

Black Voting Power

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, March 10, 2004

Black voters can flex their political muscle this year. High unemployment and a down economy have hit minority communities hard. After losing jobs in record numbers, they could go to the polls and fire the President.

That fire-in-the-belly emerged in the Democratic primaries. Blacks turned out for John Kerry, helping catapult him to the top of the party ticket. Kerry won the black vote in every state primary except South Carolina; in some states, like Georgia, he won more black voters than whites. It was the first time in history that blacks chose the presumptive nominee, according to political analyst David Bositis, of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Bositis says Kerry appeals to mainstream blacks because he's a strong supporter of civil rights legislation, he served bravely in the military, and, most importantly, they believe he can beat Bush.

In general elections, the black vote is largely monolithic; nine out of ten vote Democratic. This year, pundits say a majority of blacks will once again vote for the Democrats—and against Bush—on breadbasket issues. Jobs. Economy. Health care. Unemployment for blacks is in double digits. And 26 percent don't have health insurance year-round. The economic gains of the Clinton administration have disappeared, and black Americans are angry, says Bositis. Tax cuts for the wealthy and budget cuts for schools and social services only stoke the fire.

But a high black voter turnout this fall is not a guarantee. A 2002 Bositis poll found that many, particularly younger black voters, are disengaged, disillusioned. A significant number call themselves independent, while a small but growing number of middle class blacks identify as Republican. It's not that blacks are voting Republican says Bositis. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of blacks who voted conservative declined sharply, by about 35 percent. But those who don't identify as closely with the Democratic Party are less likely to vote. The looming problem for Democrats is not voter registration; it's getting people to the polls.

Both parties are courting the black vote. Leaders of the African American community are telling Democrats not to take their vote for granted, while telling Republicans not to ignore it. Marc Morial,

head of the nonpartisan National Urban League, says the black vote is evolving, and an alliance with Republicans is no longer taboo in local campaigns. Morial wants national parties to compete for the minority vote and “talk in plain terms” about the war, the economy, education, health care. He credits John Edwards for being one of the few candidates who reached out to voters about “issues of the heart,” such as poverty and homelessness. Morial says if a campaign can’t inspire the voters, they’ll simply stay home.

Lighting a fire under voter apathy by talking about populist issues is a make or break for Democrats this year. Spotty registration by young and poor blacks could dilute the minority community’s electoral power, so activists like Ron Bell, founder of “Dunk the Vote,” are doing something about it. Bell hosts basketball tournaments in low-income areas where participants learn to vote during game breaks, and he canvasses neighborhoods with volunteers. Bell has been knocking on doors in the poor communities of Massachusetts for about 12 years.

“When I talk to people, they ask, ‘Why should I vote?’ So I say, have you ever been stopped while driving just because you’re black?” Or he might ask them when they lost their job, or whether they have health insurance. That engagement on a hot issue gets people involved, gets them motivated. Bell then tells them where and how to vote. And this year, he’s out with a vengeance. When I caught up with him, he could barely talk after getting out the vote on primary day. But his persistence has paid off. Over the years, minority turnout has increased by 118 to 177 percent in Boston neighborhoods he’s targeted. His challenge is to replicate that nationwide.

Voting itself isn’t fail-safe as demonstrated by the 2000 Florida voting scandal. According to the Washington Post, in some black areas 136 out of every 1000 votes were “spoiled” and went uncounted—a rate three times that in predominantly white precincts. Morial says the issue was shoved to the back burner, leaving blacks without closure, without restitution and bitter. They felt ignored and disenfranchised. In November 2004, they can transform that anger into political activism by following Ron Bell’s example: get mobilized and get to the polls.