

Point of View

Black Politics Under Pressure

BY VERNON E.
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Black votes elected a President in 1976, but you would never know that from the neglect shown black interests by the current crop of candidates.

Some just write off the black vote as beyond their reach; others take it for granted, assuming that come November the black vote will be in their pocket.

Both are wrong. In 1980, it looks like the black voter will not be enthusiastically FOR any of the candidates, but chances are strong that the black vote will go AGAINST a candidate perceived as hostile to black interests.

Perhaps an even greater possibility is that black voters will just stay at home come Election Day. That would be



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damaging to the country, since massive abstentions among its largest minority damages the democratic process.

But it would be even more harmful to black interests. The limited clout wielded by blacks on the national level is partially a result of traditionally low

voter turnouts. Even in 1976, half of eligible blacks didn't register to vote. That just invites neglect by both parties.

LOW TURNOUT DISASTROUS

And low black voter turnout would be disastrous on the local level. We're not only electing a President this November, but also governors, congressmen, local officials and the state legislators that will redraw Congressional district lines next year.

The already low black vote declines in non-presidential election years and is one cause of the drastic underrepresentation of blacks in local offices. The visibility of competent, articulate black mayors of some large cities leads many to underestimate the degree of black underrepresentation.

Although blacks are about twelve percent of the population, they account for less than one percent of all elected officials. Further, according to research by the Joint Center for Political Studies, the rate of increase in the number of black elected officials has been declining steadily since 1975.

One factor is low black voter turnout. But a more insidious one is the way many communities structure local governments to dilute the black vote. One common practice is to elect city commissioners, council members and other local officials through at-large elections, instead of by districts. The result is to exclude candidates from positions of power, since the white majority's votes swamp those of even large numbers of minorities.

A case in point is

Mobile, Alabama, which is governed by a three member commission elected at-large. Although blacks comprise over a third of Mobile's population, no black was ever elected to the commission.

SYSTEM DISCRIMINATED

A federal district court said Mobile's at-large election system unconstitutional against the city's blacks. It ordered Mobile to adopt a mayor-city council form of government in which voting by district would assure blacks of council representation.

But last month the U.S. Supreme Court threw that ruling out. The Court said that in the absence of proof of intent to discriminate there was no violation of constitutional rights.

Here again, the Court has taken refuge in the difficult to prove doctrine of intent and the result is to sanction discriminatory effects. The ruling increases the pressure on the limited gains blacks have made in the political arena.

Those pressures will intensify. An expected outcome of the Census is a population decline in traditional black neighborhoods, which raises the danger that some "safe" districts now represented by blacks will be up for grabs after district lines are redrawn.

The first line of defense against present and future dilution of black representation is massive black voter registration and turnout. For blacks, far more is at stake this November than simply choosing among the presidential hopefuls.

EDITORIAL

Greater The Votes, Greater The Power

It is apparent that voter registration and voter education remain paramount toward gaining the power needed in the election process. It is an uphill battle and a long, drawn-out, frustrating experience.

This year, more than ever before, there is a determined effort being made to turn around "the system" and to take positive steps toward exposing the "machine"-- a catalyst which stands in the way of community progress.

A machine, as we know it, is an element of the leadership that inhibits growth and organizes, by design, a political entity that places into office individuals who will accede to their desires rather than those of their constituency. Their choices in office are manipulated as they see fit. The end result, is of course, disastrous for the community. There's chaos and distrust... there's the beginning of a toppling municipality.

Here's an example of how the "machine" could work: The political action committee will make a determination as to whom they want in office. While there may be two good prospects running for office, the committee makes a prior determination as to whom they want in office. The reason could be racial, religious affiliation, economic or "one of the boys."

Politicians in office could, by design, pad the work force with extra, unnecessary workers who they know will place votes in their camp. This method could mushroom through votes from relatives and friends. The committee also could look cautiously at

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CARL ROWAN

NAACP Leader Warns Politicians: Deal With Black Needs

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — Civil rights leader Benjamin Hooks warned politicians Monday that they would be buried in an avalanche of black votes this fall if they do not address the needs of the oppressed and downtrodden in America.

Hooks, executive director of the NAACP, opened the organization's 71st annual convention here with a bang by firing blasts at politicians in general, Ronald Reagan in particular, the "lying" press and bickering blacks.

The shot at Reagan came after it was announced that the likely Republican presidential nominee had rejected an invitation to speak at what

is regarded by some as the most crucial session of this largest of civil rights groups since its founding in 1909.

Hooks said he deplored Reagan's decision to give a week of "play and recreation" higher priority than discussing vital issues with the thousands of blacks who have gathered in riot-scarred Miami. He speculated that Reagan has "written off" the black vote, adding that "it would be a tragedy if that were the case."

Reagan sent Hooks a telegram Monday night saying, "I have not and will not write off the black vote in this campaign."

Reagan said Hooks' invitation to speak had for

some reason never gotten to him and "I simply was not aware of the invitation to speak before the convention until just a half hour ago."

Reagan pledged in his telegram, "to establish policies which will encourage greater capital investment in America's black communities and thereby create more job opportunities for everyone." He said "the Carter administration's economic failures are hurting everyone, and blacks and other minorities the most."

President Jimmy Carter, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Rep. John Anderson (R-Ill.) are scheduled to speak to the convention this week.

Hooks had a stern warning for them and all others seeking office this fall:

"I want to serve notice on the members of Congress, the president and all the candidates running for office, the day when black folk could be placated by empty slogans and rhythmic rhetoric has passed. The day when our votes could be gotten by the reciting of hallucinogenic hymns such as Amazing Grace, has passed. It is not sufficient to speak to our emotions. Today, we are demanding that you speak to our needs.

"I want to warn you that if you do not address the problems of the poor and (See Carl Rowan, page 22)