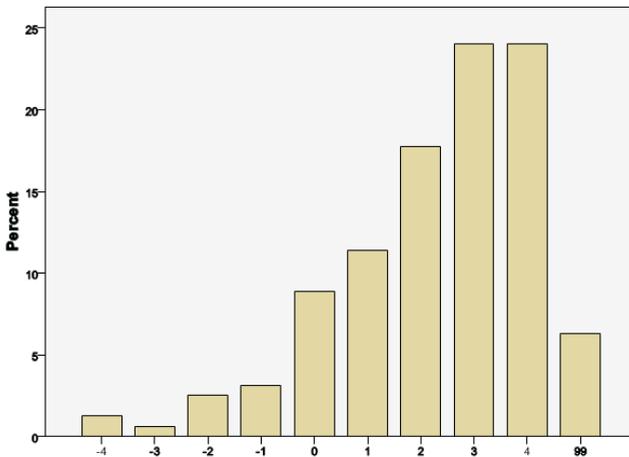
Figure 1. The election of African American president will affect racial issues in a positive way



We used numerical rating scales to illustrate our respondents' attitudes and position towards a particular question. The scale on the x-axis begins at -4 and ends at +4. It indicates an extent to which the students agree or disagree with each statement. Stands for strong agreement and 0 stands for neutral attitude, 99 stands for unidentified answer.

Twenty-five percent of our students believe and agree that the Civil Rights movement paved the way for the advancement of African Americans in specific fields. However, they are not able to reveal some general knowledge or awareness concerning some issues.

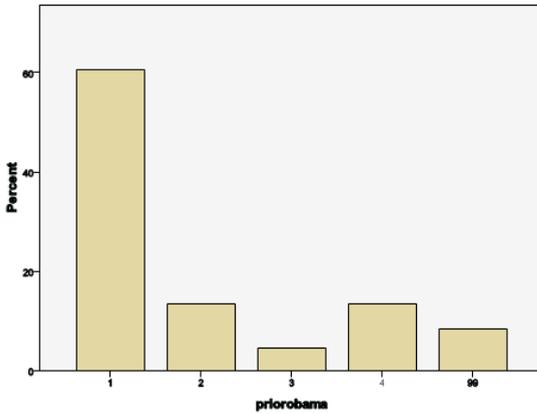
Figure 2.The Civil Rights movement paved the way for the advancement of African-Americans.



When they were asked to identify and specify the number of African Americans who had run for presidency before Obama, 60 percent thought that Obama was the only one who expressed this desire, whereas 18 percent assumed that there must have been more than three candidates, but none of the students was able to identify any candidate except Obama.

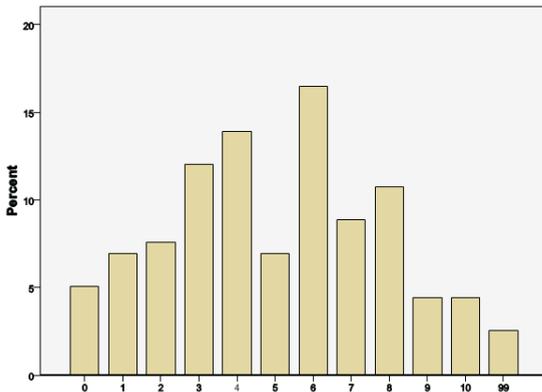
I strongly believe that our students need to have some information at least about Jessie Jackson who in fact during his presidential race in 1988, he won Democratic party primaries in 11 states. While most of his wins were in southern states with large black populations, he managed to win in the whitest state of the country (Vermont), in another very white state with far different local politics (Alaska), and a big state outside of the South (Michigan).

Figure 3. Prior to Obama, how many African Americans have run for presidency?



When the surveyed students were asked about the advances made by African Americans in the realm of politics during this specific period, only around 17 percent thought about positive moves. They have very little information about the period of the Clinton Administration, who in fact had record number of African Americans in his Cabinet.

Figure 4. To what extent do you think there were advances for African Americans in politics?



When we asked the students to identify or to specify the fields occupied by prominent African Americans, such as Colin Powell, Barbara Jordan, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Thurgood Marshall, etc. only fourteen percent was able to give more or less definite answers. Almost 98 percent of those surveyed thought that Colin Powell was an actor, or Barbara Jordan was the wife of Michael Jordan. In fact, Barbara Jordan is a

person who represented Texas in the House of Representatives from 1972-1978, the first African American Congresswoman from the deep South. They did not know, that Collin Powell was - a Black man, who for the first time in American history served as a Secretary of State, with strongest support coming from the people with conservative views including moderates who were Powell's chief advocates. None of them was able to identify Thurgood Marshall, who in fact played an important role during the struggle for Civil Rights and who was the first African American associate justice on the Supreme Court. Students knew even less about Malcolm X, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, or other leading Civil-Right figures.

