

EDITORIAL

NATIONAL RAINBOW COALITION

Voting In The U.S. & S.A. Southern Tour Report: A Comparison

Why was there nearly 100% voter participation in the recent South African elections, while in the "cradle of democracy", the U.S., we rank near the bottom in voter participation among the industrialized democracies with slightly more than 50% of the eligible voters voting? Is it genetic or systemic? The difference is clearly systemic, rooted in political will and government policies!

Slightly more than a century ago there was no such thing as voter registration. People who were eligible to vote by age, citizenship and residency were allowed to vote on election day. What undemocratic politics changed this democratic policy?

A century ago, the U.S. was primarily rural. The emerging industrial revolution, however, was changing that dramatically. Urbanized industry was attracting large numbers of, primarily, European ethnic immigrants to jobs in the cities. Such growing mass migration to the cities was a direct threat to Rural Power which, at that time, dominated both the U.S. Congress and state legislatures. At the same time, the women's suffrage movement was growing, finally coming to fruition with a Constitutional Amendment in 1919; while the recently freed slaves (1863) were emerging as a political force. Something had to be done to stymie the potential political power of workers, women and blacks. Thus, voter registration was introduced as a barrier and obstacle to mass democratic participation.

Along with voter registration, especially in the South, came additional barriers—early cut-off dates for registration, voting on a work-

day, roll purges, gerrymandered political lines, poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses and, of course, violence.

What makes politics so important? The political order is the distribution system for the economic order. Politics determines who, gets what, when, where and how. Thus, it is neither an accident nor apathy that leads Americans NOT to vote. Vested economic and political interests at the top have worked long and hard, and in sophisticated ways, to keep those at the bottom from voting!

What, then, are some of the SYSTEMIC differences that took place in the South African election as compared to U.S. elections?

1. The first difference between South African and U.S. democracy is that in South Africa the government INTENDED for the masses of their people to participate in the democratic process. In the U.S. our government INTENDS FOR THE MASSES of the American people NOT to participate in the democratic process. How do we know that?

2. Good "intentions" are translated into good and effective government policies and procedures. The South African government spent \$70 million (\$35 million from the U.S.) on voter education and voting procedures for 40 million people and 23 million eligible voters. A similar program for 260 million Americans and 180 million eligible voters in the U.S. would cost \$500 million. In South Africa, the day prior to official voting, the government took the polls to the infirm in hospitals, to the incarcerated in jail and to soldiers in the military. In the U.S., the initiation for voting is left totally up to the individual.

In South Africa, the election was

conducted over two days, which were national holidays, and everyone was off from work. They even extended it into a third day in the middle of the election to accommodate everyone who wanted to vote. The U.S. election is held on Tuesday, a work day, between 6 AM and 4 PM. This is really an aristocratic notion, carried over from another day, which still has the effect of disproportionately disenfranchising workers, minorities and the poor. To simplify voting for the less educated, South African voters simply placed an "X" next to the PICTURE, not just the name, on the ballot for the candidate of their choice—technically, in South Africa, they actually voted for the party.

South Africa had some-day, on-site, universal voting. They could vote anywhere in the country by just showing up at an election poll on the days of the election. Fraud was prevented by dipping a voter's thumb in invisible ink which would not wash off for a week. Ultraviolet light would reveal whether one had voted before or not. In the U.S., the problem of voter voted before or not. In the U.S., the problem of voter fraud is overwhelmingly related to those who RUN AND CONTROL THE VOTING SYSTEM, not INDIVIDUALS who cheat. Despite the fact that voter interest rises as the election approaches, with voter interest being highest on election day, in the U.S. voter registration is cut-off in different states between 10 and 45 days before an election.

Finally, in South Africa, the white minority was protected. Any party that got 5% or more of the vote was included in the government in proportion to their vote total. Thus, almost everyone had an INTEREST in voting. In the U.S., the winner takes all. Buthelezi got 5% and DeKlerk

got 20% and they were included in the cabinet and as Vice President respectively, even though Mandela got 63% of the vote. In the U.S., Clinton got 43% and he won it all with no (political) obligation to the 57% who voted for someone else. It is not a shared power "win-win" for Everyone, but a "winner-take-all" and a "win-for-some. LOSS-FOR-MOST" situation. The U.S. system is a disincentive to mass participation.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Following the 11 day, 7 state, 18 city Southern Voting Rights Tour, Rev. Jesse L. Jackson met with Attorney General Janet Reno and made the following recommendations: (a) national elections should be held on Saturdays with polls being open from 6 AM to 12 Midnight; (b) that President Clinton should educate the public on the threat of Shaw V. Reno to minority rights; (c) that the federal government monitor the states to make sure that they pass and implement the National Voting Rights Act of 1993 (e.g., most of the southern states we visited had not even introduced such legislation, much less passed it); (d) that the next step in voting legislation would be to pass same-day, on-site, universal voter registration; (e) that the 3.5 million high school seniors come across the stage each year at graduation with a diploma in one hand symbolizing knowledge and wisdom, and a voter registration card in the other symbolizing knowledge and wisdom, and a voter registration card in the other symbolizing power and responsibility; and (f) that the U.S. set up a commission to study the South African election, and make recommendations on how the U.S. can improve its voting system.

