

OPINION

The Right to Vote is Under Attack

Falsehoods push new restrictions

BY LESLIE WATSON MALACHI

The 2008 election was a hopeful one for African-Americans in our democracy, not because of who was elected, but because of who turned out to vote.

We voted at a nearly identical rate to our white neighbors for the first time in U.S. history. In fact, African-American women had the highest turnout rate of any group of any race.

More than 40-years after the end of the Jim Crow era (albeit amid the resurrection of what many are calling the "New Jim Crow"), we closed that persisting gap of participation. In greater numbers than ever before, we stood up, and we spoke with our vote.

But since 2008, our right to vote, which is essentially a form of free speech, has been under an unprecedented attack.



Shortly after the election, over half of Republican voters said that they believed the presidential election had been stolen for Barack Obama by ACORN, a now-defunct organization that worked to register new voters, including many African Americans.

In response to this false myth promoted by right-wing media and politicians, state legislatures across the country have been trying to make it harder to register to vote.

The most common form this takes is voter ID laws, which, under the guise of preventing the over-hyped problem of "voter fraud," in fact keep millions of voters from the polls. These laws, which are on the books or being considered in 41 states, target voters who don't have certain types of government identification. They are overwhelmingly young, elderly, and persons of color.

What's even more discouraging than the faulty basis of these restrictive

laws is where they come from. The American Legislative Exchange Council, a group funded by large corporations that writes legislation for state legislators, is pushing these voter ID laws to states around the country.

Why do big business interests care about restricting voting rights? Because voting is the only way those of us without millions of dollars to spend on elections can make our voices heard.

The real goals of these laws were thrown into sharp light in Tennessee this year, when we learned about Dorothy Cooper, a 96-year-old black woman who was denied a voter ID because she couldn't produce a copy of her marriage license.

Mrs. Cooper had voted nearly every year since she was of voting age, and had never before run into a problem registering, even in the Jim Crow South. Mrs. Cooper wasn't trying to commit fraud. She was trying to exercise her right and her duty as a citizen. Yet she was treated like a criminal.

While we can and should fight the enactment of these restrictive laws, we can't stop there. The most important thing you can do to make sure your voice is heard in the democratic process is to know your rights and vote. This is especially true for African Americans, who are disproportionately being targeted and impacted by these new laws.

The Black Church has a longstanding history of championing political, educational, and economic rights, not only for African Americans, but for all citizens. And in this modern era, we must continue the fight.

The right to vote, especially for African Americans, is under attack.

Churches, laity, pastors, and ministry leaders, who were essential to securing that right, will be essential to preserving it.

Minister Leslie Watson Malachi is the director for African-American Religious Affairs at People for the American Way.

What Next for the Occupy Movement?

Empower dissent with the ballot box

BY RICH COHEN

The unprecedented Occupy Movement has given the American people a voice for their grievances and for their hopes, and in doing so have rattled the elites who are now recognizing the moral force behind the cause that is taking root in the public consciousness.

But to keep the public on our side, we must demonstrate that their concerns are our concerns and are being acted upon with wisdom, skill and urgency.

Every grievance, every issue we care about, from student debt to foreclosures, from environmental challenges to living wages, from attacking countries that did nothing to us, to providing a doctor to anyone who needs one, will not be decided on its own in the streets we occupy, but in the buildings we don't.

The outcomes that matter most to us are decided almost

entirely in one particular building, the U.S. Capitol, which right now is ruled by corporate majorities controlled by Wall Street. If we are serious about our grievances and truly committed to making this country our own, then "We the People" must occupy the U.S. Congress, the major power center of the United States, and be there with our own majority control.

Only by winning a 218 seat majority in the House of Representatives and a 60 seat filibuster proof majority in the Senate, will we have the numbers necessary to actually shift power from Wall Street to us.

Without those numbers there is literally no way to take control of our country. We have two choices. We can either aim high, honoring ourselves by taking power, or remain on the outside looking in and endlessly reacting, constantly defending ourselves and forever appealing to corporate politicians.

Hopefully we're learning that agitating and pleading alone will never get us more than a wa-

tered down imitation of what we need. The question is, are we reactors or deciders?

As deciders our first step is to occupy our neighborhoods with relentless face-to-face, house-by-house, street-by-street congressional district campaigns that succeed in electing members of Congress who are not beholden to Wall Street and lead to our ultimate occupation of the Congress.

We have the people to get it done, but do we have the will?

We should expect more from ourselves than just calling attention to our grievances or hoping that a Washington or local politician will throw us a bone. If what we are doing is really more than just beating up on the "bad guys," then we must link our street dissent to the ballot box with the single-minded goal of taking majority control of the Congress.

That's where the power is and where we need to be if getting our problems solved and reaching for our best as Americans is why we are really here.

An electoral strategy combined with ongoing visible street occupations (around foreclosed homes, student debt, etc.) that

doesn't just talk to our 99 percent, but mobilizes them, are the two essentials for reclaiming and remaking our country.

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