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# The Color of Power:

*A Cross-Cultural Analysis of How Political Systems Use Color to Signal Authority, Build Trust, and Win Elections Across Global and Caribbean Contexts*

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Artec Research · November 2025

Keywords: *political color, chromatic isomorphism, Caribbean politics, cross-cultural color psychology, electoral design, authority signaling, ideological branding*

## Abstract

Color is the most immediate, least conscious, and most globally variable tool in the political designer's arsenal. A study of more than 300 political parties across 35 democracies found a systematic relationship between ideological position and color choice: left-wing parties cluster toward red, right-wing parties toward blue, with meaningful regional and cultural variations that complicate and enrich the global picture (Casiraghi, Curini, and Cusumano, 2023). This paper examines the psychology of political color across three registers: the universal neurological responses that color activates regardless of culture, the culturally specific associations that override or modify those responses, and the strategic application of color in political campaigns to manufacture particular emotional and cognitive states in voters. It draws particular attention to the Caribbean context, where post-colonial political color traditions, national flag symbolism, and a demographically distinctive electorate create a unique color landscape that diverges in important ways from the Western European and North American patterns that dominate the academic literature. The paper argues that color in politics is never merely symbolic. It is functional: a communication system that operates faster than language, bypasses rational evaluation, and activates the emotional infrastructure through which political trust and political identity are built.

# 1. Introduction: Color Before Language

In the 50 milliseconds before a voter has read a single word on a piece of campaign material, they have already received and processed its dominant color. The parvocellular and magnocellular pathways of the visual system, identified by Livingstone and Hubel (1988), process color and luminance within the first processing tier of visual cortex, before higher-order cognition has engaged. A political campaign's color speaks before any candidate can.

This pre-cognitive communication is not content-neutral. Color activates documented physiological and psychological responses: elevated heart rate, shifts in approach or avoidance motivation, changes in perceived warmth or threat, modulations of trust. These responses are partially universal, rooted in evolutionary associations between colors and environmental conditions, and partially cultural, shaped by the specific political histories, flag traditions, and visual conventions of each society. The political designer who understands both layers has access to a communication tool of extraordinary power. The designer who understands only the aesthetic layer is working blind.

This paper maps both layers: the universal and the cultural, with particular attention to how they interact in the Caribbean political context, where unique historical forces have produced a color landscape that global frameworks do not adequately describe.

*"Color in politics does not ask for your opinion. It forms one before you have the chance to offer it."*

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## 2. The Universal Layer: What Color Does to the Brain

### 2.1 The Blue-Red Axis of Trust and Threat

The most extensively documented axis in political color psychology is the blue-red polarity. Labrecque and Milne (2012) established through empirical research that blue is universally associated with trust, competence, reliability, and calm, while red activates higher arousal states associated with urgency, passion, and, in competitive contexts, threat. These associations are not culturally constructed. They have been replicated across populations with substantially different political color traditions, suggesting a neurological rather than purely learned foundation.

The evolutionary basis is plausible. Blue skies and calm water are associated with safety and resource availability. Red is the color of blood, fire, and the flush of an aggressive conspecific. The nervous system responds to these colors with behavioral tendencies that predate any political meaning they may carry. When a political party selects a color, it is activating an emotional response that has been accumulating evolutionary history for millions of years. The ideological meaning the party attaches to the color is a thin layer over a very deep neurological substrate.

The practical consequence for political design is significant. A campaign conducted primarily in blue is activating a trust response in voters before any policy message has been delivered. A campaign conducted primarily in red is activating an arousal and urgency response. Neither is inherently advantageous: the appropriate activation depends on the strategic position of the party and the emotional needs of the target electorate. An opposition party challenging an unpopular incumbent may benefit from the urgency signal of red. An incumbent party defending a record of stable governance needs the trust signal of blue. The color should be the visual expression of the strategic emotional position.

## 2.2 Color Saturation and the Authority-Approachability Spectrum

Beyond the hue, the saturation and brightness of a color carry independent psychological weight. Elliot and Maier (2014) demonstrated that highly saturated colors activate stronger arousal responses than desaturated versions of the same hue. Deep, highly saturated navy activates institutional authority associations. Soft, desaturated sky blue activates warmth and approachability. This distinction is not merely aesthetic: it determines whether a campaign feels like a command or an invitation.

