

Mixed bag on Blacks in White districts

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Having gained control over most predominantly Black political districts, an increasing number of African-Americans are campaigning to represent majority White districts. While some view that trend as progress, others worry that the Black community may lose clout in the process.

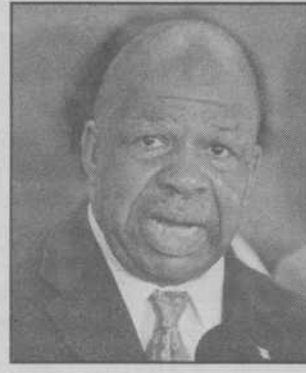
"As districts begin to reflect a broader, multicultural, multiethnic orientation, the leadership, in order to get elected, begins to reflect both political realities. And there are consequences," said U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.). "The consequences include less emphasis on programs that directly or proportionately affect African-Americans. We start talking about programs that affect all Americans. I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad idea because it requires leadership to talk about issues that reflect all Americans. But Black folk have got some real needs out here that need to

be addressed."

Many of those needs were issues discussed during last week's Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference: poverty heads the list because 58 percent of African-American children live in poverty; Black unemployment, which currently hovers around double digits; and crime that is still dogging Black communities.

"I do believe that when you've got African-Americans running [for elected office], they bring a certain level of sensitivity, not only to African-American issues, but as a whole," said Congressman Elijah Cummings (D-Md.).

"When you look at the Congressional Black Caucus, when the Caucus has spoken out on C-SPAN, 95 percent of the people who call us are White; they weren't Black people. The reason why I think that is because African-Americans basically tell it like it is, give the basics, think practical, act practical and speak practical. And, because African-Americans



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have been through so much struggle in their lives, it gives them more or less a passport to help other people, and I think that's what happens. And I think it's a wonderful thing," Cummings said.

Cummings credits U.S. Sen. Barack Obama — currently the only Black Senator and only one of five Blacks who have served in the Senate — for inspiring an increasing number of African-American Republicans and Democrats running statewide or in districts dominated by Whites. He credits Obama for people saying, "If he can do it, I can do it." Congressman Harold

Ford (D-Tenn.) was among the first to congratulate Obama after he rendered his powerful speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. It apparently rubbed off. Ford, a self-proclaimed moderate "Blue Dog" Democrat, who earned a C on the last NAACP Legislative Report Card, has left his safe House seat, previously held by his father, to run for a Senate seat.

In Massachusetts, Black Democrat Deval Patrick battled in a three-way neck-in-neck primary race for governor. The state's election is next week.

In recent polls, Ford, who

won the Democratic Primary was only slightly trailing his Republican opponent Bob Corker by less than 5 percentage points.

In Ohio, Republican J. Kenneth Blackwell and in Pennsylvania, Republican Lynn Swann are running for governor in the general election Nov. 7.

Both are trying to duplicate the statewide success of L. Douglas Wilder, the nation's first and only elected African-American governor in 1989. Wilder won Virginia's top spot with less than 2 percent of the vote. Virginia is 18 percent Black.

Many Black ministers and Black General Assembly members roundly criticized Wilder for his perceived insensitivity to such key issues as the death penalty.

Just like Whites, Black politicians are diverse in their thinking, says CBC Chairman Mel Watt (D-N.C.).

"It will vary from candidate to candidate and from situation to situation. It is clear that representative government is about represent-

ing people. And the broader and more diverse the people are that you are seeking to represent, the more you have to cater to a different constituency. That's what representative government is all about. We've had Black representatives that represented majority White constituencies for a long time. My congressional district, for example, is only 35 to 40 percent African-American."

But, a predominately White constituency should not absolve any politician from doing what is just, said Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas).

"I don't think that the fact that your constituency is diverse should limit you from pressing the issues that really should be corrected based upon America's history," said Lee, who represents the 40 percent Black, more than 35 percent Hispanic and approximately 20 percent White 18th District.

