

Point of View

To Be Equal by John E. Jacob

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

If this November's presidential election follows the patterns of recent national ballots, barely half of all eligible citizens will vote. A major reason is structure barriers that make registration and voting difficult enough to discourage all but the most determined.

Some states purge voter rolls just before an election. Others restrict voter registration hours and require and require personal visits to registration offices, almost always during working hours when most people can't show up.

It doesn't have to be that way. Election officials have to see their role as facilitating citizen participation in the

electoral process, not discouraging it.

Many states have laws that encourage broader participation. Almost half have mail-



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in registration. Others allow state agencies to register citizens that come to them for other services, such as drivers' licenses. And some

deputize community groups to register voters.

This last is an important key to generating citizen participation, but it is too often neglected by local election authorities wary of aggres-

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sive voter outreach programs.

The likelihood that the next president will be chosen by a slim majority of eligible voters questions the legitimacy of our political institutions. President Reagan, for example, made sweeping changes in government policies

without a clear mandate from the people — only about a fourth of eligible voters cast their ballots for him.

So American democracy needs a heavy dose of glasnost in the form of voting reforms that make voting as simple and as convenient as it is in other western democracies.

One big step forward would be universal postcard voter registration, in which every citizen could simply mail in a postcard and automatically be registered to vote.

Another would be to provide resources to community-based groups to encourage citizens to vote. It takes friends and neighbors to get people to the polls and to educate them to their citizen-

ship responsibilities as well as to their own self-interest in voting.

Most of the half of the electorate that doesn't vote is drawn from the poor, minorities and the dispossessed. Traditionally, they've seen politics as a game for the affluent with little in it for them. Many feel hopeless about the future and about the possibility for meaningful change.

And many just don't see the connection between voting and their daily struggle for affordable housing, health care, and jobs.

Jesse Jackson helped break through the barriers of hopelessness and get people excited about this campaign, but the big task now is to transfer that inter-

est into participation in the process that elects candidates at all levels of government.

People need to see that not voting is in itself a form of voting — it's a vote for the status quo, for reduced minority influence, for continued powerlessness.

The media are pretty good at informing citizens about personality conflicts and some of the big issues in a campaign, but they're less good at showing the connections between voting and influencing public policy. Community groups, churches, and neighborhood organizations, have to fill that gap, and work hard between now and November 8 to get every eligible voter registered and voting.

United Church of Christ

Commission for Racial Justice CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

by Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

GET OUT THE VOTE

As the date for the presidential elections. November 8, 1988, draws near, the challenge and the responsibility for voter mobilization, particularly in the African American and in other racial and ethnic communities across the United States, take on a crucial sense of urgency. We need to continue to emphasize the importance of the upcoming elections.

On the issues of domestic

and foreign policy, we have a vested interest in helping to determine the future course of this nation. The saying, "The hands that once picked cotton can now pick the President of the United States" is a true saying. The problem of the lack of voter education and awareness in racial and ethnic communities could be responsible for the perpetuation of the current Reagan-Bush policies. It is for this

reason that we will be giving considerable attention through Civil Rights Journal on the necessity to "get out the vote" on November 8th.

I have just returned from the 18th Annual Legislative Weekend of the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington, D.C. The theme of this largest gathering of African American leadership was "The Struggle Continues: A Look Into the Future." Throughout all of the work-

shops, forums and brain-trusts, there was a common sense of urgency and responsibility that something has to be done politically as well as economically to stop the devastating trends of the Reagan-Bush years against the interest of the African American community.

One publication that was distributed during the Congressional Black Caucus sessions was "The Future of African-Americans to the Year 2000" published by the Congressional Task Force on the Future of African Americans, chaired by Congressman Melvyn M. Dymally (D-Cal.). Dymally in the report stated, "Its most trenchant finding is that if we continue as we have in the past, the American economic, social, and political systems will not adequately meet the needs of African-Americans, and they will not ever share fully in the abundance of this land. To overcome this dreadful potential future, dramatic new policies will have to be undertaken,

sidetracked to such peripheral "issues" as patriotism, pollution, the Pledge of Allegiance, and Dan Quayle's military service. Mudslinging, carefully stage-managed photo opportunities and catchy TV sound bites have eclipsed the real issues of concern to the American people, and have reduced the campaign to little more than atmospheric.

The key issue facing the American people, black and white, is the economy or, more specifically, how to improve this nation's economic performance so that all citizens can benefit.

While some economic statistics may appear rosy, it is instructive to look at today's economy in comparative terms. Today's inflation may appear low in relation to the late 1970s, but it is still twice as high as the average of the years 1947-1967. In 1987, some experts gloated that the unemployment rate fell to 6.1 percent, but between 1947 and 1973 there were only two years in which the unemployment rate reached the 1987 level. Moreover, between 1980 and 1987 the rate of growth of productivity was half as great as between 1947 and 1973.

Nor is this all. Hourly earnings, adjusted for inflation, have dropped 4.5 percent since 1980, a direct result of

sluggish productivity, residual inflation from the 1970s, and a growth in the workforce due to baby boom demographics. Real family income has grown slowly since 1973, while the number of families living at the poverty rate has edged upwards.

Even more distressing is that the proportion of blacks in poverty rose from 31.1 percent in 1986 by a full two points to 33.1 percent in 1987; Hispanics below the poverty line rose from 27.3 to 28.2. The poverty rates for the population as a whole dropped slightly from 13.6 to 13.5 percent. In the last eight years, black median income has declined, while the income gap between blacks and whites has increased. Moreover, 43 percent of all black children under 18 are officially classified as poor, and the black unemployment rate is 15 percent.

Another disturbing trend is the widening gap between rich and poor, and the shift of wealth from young adults to older Americans. Traditionally, succeeding generations do better than their

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Japanese Liberal Democratic Leader

Michio Watanabe Says:

AMERICAN BLACKS ARE DEAD BEATS!

DO YOU AGREE? HAVE YOU BOUGHT A
JAPANESE PRODUCT, LATELY!