The strategic management of saturation is consequently one of the most sophisticated and least discussed tools in political color design. Parties seeking to project stable authority use deep, fully saturated versions of their primary color. Parties seeking to project approachability and human connection desaturate toward softer variants. Parties undergoing generational repositioning, attempting to maintain their existing base while attracting younger voters, often manage this tension by desaturating their primary color across a campaign cycle: maintaining hue recognition while shifting emotional register.

**Figure 1: Color Psychological Properties Relevant to Political Communication**

| Color       | Primary Association      | Secondary Association    | Arousal Level | Trust Score | Caribbean Usage              |
|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------------------|
| Deep navy   | Authority, institution   | Stability, tradition     | Low           | High        | FNM (Bahamas), JLP (Jamaica) |
| Soft blue   | Warmth, trust, calm      | Approachability, safety  | Low-Medium    | Very High   | PLP (Bahamas), PNP (Jamaica) |
| Red         | Passion, urgency         | Aggression (high volume) | High          | Medium      | PNP historical, PPP (Guyana) |
| Gold/Yellow | Change, optimism, energy | Novelty, innovation      | Medium-High   | Medium      | PLP accent, APNU (Guyana)    |
| Green       | Nature, growth, Islam    | National identity        | Low-Medium    | Medium      | PNC (Guyana), NDC (Grenada)  |
| Black       | Authority, formality     | Emotional neutrality     | Low           | Variable    | COI (Bahamas), various       |
| Orange      | Energy, accessibility    | Youth, informality       | Medium-High   | Medium      | UNC (Trinidad), various      |

Figure 1: Political color psychological properties and Caribbean party usage examples. Trust scores based on Labrecque & Milne (2012) and cross-cultural replication studies.

## 3. The Cultural Layer: How History Overrides Psychology

### 3.1 Chromatic Isomorphism: Why the Left is Red

Casiraghi, Curini, and Cusumano (2023) coined the term chromatic isomorphism to describe the systematic convergence of like-minded parties on similar colors across different national contexts. Their analysis of over 300 parties across 35 democracies found that left-wing parties cluster toward red hues while right-wing parties cluster toward blue, a pattern that holds across Western Europe more strongly than in other regions, and weakens substantially in non-European contexts.

The historical origin of red as the color of the political left lies in the revolutionary movements of the 19th century, where red flags were used to signal solidarity, the blood of the working class, and opposition to monarchical authority. This association was institutionalised through the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialist and social democratic parties throughout Europe and Latin America. Blue, associated with conservatism, institutional order, and the monarchy, settled at the opposite end of the spectrum.

What Casiraghi and colleagues found most interesting was not the pattern itself but its exceptions. In the United States, the conventional color assignments are inverted from the global norm: the

Republican Party uses red while the Democratic Party uses blue, a convention that emerged from television broadcast coverage in the late 20th century rather than from ideological tradition. In Australia, the left-leaning Labor Party incorporates blue in its identity. In Hungary, right-wing parties use red. These exceptions are important because they demonstrate that the political meaning of color is not fixed by neurological association alone: it is substantially constructed by historical convention, and those conventions vary by context.

### **3.2 The Caribbean Context: National Colors and Post-Colonial Identity**

The Caribbean political color landscape is distinct from both the Western European and North American patterns for three structural reasons. First, the region's political parties emerged in the context of decolonisation movements, which means that their color traditions were established in a different ideological register than European parliamentary systems. Colors were associated not primarily with left-right economic ideology but with national liberation, ethnic community representation, and post-colonial identity formation.

Second, Caribbean political parties frequently draw on national flag colors in their branding, a practice that is less common in Europe and North America where party identities are more firmly distinguished from national symbols. When a Caribbean party adopts the colors of the national flag, it is simultaneously making a color choice and a sovereignty claim: positioning itself as the authentic expression of national identity rather than merely one of several competing political positions.