"What it really does say is that African-Americans are broad-based, they are
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Life

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people live their lives," explained Murray, who reported initial results of his government-funded study in the online science journal PLoS Medicine.

Consider: The longest-living Whites weren't the relatively wealthy, which Murray calls "Middle America." They're edged out by low-income residents of the rural Northern Plains states, where the men tend to reach age 76 and the women 82.

Yet, low-income Whites in Appalachia and the Mississippi Valley die four years sooner than their Northern neighbors.

He cites American Indians as another example. Those who don't live on or near reservations in the West have life expectancies similar to Whites'.

"If it's your family involved, these are not small differences in lifespan," Murray said. "Yet that sense of alarm isn't there in the public."

"If I were living in parts of the country with those sorts of life expectancies, I would want... to be asking my local officials or state officials or my congressman, 'Why is this?'"

This more precise measure of health disparities will

allow federal officials to better target efforts to battle inequalities, said Dr. Wayne Giles of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which helped fund Murray's work.

The CDC has some county-targeted programs — like one that has cut in half diabetes-caused amputations among Black men in Charleston, S.C., since 1999, largely by encouraging physical activity — and the new study argues for more, he said.

"It's not just telling people to be active or not to smoke," Giles said. "We need to create the environment which assists people in achieving a healthy lifestyle."

The study also highlights that the complicated tapestry of local and cultural customs may be more important than income in driving health disparities, said Richard Suzman of the National Institute on Aging, which co-funded the research.

"It's not just low income," Suzman said. "It's what people eat, it's how they behave, or simply what's available in supermarkets."

Murray analyzed mortality data between 1982 and 2001 by county, race, gender and income. He found some distinct groupings that he

named the "eight Americas"

—Asian-Americans, average per capita income of \$21,566, have a life expectancy of 84.9 years.

—Northland low-income rural Whites, \$17,758, 79 years.

—Middle America (mostly White), \$24,640, 77.9 years.

—Low-income Whites in Appalachia, Mississippi Valley, \$16,390, 75 years.

—Western American Indians, \$10,029, 72.7 years.

—Black Middle America, \$15,412, 72.9 years.

—Southern low-income rural Blacks, \$10,463, 71.2 years.

—High-risk urban Blacks, \$14,800, 71.1 years.

Longevity disparities were most pronounced in young and middle-aged adults. A 15-year-old urban Black male was 3.8 times as likely to die before the age of 60 as an Asian-American male, for example.

That's key, Murray said, because this age group is left out of many government health programs that focus largely on children and the elderly.

Moreover, the longevity gaps have stayed about the same for 20 years despite increasing national efforts to eliminate obvious racial and

ethnic health disparities, he found.

Murray was surprised to find that lack of health insurance explained only a small portion of those gaps.

Instead, differences in alcohol and tobacco use, blood pressure, cholesterol and obesity seemed to drive death rates.

Most important, he said, will be pinpointing geographically defined factors — such as shared ancestry, dietary customs, local industry, what regions are more or less prone to physical activity — that in turn influence those health risks.

For example, scientists

have long thought that the Asian longevity advantage would disappear once immigrant families adopted higher-fat Western diets. Murray's study is the first to closely examine second-generation Asian-Americans, and found their advantage persists.

The range of ages in the 25 counties with the highest and lowest life expectancy, according to the published study in the online science journal, is from five counties in Colorado with the highest rate at 81.3 years to 80.8 years in two other counties in that state.

Lowest life expectancy, at

66.6 years, is found in six South Dakota counties, with the range extending to only months above 71 years, as was found in Martin, S.C. (71.1) and four counties in Mississippi — Tunica, Tallahatchie and Quitman (71.2 all).

Ranked by state, according to a study, life expectancy ranged from the highest — Hawaii (80), Minnesota (78.8) and Utah (78.7) — to the three worst ranked states — Alabama (74.4), Louisiana (74.2) and Mississippi (73.6).

Nevada is among the bottom-ranked states at 39 with a life expectancy of 75.8.

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