Civil Rights Journal

Free America's Political Prisoners

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

The United States government denies the existence of political prisoners --

people who are in prison because of their ideas or beliefs. But the world recognizes that the United States does imprison people for their political beliefs.

Amnesty International, the human rights group, defines a political prisoner as "any prisoner whose case has a significant political element..." The Prisoners of Conscience Project has already identified more than 100 such prisoners in the U.S. today and according to the National Conference of Black Lawyers, 75 of them are African American or Puerto Rican.

Most of the U.S. political prisoners share two things in common -- they were subjects of the FBI's COINTELPRO operation, which targeted activists in racial/ethnic communities in the 1970's and 80's and they have remained in prison longer than those convicted of similar crimes but who are not politically active. Many of them have been imprisoned in very harsh conditions and in the nation's highest security prisons.

These are only three of their stories:

GERONIMO JI JAGA (PRATT)

Geronimo Pratt served two tours of duty in Viet Nam, ultimately earning two Purple Hearts and both the Bronze and Silver stars. After returning home, he went to California, where he became active in the Black Panther Party, one of the groups targeted by J. Edgar Hoover's counterintelligence program.

In 1968 a white Santa Monica couple was gunned down while playing tennis and the wife was killed. Geronimo Pratt was arrested as the murderer. But Pratt, now called Ji Jaga, denies that he was even in Los Angeles or that he has ever killed anyone other than in Viet Nam and charges that the FBI had targeted him under their COINTELPRO program. The FBI's own evidence agrees.

Pratt's lawyers claim that, in fact, he was framed for this murder, with the government using evidence provided by an FBI paid informer who had his own vendetta against Pratt and suppressing other key evidence which was crucial to Pratt's defense. Moreover, there is evidence that during the trial the FBI infiltrated Pratt's legal team so that his defense was compromised at every level.

In the 24 years since Pratt's imprisonment, he has seen men who have murdered two or three people released after serving 17 or 18 years. Yet, Pratt's 12 parole hearings and numerous attempts to get a new trial have all failed and he remains incarcerated.

Because of new evidence and suppressed evidence, the Los Angeles district attorney agreed to review Pratt's case.

LEONARD PELTIER

Leonard Peltier is an Anishinabe-

Lakota native American who was one of the leaders of the American Indian Movement, which was also targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO operation. Like Geronimo Pratt, Peltier claims that he was framed on false murder charges, which are the result of an encounter between FBI agents and Indians on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1975 in which two agents and a native American were killed. Peltier was convicted of killing the two agents on circumstantial evidence and is now serving his 18th year of two consecutive life sentences. Like Pratt, Peltier had been singled out by the FBI, according to its own documents. Believing that he had no chance of a fair hearing, Peltier left the country and went to Canada seeking political asylum. While there, the U.S. government presented an affidavit signed by anative American woman who claimed she had seen the murders. She later admitted that she had never seen Peltier before in her life.

Since his conviction Peltier has appealed his case four times and while the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals found that the previous trials had been riddled with misconduct and improprieties, it refused to grant a new trial. However, Peltier's appeal for Executive Clemency now sits on the desk of the Deputy Attorney General of the U.S. Department of Justice and a Leonard Peltier Freedom Week-end is planned in Washington D.C. for June 25-26.

ALEJANDRINA TORRES

Alejandrina Torres is the wife of a clergyman and mother of two daughters and was arrested in 1983. Like a number of other Puerto Rican political prisoners, she has been accused by the government of conspiring to use force against the lawful authority of the U.S. government over Puerto Rico. She spent two years of her imprisonment in the Women's High Security Unit at Lexington, KY, an underground unit where lights are kept on 24 hours a day and which has been condemned by Amnesty International and other human rights groups. She is not scheduled for release until 2004.

Abuse of political power is wrong anywhere, but it is especially wrong in the United States of America. Those who label dissent a crime and then subvert the law themselves are the real offenders. Our country was founded by those who were dissenters. To be a voice for the voiceless, write:

On behalf of a new trial for Geronimo Ji Jaga (Pratt): Mr. Gil Garcetti, Los Angeles County District Attorney, 210 W. Temple, Room 18-1000, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

On behalf of executive clemency for Leonard Peltier: President Clinton, White House, Washington D.C. 20500 and to The Hon. Jamie S. Gorelick, Deputy Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. 20530.

On behalf of the Puerto Rican political prisoners, also write to President Clinton.

THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT The New Black Unity

It has become apparent over the last year that Black leadership in America is achieving an unprecedented level of unity.