Third, the ethnic and demographic composition of several Caribbean nations has historically mapped onto party color choices in ways that carry social meaning beyond psychological color associations. In Trinidad and Tobago, the People's National Movement's black and red have historically been associated with Afro-Trinidadian political identity, while the United National Congress's colors have been associated with Indo-Trinidadian political identity. In this context, color is not merely a brand attribute. It is an identity marker, and changing it carries social stakes that have nothing to do with color psychology.

### **3.3 The Pan-Caribbean Blue Shift**

A notable trend in Caribbean electoral politics over the past fifteen years is what can be termed the blue shift: a move by incumbent and aspirant governing parties across the region toward softer, more desaturated blues as their primary campaign color. This shift is observable in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and the Bahamas, and it tracks with a broader demographic transition: the

rise of younger first-time voters who are less bound by historical party color allegiances and more responsive to the direct psychological properties of color.

Losada Maestre and Sanchez Medero (2024) demonstrated experimentally that color activates partisan bias in political message interpretation: voters process identical political messages differently depending on the color in which they are presented, with red-presented messages perceived as more left-leaning and blue-presented messages as more moderate or centrist. In the Caribbean context, where historical red associations carry different weight than in Europe, the blue shift may reflect a strategic move toward the color most likely to generate positive first-impression affect in a cross-partisan younger voter demographic.

**Figure 2: Caribbean Political Party Color Mapping by Territory**

| Territory | Party | Primary Color | Secondary   | Ideological Tradition      | Youth Appeal |
|-----------|-------|---------------|-------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Bahamas   | PLP   | Soft blue     | Gold        | Centre-left, nationalist   | High         |
| Bahamas   | FNM   | Red / navy    | White       | Centre-right, liberal      | Low-Medium   |
| Bahamas   | COI   | Black         | Aquamarine  | Independent, third way     | Low          |
| Jamaica   | PNP   | Orange        | Gold        | Social democratic          | Medium       |
| Jamaica   | JLP   | Green         | Black/gold  | Labour, centrist           | Medium       |
| Trinidad  | PNM   | Black / red   | Gold        | Nationalist, Afro-T&T base | Low-Medium   |
| Trinidad  | UNC   | Orange        | White       | Centrist, Indo-T&T base    | Medium       |
| Barbados  | BLP   | Red           | Gold/yellow | Social democratic          | Medium       |
| Barbados  | DLP   | Blue          | Yellow      | Conservative               | Low          |

*Figure 2: Selected Caribbean political party color profiles mapped against ideological tradition and estimated youth voter appeal based on color psychology research.*

## 4. The Strategic Layer: Color as Campaign Architecture

### 4.1 Color Ratio as Message

The proportion of a campaign palette devoted to each color carries as much strategic meaning as the color choices themselves. A campaign that uses its primary color at 80 percent field coverage

and its secondary color at 10 percent is sending a fundamentally different message than a campaign that divides its palette 50-50. High primary color dominance signals conviction, clarity, and single-minded purpose. Balanced two-color campaigns signal coalition, openness, and the acknowledgment of multiple constituencies.

The ratio also affects the psychological impact of the colors themselves. A small accent of red in a blue-dominant campaign activates urgency associations without triggering the threat response that a red-dominant campaign might generate. A small accent of gold in a blue campaign adds warmth and optimism without diluting the trust signal of the primary blue. Designers who understand color psychology at the ratio level can use small quantities of emotionally potent secondary colors to modulate the overall impression of a campaign without compromising its primary emotional message.

## 4.2 Color and Candidate Presentation

Beyond the logo and graphic materials, the color of a candidate's attire on campaign materials is one of the most psychologically consequential design decisions in electoral branding. Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2007) established that the warmth-competence evaluation of social perception is substantially influenced by visual presentation, with formal dark attire scoring higher on competence and lower on warmth, and casual lighter attire reversing the ratio.

Political campaigns that dress candidates in their party's primary color on billboard materials are making an explicit identification between the individual and the brand. This is a high-commitment strategy: it creates visual unity and clear party identification, but it also means the candidate inherits all of the emotional associations of the color, including any negative ones. A candidate photographed in deep saturated red against a red background may project passion and urgency to some voters and threat and aggression to others, depending on the personal color history and cultural context of the viewer.

