

COMMENTARY

Black Voters not showing paranoia over Florida vote

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The polls in Florida had barely closed when Black leaders immediately screamed foul. They charged that Blacks were harassed and intimidated by police in some counties, and were turned away by registrars who claimed a shortage of ballots in other counties.

Then there is the weird butterfly ballot that turned up in some precincts in the heavily Black and Jewish, precincts of West Palm Beach. This has ignited the greatest furor. Jesse Jackson Sr. has virtually led round the clock protest demonstrations over alleged voting violations.

NAACP President Kweisi Mfume produced a parade of angry Black witnesses who swore that they were harassed by registrars or denied ballots. Mfume promptly demanded that U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno investigate the charges. Republicans

dismiss Black accusations of vote irregularities as another self-serving ruse by the Democrats to tip the vote back to Gore.

They are right and wrong. Jackson and Mfume are fervent Gore supporters, and so are the overwhelming majority of Black voters in Florida. They voted nearly 10-1 for him. They are in stark terror that Bush is the barbarian at the gate who will obliterate civil rights protections and further torpedo social programs. They've made it a feverish life and death struggle to insure that Florida and the presidency go to Gore.

But for the Republicans to derisively wave off Black fears that they were bamboozled at the voting booths and call it paranoia or ignore the terrible history of the South's century long effort to disenfranchise Black voters.

In the decade after the Civil War, Blacks voted in far greater numbers in the

South than Whites. But that quickly changed. With the withdrawal of federal troops and the collapse of Reconstruction, the White South unleashed a naked reign of terror to drive Blacks from the polls. Southern states attempted to finish the job with a wave of literacy tests, poll taxes, informal voting codes, and whites-only primaries. By 1900, Blacks had virtually disappeared from the voting rolls in the South for the next half-century.

As late as 1948, a Gallup Poll found that 8 million Blacks eligible to vote in the South were unregistered. The Supreme Court's outlawing of the all-White Democratic Texas primary in 1944, and the strong recommendation by President Harry Truman in 1947 that Congress increase Black voter protections only marginally increased the Black registration in the South.

The Eisenhower administration's 1957 and

1960 civil rights bills contained tepid provisions that permitted the Justice Department to sue districts that denied Blacks to vote. But the White House feared a ferocious Southern backlash to the law and authorized only four lawsuits under the provisions of the act in the entire South.

The first real breakthrough on Black voting came in 1965. President Lyndon Johnson stoked national anger and revulsion over the bloody rampage by Alabama state troopers against civil rights marchers at Selma to prod Congress to take action on his long stalled voting rights bill. But even with sentiment in favor of the bill's passage getting the bill passed was not a slam-dunk.

The major opponents to the bill weren't rabid racist Southern Democrats but Northern Republicans. House Republicans, led by then minority leader Gerald Ford, proposed four horrible pro-

visions aimed at gutting the bill. Their provisions would not outlaw the poll tax, and literacy tests, authorized the attorney general to bring suit only after a set number of complaints of voting violations had been received, and eliminated the provision requiring the federal courts to approve all voting laws passed by recalcitrant Southern states.

Congress did the right and sensible thing and promptly dumped the Republican provisions, passing the bill with full enforcement provisions intact.

But this did not end the battle to strengthen Black voting rights. White Southern Democrats and Republicans launched a major counter campaign to bolster White voter registration. The Republicans, long moribund in the South, sniffed a huge opportunity to exploit White fears over Black political domination and turn the South into a GOP bastion.

Republican presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and the elder Bush carefully crafted and fine-tuned the Republican's Southern strategy. It was simple: say and do as little as possible about Black rights, while actively courting White voters.

The Southern strategy has worked so magnificently that the strategy has become the big gun in the GOP's political arsenal. It certainly paid big dividends for George W. Bush, who swept nearly all of the states of the old Confederacy.

And if he makes the sweep complete by bagging Florida it will likely put him in the White House, Black voters can't and dare not forget this sordid history of voting betrayal and neglect.

And this is why they passionately believe that they were once again victimized at the voting booth in Florida.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the President of the National Alliance for Positive Action.

Extended debate over Presidency keeps the importance of voting in public eye

Special to Sentinel-Voice

America's most powerful civics lesson since the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s continues; and we're still not sure who will take the oath of office on Inauguration Day.