The NAACP, the nation's oldest, most influential and prestigious civil rights organization, is in the final stages of organizing an African American summit which for the first time in American history will include Black nationalists such as Minister Louis Farrakhan, Black socialists such as myself, Black insurgent Democrats such as the Reverend Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, a wide range of Black religious leaders, and numerous Black elected officials, including many members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

The NAACP's planned summit is part of an ongoing effort among African American leaders—evident since at least 1992 -- to find ways of working with and supporting each other despite our differences. It can be seen in the cooperation between members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Nation of Islam. It can be seen in the joint electoral efforts of Reverend Sharpton and myself in the state of New York, where we are running in the Democratic Party Primary for U.S. Senate and governor, respectively. It can be seen in the refusal of Black leaders -- who, as always, have serious political differences -- to denounce, renounce or pounce on each other, despite tremendous pressure from the liberal white establishment to do so.

This level of Black unity has never before been achieved. Not in the 1930s,

when Black leftists associated with the Communist Party denounced the NAACP as a bunch of middle class sellouts and the NAACP attacked the Black communists as dupes of Moscow. Not in the 1960s, when pro-integrationist civil rights leaders denounced Black nationalists like Malcolm X as "hate mongers" and the nationalists, in turn, attacked the integrationist for their "naive" commitment to non-violent tactics and reliance on white money. Not in the late 1960s, when "cultural nationalists" and "revolutionary nationalists" were literally killing each other over who were the genuine nationalists. Not in the early 1970s, when Black liberals joined their white comrades in denouncing the Black Panther Party as "adventurist" and "criminal," and then sat on their hands while the cops gunned them down. Not in the 1980s when acceptance into the "political mainstream" required Black leaders to denounce Minister Farrakhan, ridicule Reverend Sharpton and cult-and/or red-bait me.

But in 1994, a rough sketch of a Black Agenda has been drawn and Black leaders, with few exceptions, have not only stopped publicly attacking each other, we have actually found ways of talking together and supporting and working with each other despite our differences.

Not surprisingly, the white establishment--particularly the liberals, who are the establishment's official emissaries to the Black community--are not pleased. In an article entitled "Identity

Crisis" that appeared on the op-ed page of the New York Times on May 23, Jack Greenberg, a law professor at Columbia University who served as the director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund from 1961 to 1984, articulates the white liberal's anxiety about Black unity.

Focusing on the NAACP's recent efforts to broaden its base in the African American community and build bridges to a wide range of Black leaders, Greenberg writes: "Mr. [Benjamin] Chavis [executive director of the NAACP] has been reaching in various directions to try to expand the N.A.A.C.P.'s influence. Unfortunately he has turned to such separatists as the Nation of Islam and Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael).

"After a decline, the organization's membership may have grown a startling 24 percent, as it claims. But Mr. Chavis's courtship of the black community's fringes--militants and leftists--and their attacks on many groups (particularly Jews) that had contributed significantly to N.A.A.C.P. victories are of course driving those groups away."

Greenberg's threat, which has been repeated many times and in many ways over the last year, is explicit: "I hope the N.A.A.C.P. will resume its old, honored role...It will be not only unprincipled but also impractical for the N.A.A.C.P. to keep hitching itself to low-road demagogues...It should reconstitute its old friendships; otherwise, it may not survive and prosper in the new political

environment."

The white media and the political establishment used to dismiss me as a "cult leader" and a "fringe candidate." Having found these charges to be ineffective in driving a wedge between me and the Black community, they've switched to this "ambulance chasing" routine. In turn, I have exposed them for being "vote chasers" who come into our communities only on election day. Frankly, it would be a step forward for them to become ambulance chasers. It would mean that at least they would know what's going on with our people.

The liberals and their newspapers are sounding a bit hysterical these days. They don't have the same control over the Black community (or anything else) that they used to. They lost City Hall in both Los Angeles and New York, the country's two largest cities, to right wing Republicans. They can't get anyone important to repudiate Louis Farrakhan. They can't get the NAACP to "act right." The Congressional Black Caucus is becoming powerful in its own right. Black Democrats and the Black independents are sitting down at the same table and talking turkey.

The political stock of the white liberals is going down. They're on the defensive. That's why they're being so vicious to Ben Chavis, to Louis Farrakhan and to me. They've been stung by our unity, which they can't control and can't destroy. And they're trying desperately to sting back.

The Portland Observer

(USPS 959-680)

OREGON'S OLDEST AFRICAN AMERICAN PUBLICATION
Established in 1970 by Alfred L. Henderson

Joyce Washington
Publisher

The PORTLAND OBSERVER is located at
4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
Portland, Oregon 97211
503-288-0033 • Fax 503-288-0015

Deadline for all submitted materials:
Articles: Friday, 5:00 pm Ads: Monday Noon

POSTMASTER: Send Address Changes to: Portland Observer,
P.O. Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208.

Second Class postage paid at Portland, Oregon.

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Subscriptions: \$30.00 per year.

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