The alternative, dressing candidates in neutral, warm, or contrasting colors while maintaining the party palette in background and graphic elements, allows the candidate to carry different emotional associations from the brand itself. This separation can be strategically useful when a candidate's personal appeal needs to reach beyond the party's core color demographic, particularly in multiparty contests where cross-partisan appeal is essential.

**Figure 3: Color Impact on Voter Perception by Age Group and Region**

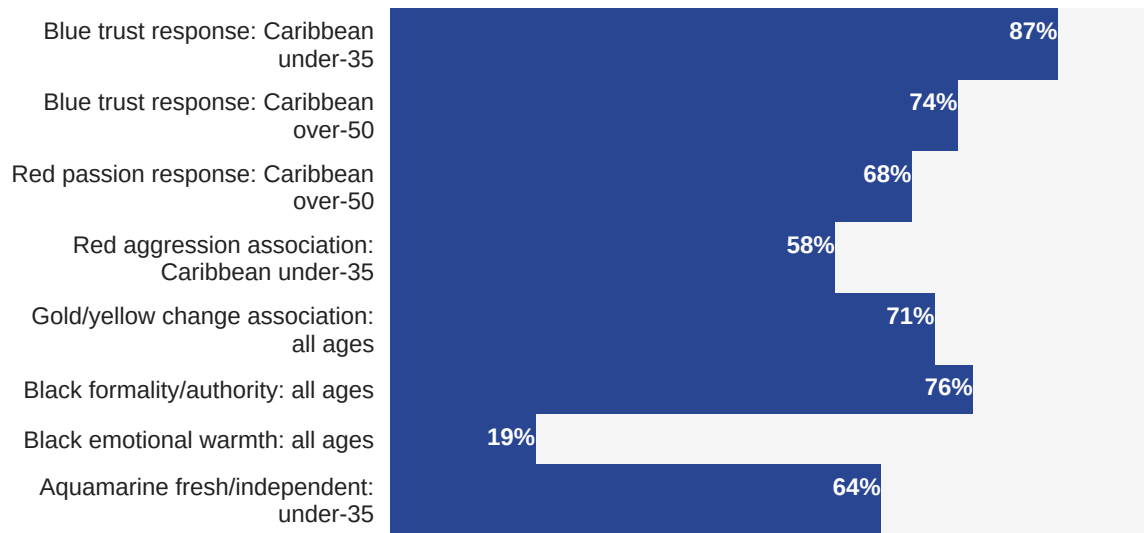


Figure 3: Estimated voter color perception responses in Caribbean contexts by demographic group. Based on Labrecque & Milne (2012), Elliot & Maier (2014), and regional electoral observation data.

## 5. The Caribbean Distinctives: What Global Frameworks Miss

### 5.1 The National Colors Problem

A unique strategic challenge in Caribbean political color design is the use of national flag colors by political parties. When the Bahamian Coalition of Independents adopts black, aquamarine, and gold, the colors of the Bahamian national flag, it is making a patriotic appeal that has symbolic resonance regardless of the psychological properties of those specific colors. The symbolism and the psychology may work in the same direction, or they may work against each other.

In the COI case, black and aquamarine carry different psychological weights in electoral contexts. Aquamarine, as a fresh, distinctive, and emotionally positive color, could carry substantial persuasive power. But subordinating it to black as a background color reverses the psychological logic: the potentially powerful color is made secondary to the emotionally neutral one. The symbolic choice, honoring the national colors, conflicts with the strategic choice, leading with the color most likely to generate positive affect in passive exposure.

This tension between symbolic fidelity and psychological effectiveness is one the Caribbean designers face more frequently than their European counterparts. European parties are less likely to build their identities directly from national flag colors, which gives them more freedom to select colors on strategic grounds. Caribbean parties that tie themselves closely to national colors must find ways to use those colors strategically even when the colors themselves are not optimal from a pure psychology standpoint.

## 5.2 Color as Ethnic Signal

In several Caribbean territories, party color functions as an ethnic community signal in ways that have significant implications for the psychology of color response. When a voter's community has a long history of association with a particular party color, their response to that color activates not just the universal neurological properties of the color but also the full social identity investment of community membership. The color of their party is not just a brand element. It is a symbol of belonging.

