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A Historic Moment: Black Voters and the 1992 Presidential Race

by
Clarence Lusane

November 2, 1991, may well be remembered as a watershed date in the unique and quixotic 1992 presidential race. On that day, stating that he would “not seek the nomination for the Democratic Party,”¹ Jesse Jackson backed out of the presidential campaign spotlight and started a chain reaction that has put the black vote in perhaps its least influential position since before 1984.

Extremely low black voter turnout was one of the most significant trends of the 1992 primaries. In the Democratic contests, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton won an impressive percentage of black votes, about 70 percent. However, those votes were garnered in the context of the smallest black voter turnout for a presidential primary in a decade.

In key states, particularly in the South, black voter turnout in the 1992 primaries was embarrassingly depressed. Clinton won less than half of the votes that Jackson received in 1988 in Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. Jackson won more than 1.8 million votes in those states while Clinton managed to win less than 860,000. In 1988, 113,286 blacks voted for Jackson in the Tennessee primary; in 1992, Clinton won only 35,086 black votes.

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In Louisiana, Jackson’s black vote was 245,784 compared to Clinton’s 85,951 in 1992. In 1988, Jackson won 91 percent and 88 percent of the black vote in Illinois and Maryland, respectfully. Clinton’s black vote in those two states, in a less crowded field, was only 70 percent and 49 percent, respectfully. Overall, Clinton averaged between 49 percent and 90 percent of the black vote during the primary, while in 1988, Jackson averaged between 88 percent and 95 percent of the black vote.²

According to exit polls conducted during the last primaries in late May and early June, black voter dissatisfaction with Clinton had increased. *USA Today* reported that Clinton’s appeal to black voters had fallen to about 50 percent.³ Meanwhile, Clinton’s hold on black voters was being challenged by the campaign of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot. In California, Perot was attracting support from about 18 percent of blacks across



the state, according to *USA Today*.⁴ In Los Angeles, 22 percent of the blacks who voted in the primary voiced support for Perot. Nationwide, according to a CBS News poll, Perot was winning at least 12 percent of the black vote.⁵

However, when the primary season came to an end in June, Clinton had secured more Democratic primary victories than any candidate since Lyndon Johnson.⁶ Having vanquished all comers, there was little question that Clinton was solidly in control of the nomination. In addition, President Bush’s ratings were at an all-time low for a sitting president, about 33–35 percent.⁷ In any other presidential election year, the Democratic nominee’s camp would be in a state of unabridged celebration. As it turned out, however, it was not the expected challengers who were the problem, but the unanticipated, and then underestimated, outsider who changed the overall picture of the race.

By the end of June, poll after poll showed Perot leading Bush with Clinton generally coming in third.⁸ It became clear that electorate animosity was aimed not only at the White House, but also Congress and the Democratic party. In addition, Clinton’s early primary scandals (questions concerning adultery, draft dodging, and marijuana smoking) had severely damaging effects on his campaign and led many to believe that he was headed towards defeat.

Politically skittish about the perception of being held hostage by the so-called special interest groups, blacks and organized labor, and, more often than not, seeking to keep his distance from Jesse Jackson, Clinton’s campaign (and most of the rest of the Democratic party leadership) carried out a strategy that sought to win white, mainly suburban, mostly middle-class votes. This group of voters is popularly known as the Reagan

Democrats because they voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, and, to a lesser degree, for George Bush in 1988. In selecting Clinton, a moderate Democrat who criticized traditional Democratic social programs, Democratic party conservatives hoped to send a signal that it was time for the Reagan Democrats to come home.

Black Voters' Discontent

Clinton's troubles with the black vote can be accounted for in a number of ways. First, after two presidential elections in which Jackson ran strong in the primaries, a large number of blacks were not motivated to vote for a white candidate. When Jackson declined to run and Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder left the race early, many blacks concluded that the remaining candidates, all of whom were white, had few ties to black voters and had expressed little interest in black community concerns.

Second, Clinton's positions on many issues do not sit well with many black political activists. His positions supporting the death penalty, calling for welfare reform, proposing prison work camps, and pledging tax breaks for the "middle class"—widely interpreted to mean middle-class whites—make many black activists wary.

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His incessant call to "save the middle class," led some blacks to initially support Jerry Brown or Tom Harkin in the early days of the primary season. Clinton's plea for racial harmony was offset by his unwillingness to address forthrightly concerns expressed by black voters. While Jackson in his campaigns highlighted the breadth of interests expressed by the black community, including South Africa, Haiti, affirmative action, funding for social programs, and aid to the inner cities, Clinton only raised these issues in a very limited way and, generally, only with black audiences.

