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USA

Why Blacks vote for “pragmatism”

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV495 - April 2016 -

Publication date: Saturday 23 April 2016

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Many African American progressives and liberal whites wonder why the Black population voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Party primaries, particularly in the Southern states. Although the numbers were lower in the North and West, they were still a majority for Clinton. Why?

It is easy to assert that the reason was strong support for Clinton by the establishment Black leadership, from the Congressional Black Caucus Political Action Committee to the traditional civil rights groups, church and community leaders.

Charles Blow, a Black columnist for The New York Times, charged those who back Sanders as “condescending” toward African Americans and their decisions. Paul Krugman, an economist and fellow NYT columnist, goes further, implying that Sanders supporters are not realists and are hurting the Democratic Party by challenging the Clinton candidacy.

A more important factor, however, is that Blacks remember the Bill Clinton presidency in the 1990 as positive compared to how they were treated under Reagan, Bush 1 and Bush 2. The racism directed at the first Black president, Barack Obama, is another.

Hillary Clinton is seen as the continuation of the Obama presidency (as she repeats over and over again).

Race and Racism

African Americans are probably the most pragmatic voting bloc in the country. African Americans more than any other ethnic group understand white supremacy, racism and class exploitation.

The fact that Bernie Sanders is from a mostly white liberal state, Vermont, is not why Blacks have failed to rally to his banner. The reality is that Blacks in the Old Confederacy are the most realistic about what is possible to win in today’s rising white racist backlash.

African Americans live with state-sanctioned violence and extra-legal terror and discrimination. There is less hypocrisy about race relations in the Southern states, where “them and us” is crystal clear.

But even in liberal San Francisco, a 2013-2015 study of police traffic stops showed that Blacks are pulled over and searched four times as much as whites. African Americans are less than six percent of the city’s residents. Whites are 44% (April 8, 2016 San Francisco Chronicle). San Francisco cops are as trigger happy and shoot Blacks and Latinos as “suspects” as much as their comrades in the South.

Few Illusions

The appeal of Clinton is not so much a rejection of Sanders’ program, but sizing up which candidate can win in

November.

There are few illusions among African Americans that voting in and of itself will stop racism and discrimination. But there is a deep understanding that the white supremacists understand that the vote represents a symbol of political influence and potential power.

Voter suppression is central to the racist strategy to roll back progress made by Blacks over the last four decades.

Kevin Alexander Gray, a Black progressive living in South Carolina, made an important observation in a March 2 article (“Why Black Voters Aren’t Feeling the Bern”) in *The Progressive*. He was speaking to those Sanders supporters who came to South Carolina:

Sanders has been in Congress for thirty years, but hasn’t developed meaningful relationships with many black elected officials and activists. The way he approached South Carolina was largely to bring in outside black, northern intellectuals “all men” who have made a habit of denouncing President Obama. And Killer Mike “a rapper. Women are 60 percent of the black electorate here, and you are hard pressed to find a black voter who does not feel strongly supportive of the first black President. Sanders might have missed the reality on the ground, since he held his events at the colleges. That isn’t a serious bottom-up strategy for getting to where working people in the community really are.

He continued:

Black folks like some of what Bernie says about Wall Street and public colleges, but it’s clear he’s not really thinking about historically black colleges and universities.

Most historically black colleges and universities are in heavily in debt and many of their students wouldn’t be accepted to public universities because of their test scores or grades. These institutions have been neglected in the Obama years. They are already at risk, and they would be even more at risk under a free public university plan.

This is just one small example of how black folks are at best an afterthought in the Sanders campaign. It’s the same situation with critical issues like gerrymandering and the Voting Rights Act.

The historically Black college issue exposes a reality of Southern institutional racism. These institutions were formed because African Americans were prevented from attending the whites-only public universities in these states. They remain important centers of higher education for Blacks.

If in fact public colleges were free with open admissions, the possibility would exist to transform these institutions into publicly funded colleges. But Gray’s analysis shows that there isn’t the confidence that much progress is possible on winning free college education and funding historically Black universities.

The reality is unless there is a push to make education free for all (pre-K through university) it will be difficult to keep funding for the private Black colleges and eliminate their debts. In the circumstances, the status quo seems safer.

