

African-American Political Power: The Need to Transform Votes into a Revolutionary Program

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Global Research, April 05, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

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With the last two months of primaries and caucuses in approximately twenty states, the role of African Americans is pivotal.

Both candidates for the Democratic nomination, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders have made special appeals to win over the African American electorate.

This process goes back at least to 1960, when a re-emergent Black electorate swung its support to Democratic candidate Senator John F. Kennedy in a significant move that landed him in the White House. Nonetheless, numerous militants from the period such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael criticized the Kennedy administration for its failure to protect Civil Rights workers as well as navigate legislation through Congress that would protect the social and political rights of this nationally oppressed group.

On August 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law by the-then President Lyndon B. Johnson. The bill was the product of the escalating struggle of the African American people during the mid-1960s demanding full equality and the right to self-determination.

Restrictions on Voting Rights Reinstated by Supreme Court

Nearly five decades later on June 25, 2013, the United States Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling in the case of *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder*, struck down the enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act. This decision eviscerated the authority of the Justice Department to monitor and intervene when issues related to ballot access and legislative representation is involved.

The recently-deceased Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia during the legal arguments surrounding the decision remarked that such a bill in the modern period represented some form of “racial privilege” for African Americans. This statement was made at a time when the impact of the Great Recession had devastated African Americans in the areas of home foreclosures, job losses, declining income and household wealth.

An article in the New York Times on the decision said the ruling “effectively struck down the heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by a 5-to-4 vote, freeing nine states, mostly in the South, to change their election laws without advance federal approval.” This same report suggested that “At the core of the disagreement was whether racial minorities continued to face barriers to voting in states with a history of discrimination.” (June 25, 2013)

In a quote from conservative Justice John G. Roberts speaking for the majority in relationship

to the decision, he said “Our country has changed. While any racial discrimination in voting is too much, Congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions.”

Laws instituted by various states to enhance barriers to ballot access were vindicated by the ruling as in the state of Texas. Authorities in Texas “announced shortly after the decision that a voter identification law that had been blocked would go into effect immediately, and that redistricting maps there would no longer need federal approval.” (NYT, June 25)

These and other measures such as the denial of ballot access for those having criminal records, disqualifies approximately 25 percent of African American voters in Florida. Overall within this Southern state some 1.3 million people were missing on the voters’ rolls at the time of the primary elections which were held on March 15.

Mass Struggle Escalates in Response to Right-wing Offensive

Under the administration of President Barack Obama no concrete measures were ever initiated to address these concerns. Three consecutive elections held in 2010, 2012 and 2014 witnessed the transformation of the Democrats in Congress from a majority to a minority as the traditional base of the party lacked inspiration for maintaining the status-quo.

The absence of an effective political alternative both within and outside of Congress resulted in the deepening of a right-wing political agenda that has enhanced the capacity of the capitalist class to dominate the workers and oppressed generally. State repression by the police and intelligence agencies reinforces the system of exploitation with impunity.

Nearly all of the mass demonstrations and rebellions since 2012 have been in response to the cop and vigilante killings of African Americans and Latinos. These protests and acts of property destruction has prompted the stark display of the militarization at all levels of law-enforcement which has been supplied with automatic weapons, armored vehicles, tanks, chemicals, batons and sound devices by the federal government which are designed to repress and disperse crowds.

Shifting Political Attitudes in 2016

New polls indicate that the Sanders campaign has gained significant support within the African American community in the Midwest and West coasts. One recent poll indicated that within a period of two months, Sanders now leads Clinton among African American voters in Wisconsin prior to the April 5 primary.

According to a March 31 article published by the Huffington Post, it notes that “On February 27th, Hillary Clinton led Bernie Sanders among African-American voters by 52 points. By March 26th, she led Sanders among African-Americans by just nine points. And today, Public Policy Polling, a widely respected polling organization, released a poll showing that Sanders leads Clinton among African-American voters in Wisconsin by 11 points.”

This same report suggests “In short, the Clinton campaign is in the midst of an historic collapse — much of it due to the unraveling of support for Clinton among nonwhite voters — and the national media has yet to take any notice.” Primary elections in the next few weeks will prove or disprove these assertions.

At any rate there is a degree of desperation in the Clinton campaign particularly in reference to the outcome of the Wisconsin primary. Clinton held campaign rallies in African-American neighborhoods in Milwaukee during the last week of March.

In two major events, U.S. Representative Gwen Moore, Wisconsin's sole African American member in the House stood next to Clinton on stage. Moore welcomed Clinton at a Boys and Girls Club by claiming that the former New York senator and first lady had helped African-American youth in South Carolina while working for the Children's Defense Fund. (WPR.org, March 31)

This same trend was illustrated in Michigan during early March and was reflected in the questionable close margins of victory by Clinton in Illinois and Missouri along with the overall lack of enthusiasm for the former Secretary of State's second presidential campaign.

The Need for Independent Political Action

What do African Americans have to gain from their continued support for centrist Democratic candidates in light of the history of the 1990s under Clinton and the last eight years of the Obama administration? Joblessness, poverty, mass incarceration, police terrorism and institutional racism remain as structural barriers to socio-economic advancement and political empowerment.

The apparent shift in outlook toward the Sanders campaign illustrates the discontent within numerous Democratic Party constituencies, which African Americans are an indispensable element. Clinton's reliance on elected officials and party organizational structures has not been nearly enough to sustain a series of victories in the South and other areas during the early phase of the campaign.

Questions are being raised within the electorate over the role of the "super delegate" process where committed forces, most of whom representing the party bosses, maintain the capacity to override electoral losses suffered by Clinton in several key states including Michigan, Alaska, Hawaii and New Hampshire. This will become a critical debate in light of several polls that show Sanders running a much stronger campaign against Republican frontrunner Donald Trump in the general elections in November.

These shifts in political views must lead towards greater political independence during the primary process, the national elections and beyond. Ultimately, African Americans, the nationally oppressed from other communities and the working class in general must break with the Democratic Party to establish their own organization that will speak in their name fighting for a program of total liberation and genuine socialist construction.

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