As for general questions about advances in science and education , in terms of African Americans' ability to gain admission to prestigious schools, universities, or other schools , around 14 percent think that there were minor improvements in this field, 15 percent believe that there were some fair improvements, whereas 14 percent believe great success has been achieved. In 1977 50 percent of blacks undertook postsecondary school education, including college, and by 1986 the number dropped to 37 percent(Patterson, 1995).

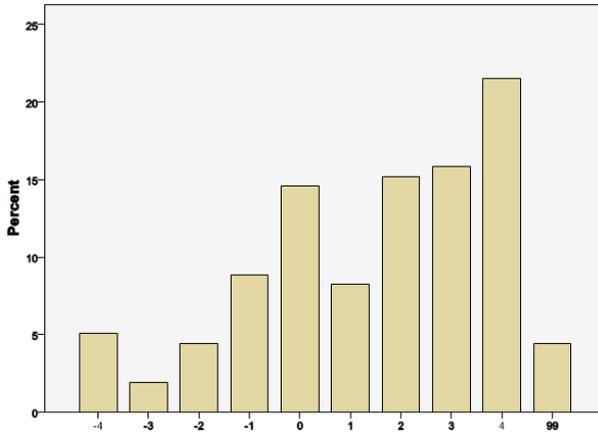
The 1990s witnessed the completion of African Americans' transformation from mass illiteracy to a status among the most educated persons in the world, with median years of schooling and college competition rates higher than those of most Western Europeans. It is not a shocking exaggeration. This fact gains importance when considered in light of the constant assertion of the community that the miseducation of Black Americans is the major source of their dilemmas(Patterson).

Concerning questions about the general improvement in the economical situation of African Americans in terms of salary and other basic factors, 22 percent of those surveyed believe that more or less the situation has improved, while 17 percent believe in strong improvements.

On specific questions about the history of slavery in the US , the students were more capable of giving appropriate answers. One example for illustration: When we asked the students to identify the period when slavery was officially abolished in the United States, nearly 43 percent was able to identify the correct period.

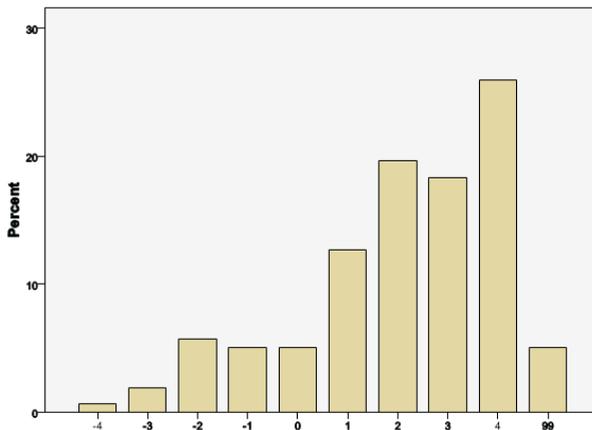
When we asked them about their reactions to certain stereotypes, e.g.: Blacks are more talented than Whites in the field of sports, 15 percent partially agreed, whereas 23 percent expressed the strong agreement.

Figure 5. Blacks are more talented than Whites in the field of sports.



Overall, 38 percent of the students surveyed strongly agreed that the language, the cultural patterns, the music , the material prosperity and even the food of America blend elements of black and white.

Figure 6. The language, the cultural patterns, the music, the material prosperity and even the food of America are the blend of black and white.



Conclusion

As a result of the conducted social survey, we can conclude that

neither the students of the American Studies Direction nor the students of the International Relations Direction of the IBSU have full or at least in many cases responsibly accurate information about African Americans' lives in the still racially divisive post-civil rights period. We consider this period crucial in terms of achievement in American race relations, promoting participation of blacks in the nation's educational, economic, military and political life . However, the scope of progress did not reach to such an extent as to serenely accept the fact of the first black man becoming the United States President.

We plan to include the period under consideration in the junior year course books of the American History and American Culture and Society curriculums of the IBSU American Studies Direction.

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