Third, Clinton's public spats with Jackson also alienated him from many blacks. At one point, when he was erroneously informed that Jackson had endorsed another candidate, Clinton lost his cool and let loose an emotional outburst that was captured on videotape, shrieking that what Jackson did was "... an outrage. A dirty, double-crossing, back-stabbing thing to do. For him to do this, for me to hear this on a television program is an act of absolute dishonor."⁹ Clinton also snubbed Jackson by not inviting him to speak before a meeting of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the organization of conservative Democrats over which Clinton once presided.

In early June, in a gesture that was meant to ease the strained relations between the two, Jackson invited Clinton to speak before a gathering of the National Rainbow Coalition, the organization headed by Jackson.

Clinton used the opportunity to sharply criticize Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition for having invited rap singer Sister Souljah to speak at the conference the previous night. Clinton berated conference organizers for inviting the singer after the *Washington Post* reported that she had called for a week of killing whites following the Los Angeles rebellions, remarks she says were taken out-of-context.¹⁰

It is broadly believed that Clinton's attack on Sister Souljah was a calculated political tactic engineered by his campaign to demonstrate his willingness to challenge Jackson and other constituencies viewed by many whites as Democratic special interests. To a great degree, Clinton's gamble paid off. He won support from moderate and liberal white columnists,¹¹ the *New York Times* editorial page,¹² and certain black elected officials including Cleveland Mayor Michael White and Representative Mike Espy (D-MS).

Jackson and many of his supporters responded angrily to Clinton's verbal attack on Souljah and argued that millions of black voters were being turned off by these kind of tactics and insults.¹³ Ron Walters, chairman of Howard University's Political Science Department, wrote that "this incident will, no doubt, deepen the cynicism in the black community with respect to the current election and about Clinton's candidacy in particular."¹⁴

Black Votes vs. White Votes

Most important, however, is the belief of a number of black political experts that Clinton has little chance of winning if there is a depressed black voter turnout. In the last three presidential elections, the Democratic party has lost about two-thirds of the white vote.¹⁵ Of the three elections won by the Democratic party since 1960—John Kennedy, 1960; Lyndon Johnson, 1964; and Jimmy Carter, 1976—the black vote has been pivotal in two, in 1960 and 1976. In 1960, the black vote was critical in fifteen states that totaled 209 electoral votes for Kennedy, more than two-thirds of the total he needed to win.¹⁶ Nationwide, Kennedy won 70 percent of the black vote.¹⁷ In 1976, southerner Carter won only 45 percent of the white vote in the South, but won more than 90 percent of the black vote.¹⁸

It has been argued that if Democratic nominees Walter Mondale in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988 had aggressively registered and turned out traditional Democratic constituencies, particularly in the black community, they may have won. Dukakis won 86–90 percent of the black vote, but only 41–44 percent of the white vote.¹⁹ Clinton's chances of winning without a massive black turnout, while not impossible, is still highly questionable.

Clinton's campaign strategy of going after the white suburban vote, however, is one of desperation. Even with a strong black voter turnout, Clinton can not win without getting close to half or more of the white vote, something the Democrats have not done in a presidential

election since 1964. The inability to win at least half of the white vote has meant that, in recent presidential elections, the Democrats have lost in every southern state despite winning close to 90 percent of the black vote. In one poll taken at the end of May, Clinton was only winning about 20 percent of the white vote.²⁰

For the Democrats, as with this year's black vote, there was a sharp decline in the white vote during the 1992 primaries. In Mississippi and New Jersey, for example, white voter turnout for the Democrats fell sharply from 1988 levels. In Mississippi, white voter turnout dropped 44 percent and in New Jersey, it fell 41

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percent. Dramatic white voter decline has also existed in states that will be critical to a Democratic victory in November, including California (11 percent), Florida (12 percent), and New York (28 percent).²¹

To win back the white vote, the Clinton campaign has elaborated a strategy that targets the suburban vote where about half of the electorate is located. Rather than focus on the South or on urban areas, this strategy is aimed at such predominantly suburban states as California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut, among others.²²

Within the framework of the suburban strategy, the impact of the black vote is greatly diminished. The southern states, where over half of the black vote is located, are written off, for the most part. With Clinton and his vice-presidential choice, Senator Al Gore of Tennessee, on the ticket, it is very possible that the Democrats will win in Arkansas and Tennessee. However, they are given a slim chance of winning in other southern states, even with a high black voter turnout. The Clinton-Gore ticket, therefore, has placed top priority on targeted suburban areas in the Midwest, the West Coast, and Eastern Seaboard—regions where the black vote is minimal.

In the days immediately following the Democratic National Convention, this strategy appeared to have a tremendous appeal. In a *USA Today*-CNN poll, Clinton had bounced back from a preconvention rating of about 25 percent to 53 percent only three days after the convention.²³ Clinton's distancing himself from Jackson and his image as a solid moderate as a result of the convention contributed to his surge.

