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“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

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## Black Votes Taken for Granted

As we enter the 2016 political campaign season with numerous candidates for president of the United States in the Republican and Democratic parties, it appears once again that the political and economic interests of Black America are not being adequately addressed by either of the major political parties. It is as if the Black American vote is being taken for granted.

The Black vote is important first to the Black community and secondly to American democracy. The right to vote and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did not come about without a struggle. Many brothers and sisters went to jail and paid a heavy painful price to acquire the right to vote. Some even died in the struggle to advance Black political and civic participation.

In the Civil Rights Movement, voting rights were deemed precious and a sacred moral responsibility to everyone of voting age. Today, there is need for the Black community to reassert the value and strategic leverage of the Black vote. It is one thing for the status quo to ignore the political interests of the Black community, but it is another when so many of us are



**Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.**

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missing in action on Election Day.

According to the United States Elections Project, Black voter turnout has been significantly increasing steadily from 48.1 percent in 1996 to 52.9 percent in 2000 to 61.4 percent in 2004 and peaking at 69 percent in 2008

We should recall that in the 2012 elections, for the first time in history, Black voter turnout was higher than White voter turnout

when Senator Barack H. Obama was elected president. In 2016, we should have no less than a 90 percent Black turnout. If that happens, the Black vote, more than any other single voting group in

the U.S., will determine the outcome of the elections.

We should recall that in the 2012 elections, for the first time in history, Black voter turnout was higher than White voter turnout – 66.6 percent to 64.1 percent.

Why do all these voting statistics matter? The short answer is because if we can continue to increase our voter turnout we will be better positioned to advance the interests of the Black community.

A few weeks ago, the Pew Research Center reported that for the first time in history, there are at least 364 counties, independent cities and other county-level equivalents in the U.S. that did not

leading to the election of more Blacks as county sheriffs, county chief executives, and other high public offices at the county and regional levels.

Some would say it is poetic justice, but it is a rapidly changing racial demographics reality in terms of population density increases and Black elected officials are on the rise particularly in the 11 states that once made up the old Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. That's not surprising when you consider that 55 percent of all African Americans reside in the South, up from 53.6 percent in 2000.

It's not surprising that some of the most intense efforts to suppress the Black vote is taking place in the South.

Yes, Black Lives Matter! We must do whatever is necessary to improve the quality of life for our families and communities. Do not fall into the cynical attempts to persuade us that our votes do not count. Our votes do count and do make a big difference for the betterment of Black America. Yes, Black Votes Matter!

## Criminalizing Black Protest and Black People

Is #BlackLivesMatter a criminal organization that advocates attacks on and murder of White police officers?

That's the snake-oil pitch the conservative echo chamber is making these days – even as news accounts every week bring new proof that neither Black law-abiding citizens nor, frankly, Black criminals, nor anyone else are preying upon the police. Washington Post columnist Radley Balko's Sept. 10 column offers a must-read examination of the data that shows that assaults on and murders of police officers have fallen to dramatic lows in recent years, and there's no indication they're about to increase. Balko emphasizes, The so-called war on cops “just isn't true.”

Instead, what continues to be true is that a significant number of individual cops and prison guards continually seek the slightest excuse – or no excuse at all – to brutalize Blacks and other people of color.

Look at the video released last week by the Fairfax County (Va.) sheriff's office of five officers wearing biohazard suits, gas masks and rubber gloves taking Natasha McKenna, a 5'4" mentally unstable Black woman, from her cell – apparently completely nude – last February and shooting her with a stun gun four times while she lay face down on the floor outside her cell. She died days later.

Read the Sept. 10 *New York Times* account of the death in April of a Black mentally ill inmate at New York's Fishkill state prison, Samuel Harrell, allegedly at the hands of a so-called “Beat Up Squad” of prison guards, and their subsequent efforts to intim-



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Columnist

idate inmates who witnessed the killing into silence.

Watch the video of a bully-boy New York City undercover cop jumping retired Black tennis star James Blake in front of a Manhattan hotel Sept. 10, and read of this dirty cop's record of assaulting innocent people.

These three terrifying examples don't begin to indicate the scope of the reality so many Black and

the post-Civil War achievements Blacks forged during the Reconstruction Era, or the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Revealingly, it was after the massive March on Washington of 1963 that arch-racist F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover called Martin Luther King, Jr. — not Malcolm X — “the most dangerous Negro in America.”

Today, the striking success of Blacks in marshaling their voting power has provoked the Republican Party's national campaign to block Blacks' access to the ballot under the smokescreen of preventing voter fraud. And conservatives have constantly attacked President Obama himself as “lawless.” For example, in October 2008, when his victory over the McCain/Palin

the many injustices of the criminal justice system that, thanks to videos, e-mail, tweets and text messages, have become more and more visible to more and more people. Further, #BlackLivesMatter has added a compelling, straight-from-the-streets energy and urgency to the high-level efforts of Obama administration and elected officials and public-policy scholars to reform the criminal justice system.

Another reason for the conservative movement's attack against today's Black protest movement stems from its own abject failure in several of the “theaters” of the war it's been waging against the Obama administration and American democracy.

Its miserable record of failure— from not defeating Obama electorally, to not blocking Obamacare either in the Congress or the courts, to neither halting nor slowing the expansion of rights for gay and lesbian Americans, to its humiliating inability to undermine

What continues to be true is that a significant number of individual cops and prison guards continually seek the slightest excuse – or no excuse at all – to brutalize Blacks and other people of color

Hispanic Americans face from the front-line “troops” of America's criminal justice system. But they are enough to show up the “criminalization gambit” as just another rotting plank of the structure of American racism.

Criminalizing Americans of color, especially Black Americans, has long been a constant of American society. Racists have often tried to diminish black protest movements, and Black achievement itself, by characterizing them that way — be it the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement,

ticket seemed assured, conservative pundit Michael Barone wrote a column bemoaning the “coming liberal thugocracy” his administration would be. Naturally, his phrasing was rapidly picked up by the conservative confederacy.

That framework helps illuminate three specific reasons conservatives are pushing the criminalization gambit against #BlackLivesMatter now.

One is their fear of its success in giving blacks and many progressive-leaning Whites a means of direct-action protest against

the landmark treaty Obama and the leaders of six European nations forged with Iran to prevent the latter from developing nuclear weapons—underscores why chaos continues to rule the Republicans' presidential sweepstakes process.

In other words, two of the pillars of the anti-#BlackLivesMatter campaign suggest the third desperate motive for it, and exemplify what conservatives often do when they find themselves stuck in a political quagmire: They play the dirty game of “blame the Black people.”