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OPINION

Momentum for Supporting Basic Human Needs

Holding policy makers accountable

BY THE REV. M. LINDA JARAMILLO



In the aftermath of this month's election, emotions range from celebration to lamentation, depending upon on which political party or candidate that we supported.

If the barrage of political ads leading up to the election didn't already exhaust us, we are now forced to digest the endless speculation of political analysts recounting all the reasons for the results. Negotiation among elected leaders is once again promised as a solution to the gridlock, which has severely discouraged voter participation throughout the land.

In the midst of all the media buzz, it is good to see that communities of faith are stepping up to join forces with non-religious organizations working together to support basic human needs. Momentum is growing and with it we see renewed energy to hold policy makers accountable to voter-endorsed measures dedicated to advancing the common good.

Need an example? Voters from Alaska, Arkansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota overwhelmingly recognized the need for a living wage in their states. Last week these states joined 25 others that have previously endorsed an hourly wage that surpasses the woefully inadequate federal minimum wage.

Because of this action, nearly 700,000 low wage workers can

look forward to modest raises. This movement across the country demonstrates our support for families and shows that we recognize the struggle of parents who must work two or three jobs to meet the basic needs of their household. By supporting these workers, we are demonstrating our commitment to one another and to improving the economic situation of whole communities.

Policies responding to the needs of working families were affirmed by Massachusetts' voters who supported paid sick leave, and further reinforced by Oakland, Calif. and two New Jersey cities, Trenton and Montclair. Eight similar measures passed earlier this year with several campaigns gaining strength. Families will undoubtedly benefit from these recent actions and economic development reports predict that it will

also be good for business.

California voters also acted to address disparities in their criminal justice system and are slowly but surely overturning their 1994 "three-strikes" law, which has disproportionately affected low-income persons and people of color. While the law was intended to address offenders committing violent crimes, it has also resulted in life sentences for petty thieves and shoplifters.

Californians supported Measure 47, which will convert low-level drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, reducing the sentences of an estimated 10,000 inmates. In the past, arguments in support of this step concentrated on the excessive cost of implementing the three-strikes law; however, a Los Angeles poll in September indicated that Californians felt that fairness was far more im-

portant than money.

Voters from both sides of the political spectrum led the way to justice by passing Measure 47 with a 58 percent majority.

Stories like this were visible across the nation. Voters stepped up in this election cycle to support basic human needs. At the same time scholars at the Pew Research Institute are documenting a surge of support for churches that engage politically, especially in advancing the common good.

It seems that we are at an important moment as a nation, and that we, as people of faith committed to justice and equality, are uniquely poised to help hold our elected officials accountable to the will of the people in this post-election time.

Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo is a Witness for Justice executive and national officer of the United Church of Christ.

Applauding the Nomination for Attorney General

Loretta Lynch has the values we look for most

BY MARC H. MORIAL

I had the honor of visiting the White House this month for President Obama's announcement of his choice to succeed Eric Holder, who recently declared his decision to retire, as Attorney General of the United States.

It had been rumored for days that Loretta Lynch, who currently heads the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, had risen to the top of the President's list. While the timing of the announcement, just four days after the power-shifting mid-term elections, may have surprised many, it also confirmed the President's commitment to seamlessly uphold the civil rights protections and criminal justice reforms that have been so fiercely advocated by Holder.

Lynch, who would be the nation's first African American woman Attorney General, has served more than 15 years



as a prosecutor in the office that covers eight million people in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and Long Island, New York. The Senate unanimously confirmed her to lead the

U.S. Attorney's office on two separate occasions – once under President Clinton and more recently under President Obama.

She has an outstanding record of successful prosecutions, including the terrorists who plotted to bomb the Federal Reserve Bank and the New York subway system, some of New York's most violent and notorious mobsters and gang members, and corrupt public officials from both parties. She has also won a number of Wall Street financial fraud cases. In 1999, she famously prosecuted one of the most egregious cases of police brutality in New York City history, the beating and sexual assault of Haitian immigrant, Abner Louima.

In nominating Lynch, Presi-

dent Obama said, "It is pretty hard to be more qualified for this job than Loretta. Throughout her 30-year career, she has distinguished herself as tough, as fair, an independent lawyer who has twice headed the most prominent offices in the country. She has spent years in the trenches as a prosecutor, aggressively fighting terrorism, financial fraud, cyber-crime, all while vigorously defending civil rights."

A native of Greensboro, N.C., the daughter of a Baptist minister and the granddaughter of a pastor/sharecropper, Lynch's dedication to protecting civil rights and ensuring equal justice is part of her DNA.

Her background and experiences also inform her commitment to common sense criminal justice reforms designed to make our system smarter and fairer. She remembers as a child riding on her father's shoulders to student anti-segregation boycott meetings at his church. She also recalls her sharecropper grandfather

lamenting, "In rural North Carolina in the 1930s, if you were poor and black and got in trouble with the law, you had very little recourse."

As a lawyer and U.S. attorney, Lynch's career has been undergirded by an unshakeable belief that, as she states, "Justice is only served when people feel protected by their govern-

ment rather than targeted."

Those are the values we look for most in the People's Lawyer. We urge the Senate to confirm Loretta Lynch as the next United States Attorney General without delay.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

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