Black Vote Potential

Still, the black community has the ability to significantly impact the election. Clinton could win in a close election if he is the beneficiary of a strong, united black voter turnout. A depressed black voter turnout would probably nullify black voter impact, but a united black vote would be a highly attractive prize. Clinton has

shown to some degree that he wants that block of votes and has toned down his rhetoric concerning a tax cut for the (white) middle class.

Perot has done precious little outreach to communities of color. In fact, his remarks concerning gays, where he stated that he would not select a gay person to be in his cabinet and added that he would not "just limit it to that category," sent an alarming warning signal to many blacks about his prejudices.²⁴ Perot further alienated himself from blacks when he referred to them as "you people" in a major speech before the NAACP national convention. African Americans have other reasons to fear Perot. His drug war campaign in Texas called for the cordoning off of black and Hispanic communities, to the enduring ire of local black leaders, and his intervention also led to the weakening of the hard-won Dallas Police Citizens Review Board.²⁵

Clinton was undoubtedly puzzled and surprised by earlier polls showing that a significant number of blacks planned to vote for Perot. Perot won the support of New York's influential Reverend Calvin Butts and the former football great, O.J. Simpson. Rumors were even circulating that Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder was at one time being considered as a vice-presidential choice by the Perot camp.

It remains to be seen if the Democrats will find a way to inspire a large and supportive black voter turnout in November. Clinton's selection of issues, the Democratic party's treatment of Jackson, the strategies employed by Clinton's black supporters, the actions of Jackson, and now the Perot candidacy will determine the nature of the black vote and, perhaps, the outcome of the presidential race itself.

Notes

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³Richard Benedetto, "Perot Attracts Support From Swing Voters," *USA Today*, 17 June 1992.

⁴Ron Walters, "A Breakthrough Among Blacks?," *USA Today*, 9 June 1992.

⁵Richard Berke, "Some Gaps Emerge in Perot's Appeal," *New York Times*, 10 June 1992.

⁶Jonathan Alter, "Clinton in the Twilight Zone," *Newsweek*, 15 June 1992, 28.

⁷"Perot: Can He Become America's Big 1990s Political Force?," *The American Political Report*, 5 June 1992, 1.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Howard Kurtz, "In Instant Replay, Clinton's Unvarnished Emotion," *Washington Post*, 29 February 1992.

¹⁰David Mills, "Sister Souljah's Call to Arms," *Washington Post*, 13 May 1992; and Carleton R. Bryant, "Sister Souljah Makes Most of Clinton's Ire," *Washington Times*, 16 June 1992.

¹¹See Richard Cohen, "Sister Souljah: Clinton's Gumption," and Mary McGrory, "Backing Jackson Into a Corner," *Washington Post*, 16 June 1992; and Richard Benedetto, "Clinton Shows No Sign of Bowing to Jackson," *USA Today*, 19 June 1992.

¹²Editorial, "Sister Souljah Is No Willie Horton," *New York Times*, 17 June 1992.

¹³R. W. Apple, Jr., "Jackson Sees a 'Character Flaw' in Clinton's Remarks on Racism," *New York Times*, 19 June 1992.

(continued on page 19)

(continued from page 10)

A Historic Moment: Black Voters and the 1992 Presidential Race by Clarence Lausane

¹⁴Ron Walters, "Clinton's Gall," *Washington Post*, 16 June 1992.

¹⁵Robin Toner, "The 1992 Campaign Strategy: Perot Makes Major Parties Do Some Major Rethinking," *New York Times*, 4 June 1992.

¹⁶Ron Walters, *Black Presidential Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸Barbara Reynolds, "Without the Black Vote, Party's Over for Democrats," *USA Today*, 13 March 1992.

¹⁹Gary Maloney, ed., *The Almanac of 1988 Presidential Politics* (Falls Church, VA: The American Political Network, 1989), 34.

²⁰Richard Benedetto, "Perot Attracts Support From Swing Voters," *USA Today*, 17 June 1992.

²¹Clarence Lusane, "Souljah Story," *Black Political Agenda '92*, June 1992, 6.

²²William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1992, 33–44.

²³Richard Benedetto, "Perot Vote Tilts to Clinton," *USA Today*, 20 July 1992.

²⁴Kathleen Quinn, "If Perot Were Black," *New York Times*, 11 June 1992.

²⁵Michael Isikoff, "Perot's Rhetorical Drug War Raises Questions," *Washington Post*, 9 June 1992; and Frank Snepp, "Ross Perot's Private War on Drugs," *Village Voice*, 9 June 1992, 25–28.

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