

Grassroots Activists Struggling to Motivate Blacks to Vote

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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With Black unemployment rates still stuck in double digits while Whites remain consistently below the national average, economic frustration and suffering in the Black community is making it difficult for grassroots organizers to motivate people to the polls Nov. 6.

“We are in crisis,” says Baltimore Pastor Jamal-Harrison Bryant, whose Empowerment Movement is holding a “Code Red” conference Aug. 15-17 at the Empowerment Temple where he pastors. “In 2008, we were excited to see a Black man running for President. But we were so excited by the prospects of a Black president that we failed to establish a Black agenda.”

Bryant says President Obama is simply “not motivating Black people to go to the polls” and he has found that many who are planning to vote “can’t even articulate why” they will vote for the candidate they’ve chosen.

Blacks turned out for Obama at a record 98 percent four years ago. This time around doesn’t appear so certain as the frustration appears pervasive and Black leaders are struggling to create a sense of urgency.

Lee Saunders, the first Black president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, made it plain before a packed house with hundreds of activists and youths last week at the A. Philip Randolph Institute National Education Conference in Downtown D.C.

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“Sisters and brothers, make no mistake about it. We’ve got to work like hell and re-elect Barack Obama as our President in November,” he said. Saying that Mitt Romney has sent jobs to other countries, exploited tax loopholes while refusing to show his tax returns, and wants to give tax breaks to millionaires, Saunders told the applauding audience, “Sisters and brothers we’ve got to make sure that the only way that Mitt Romney gets into that White House is that he stands in that line with everybody else and he’s on a tour.”

Both young and seasoned grassroots activists interviewed at the conference expressed the uphill battle they face.

“A lot of our young people are actually not real excited about this election. They feel that there were some things that should have changed or should have happened over the last four years that didn’t, so they really don’t feel the need to get out and vote,” says Jessica Brown of Tampa, Fla., national field coordinator for Black Youth Vote, a program for the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation (NCBCP).

She says she tries to inspire her youthful peers by telling them that it’s not just about the presidential election but even trickles down to state and local leaders. “We really try to teach them about what voting is and bring it home literally to their communities.”

But, their frustration links to real life says, William C. Kellibrew, IV, who manages Black Youth Vote as deputy director of NCBCP. “Young people are out of work right now. You can go to any city and find 50 percent unemployment rate or over 40 percent unemployment rate for young people, so it’s a huge issue and they’re looking for jobs at this point. So, who’s going to be creating jobs at this point?”

In Florida, with its infamous history of voter disenfranchisement, African-American activists are being creative in their get out to vote efforts.

Salandra Benton, manager of the Unity Campaign in Florida, says other than jobs, a major concern is the number of convicted felons who have not received the restoration of their voting rights.

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“We’re also encouraging those people who have felonies and cannot vote to take five [registered] people to the polls to vote,” she said.

The Unity Campaign is a partnership between the A. Philip Randolph Institute, an organization of African-American trade unionists, and the NCBCP. Letetia Jackson, of Alabama, manager of the Unity Campaign nationally, says the effort is targeting 14 states where African-Americans can make a specific impact.

“We understand that people had high expectations and there’s still a lot of hurt,” Jackson said. She specifically described Black males who have lost jobs and can’t feed their families; also the loss of Black wealth through the housing foreclosures. “I don’t think the national agenda is talking about the pain that’s being felt in these communities with our voters, our constituencies, and our people that turned out in such large numbers in 2008 and had such high hopes.”

Despite the positives, such as health care reform, there is still much to be done Jackson said. Jackson says the Unity Campaign attempts to motivate people by educating them about the alternatives.

“We talk to them about what’s at stake, about the issues, what the alternatives are, how we have to continue the growth and the changes that we started in 2008. It doesn’t end with just one election and let them know really and truly the alternative is so much worse,” she said

Compounding the voter apathy is the fact that many Black Pastors have withdrawn their support for Obama because of his support for same-sex marriage, Bryant points out.

The Rev. Anthony Evans, president of the National Black Church Initiative, says his organization has taken an informal poll of approximately 1,000 of its members and 23 percent say they will not support President Obama because of his support of gay marriage, the slow growth of jobs in the Black community and various issues pertaining to his use of the military.

“This is clear evidence that the support for our beloved President Barack Obama is beginning to erode among Black churches and Black congregants,” Evans says. “Beyond him changing his

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position on gay marriage I don't see anything that could turn this tide around."

But if activists like Jackson has her way, African-Americans will at least go to the polls: "We have to make people understand that while we haven't gotten everything we needed and everything we wanted, we still have an opportunity to fight and to improve our community. Things are just turning around so in the midst of things starting to turn around for us, we can't change the game. We have to stay the course." {jcomments on}