This community color identity creates both strategic advantages and strategic constraints. The advantage is deep, emotionally resonant loyalty: voters who associate their community identity with a party color experience the party's visual materials not as external communications but as affirmations of their own identity. The constraint is that it makes cross-community appeal extremely difficult. A party whose color carries strong ethnic community associations may find it nearly impossible to use that color to attract voters from other communities, because those voters bring their own associations to the color that may conflict with the party's intended message.

Casiraghi and colleagues (2023) found that in contexts with strong ethnically or historically constructed party-color associations, color choice is significantly less free than the psychology literature would suggest. Parties in these contexts are often locked into color commitments that made strategic sense when the party was founded but may no longer optimally serve their current electoral goals. Rebranding away from a community-associated color carries social costs that are entirely separate from and potentially much larger than the standard costs of brand evolution.

**Figure 4: Color Strategic Freedom Index by Political Context**

| Context Type          | Color Freedom | Primary Constraint     | Caribbean Example   |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| New party, no history | Very High     | None beyond psychology | COI (Bahamas, 2024) |

| Context Type                  | Color Freedom | Primary Constraint                     | Caribbean Example                    |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Established, no ethnic link   | High          | Existing brand recognition             | Most Western European parties        |
| National flag colors used     | Medium        | Symbolic fidelity expectations         | COI, Trinidad PNM                    |
| Ideological color tradition   | Medium-Low    | International left/right associations  | BLP Barbados (red-left tradition)    |
| Ethnic community color signal | Low           | Community identity investment          | UNC Trinidad, historical PNP Jamaica |
| Decades of incumbency         | Very Low      | Voter expectation and familiarity lock | PLP Bahamas, PNM Trinidad            |

Figure 4: Strategic color freedom by political context type, with Caribbean examples. Higher community and historical investment reduces the designer's freedom to make color choices on psychological grounds alone.

## 6. Implications for Political Design Practice

The research reviewed in this paper generates a set of principles for designers working in electoral and political communication contexts, particularly in the Caribbean and in other post-colonial democratic settings where global color frameworks apply imperfectly.

The first principle is layered analysis. Before making any color recommendation for a political campaign, the designer must assess both the universal psychological properties of the candidate colors and the culturally specific associations those colors carry in the specific electoral context. A color that would generate strong trust associations in one context may carry ethnic or ideological associations in another that override the psychological baseline entirely.

The second principle is ratio management. Color choice and color ratio are separate strategic decisions that must be made in sequence. Once the primary color is fixed, the ratio of primary to secondary to neutral colors determines whether the primary color's associations are amplified, modulated, or contradicted. The goal is a palette system, not a color choice.

The third principle is demographic calibration. The research consistently shows that different age groups respond differently to the same colors in political contexts. Younger voters without deep party color histories respond more to the direct psychological properties of colors: trusting blue, engaging orange, fresh aquamarine. Older voters with established party color histories respond more to the identity associations those colors carry. A campaign targeting both demographics

must either find a color strategy that works across both response patterns or differentiate its color deployment by channel and material type.

The fourth principle is that color works before language and below language, but it does not work alone. The most sophisticated color strategy in electoral history is still just the frame within which a candidate, a message, and a record are presented. Color sets the emotional conditions for trust, but trust ultimately derives from the alignment between what the color promises and what the candidate delivers. The most powerful political color in the world is the one that turns out to be true.

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## 7. Conclusion

Color in politics is a pre-verbal, pre-rational communication system that has been operating in human social life since long before democratic elections were invented. The particular colors a political party chooses, the ratio in which it deploys them, the saturation and brightness with which it renders them, and the cultural context into which it places them: each of these decisions activates documented psychological and neurological responses in voters that begin before any deliberate evaluation occurs.

Understanding these mechanisms at the depth the research supports, from the color-processing pathways of the visual cortex to the chromatic isomorphism patterns of 300 parties across 35 democracies, is not an academic exercise for political designers. It is a professional requirement. The Caribbean context in particular, with its unique combination of post-colonial color traditions, national flag symbolism, and a rapidly changing young electorate, demands a design literacy that goes beyond universal color psychology to encompass the full cultural and historical specificity of each electoral environment.

Power has always had a color. The designers who understand what that color is doing to the human brain, and why, are the ones best equipped to use it responsibly and well.

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