It has driven some pundits and ordinary Americans to express anger or sadness over the heated bickering and maneuvering, and, why even posturing, of the partisans for the Gore and the Bush tickets. These folks have declared the lack of "statesmanship" being exhibited, and disparaged the predominance of "politicians" and "lawyers" in the doings.

I find such criticism more than a little strange given that what is at issue is, not the presidency of a high school senior class, but who gets to occupy the most powerful political office of the most powerful nation on the planet. I'm not surprised there's a huge amount of bickering and maneuvering because the stakes are huge. As long as the politicians and lawyers, and everyone else keep it clean, and pursue their remedies through the legal system — well isn't that what the legal system is for?

It seems to me that these critics have got the reality of the past confused with the

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price
President
National Urban League



old Hollywood film versions of the country's origin, in which a group of photogenic white men in wigs, ruffled blouses, knee breeches and buckled shoes sat calmly in a great hall giving wonderful speeches about liberty and democracy while fashioning the Constitution.

In fact, of course, the drafting of America's founding documents was a good deal more complex — with plenty of bickering and maneuvering in evidence in their formation of a significantly imperfect democracy.

Indeed, I'm appropriately thankful for the extended debate over who gets the Presidency because it kept the importance of voting in the public eye. It's impressed upon many people, apparently, that every vote does count and that voting is something that ought not be taken for granted.

That sentiment has come through loud and clear in the news reporting on the mood of the country, and it's been confirmed by a new poll by ABCNEWS.com.

The survey, conducted the week of Nov. 15, found that two-thirds of those surveyed said that the "post-election" battle for the White House has made them more likely, not less, to vote in the 2004 presidential election. This includes 71 percent of the voting-eligible already registered, and, significantly, 51 percent of those not now registered. Overall, 54 percent say they're much more likely to vote.

By contrast, only 16 percent said the controversy has made them less likely to vote four years from now.

That could also mean that the former group of Americans — those who say they're

(See Voting, Page 14)

Electoral College needs reform

Rep. James E. Clyburn, D-S.C.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In light of the Presidential election debacle, I believe it is time for our country to reconsider how the highest office in the land is won. Many political observers are calling for the end of the Electoral College. I think that is a bad idea. However, I do believe the current system must be redesigned to reflect the modern complexity of our nation.

For a long time, I have advocated changing our entire election method. My position has always been that winner-take-all elections trample on the variety of voices in our diverse country. Winner-take-all elections by their very nature means that the highest vote getter wins, even if the margin of victory is only one vote.

The founding fathers were concerned about this scenario significantly enough to discount basing a presidential election solely on the popular vote. Instead, they decided to implement an Electoral College method, which uses each state's number of U.S. House and Senate members to determine the number of ballots each state casts in the Electoral College. However, winner-take-all is still at play here. Whoever wins the popular vote in the state, in turn gets all of its Electoral College votes. And that is true whether or not the highest popular vote getter wins by a margin of one vote or one million votes. That to me is the crux of the problem.

There are two states that have made an exception to this rule — Maine and Nebraska. The legislatures in these states have determined that electors will be apportioned based on who wins each Congressional district in the state. To me, this is a logical solution.

Let me explain how this scenario would work in South Carolina. We have 8 electoral votes because we have 6 House seats in addition to our 2 Senate seats. Since the Senate seats are elected statewide, those two electoral votes should be cast for the Presidential candidate who won the popular vote in South Carolina. Using this year's presidential campaign as an example, Texas Gov. George W. Bush would receive those two votes. Then presidential votes would have to be examined by Congressional districts. I am certain, even without having the exact numbers, that Vice President Al Gore won the 6th Congressional District. Therefore, he would receive at least one electoral vote from South Carolina.

Using this method of selecting electors, Florida would not have become the winner-take-all, make-or-break state in this year's presidential election. A few hundred votes would not have been the difference between receiving all or none of its 25 electoral votes. Instead, 23 of those 25 votes would be divided up based on the outcome in each congressional district.

Having said that, I can't say for sure who would have won the 2000 Presidential campaign under this scenario. I have not seen the break down of the race by congressional districts. Consequently, I am not making this argument because it may have resulted in a Gore victory. Rather this scenario represents the fairest reform of the Electoral College while holding true to the founding fathers' desire to avoid electing the president by popular vote.

I admit that such proposals have been introduced in Congress and failed. It is unlikely with such divided government as

(See Electoral College, Page 15)