White Fears

Why Blacks vote for “pragmatism”

Since the rightwing Supreme Court majority gutted the Voting Rights law in 2013 and Republicans took over most state houses and the Congress, there has been a rollback on basic civil rights in the South. Whites there believe it is possible to limit Black political power, limit immigrants' rights and maintain the white-dominated status quo for decades if not forever.

Whites, especially working class whites who back Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, see themselves as the victims of reverse discrimination for the lack of income fairness and jobs. They for the most part see Blacks, immigrants and gays as their immediate target. They fear that these groups could seek “revenge” for what segregation did to them.

It's ironic that the only gun laws supported by the NRA and conservatives (Reagan as governor of California in the 1960s) were in response to Blacks beginning to assert their “Second Amendment rights” to arm themselves!

The backlash against the Civil Rights Revolution began immediately after the 1965-1968 civil rights legislation was adopted by Congress and by presidential Executive Orders. Black Power militants who wanted to go beyond legal equality put fear into the powerful.

The most far reaching gains of the movement were actually expanded under Republican President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s.

Nixon was no friend of Blacks. He used laws and FBI secret surveillance and police violence. Leaders were framed and assassinated. But as the ruling-class representative, he sought to contain the rising militancy through reforms as well as repression.

White fear has always been a tool of the ruling class. As Timothy Egan explained in an April 8, 2016, article in the New York Times (“A Mason-Dixon Line of Progress”):

Nearly all the states with the highest percentage of minimum wage workers — full-time jobholders making \$290 a week, before taxes — are in the South. These are also the same states that refuse to expand Medicaid to allow the working poor to get health care. And it's in the same cradle of the old Confederacy where discriminatory bills are rising. Don't blame the cities; from Birmingham to Charlotte, people are trying to open doors to higher wages and tolerance of gays, only to be rebuffed at the state level.

Essentially, this Republican-controlled block has decided that it's better to be poor, sick and bigoted than prosperous, healthy and open-minded. And its defense is precisely that: The region is too economically distressed and socially backward to accept progress, so why change? Discrimination, as they see it, is just another term for religious freedom.

Race and class are so intertwined for Blacks that it is never seen as either or. It is our reality.

A majority of whites support better health care, higher minimum wages and end of student debt. The problem is that their political leaders use race-baiting and fearmongering to get these same whites to circle the wagon around their “white (nationalist) communities” and against immigrants and African Americans.

The “Confederate Party”

The United States remains two realities divided along both regional and racial lines.

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A majority of whites in the old South especially (including youth) do not really see themselves as members of the Republican Party. Nor did they see themselves as members of the Democratic Party (Dixiecrats) before the civil rights revolution in the 1960s. They don't see themselves as Lincoln Republicans.

Most whites in the South primarily see themselves as ideologically supporters of the “Confederate Party” (the true meaning of “Southern values”) even if few would openly put it that way.

That's why governments build statues and monuments for Confederate heroes, not for Lincoln or northern generals who defeated the Confederacy. (Never mind any monuments to former slaves who rebelled.)

Blacks were kept in their place even during Roosevelt's New Deal. The dirty deal (which organized labor accepted) was that improvements for northern Blacks and labor would not be extended to the South. That understanding (so called “respect” of state rights) is why white supremacists would happily vote Democratic.

Democratic Party leaders defended states' rights — the right to oppress and discriminate in the South. African Americans who could vote tended to lean Republican until the middle 1960s when Lyndon Johnson pushed through the civil rights laws.

This complex history of racism of the two major ruling-class parties is a factor in why Blacks in the Southern states voted for Clinton as the practical choice in the face of rising racism. They seek a friendly Federal government. They may agree with many of Sanders' positions but don't see him as likely to be the next president.

The support for Clinton is thus shallow. If Sanders became a realistic choice as nominee his support from African Americans would soar. (It should be recalled that most African Americans initially supported Clinton in the 2008 pre-primary polls until it became clear that Obama could win the nomination.)

Black Lives Matter is Crucial

Sanders for his part has listened to Black Lives Matters protesters and improved his program for Blacks. His long support for civil rights back to his days as a student at the University of Chicago even forced the media to recognize his record of activism.

Hillary Clinton has made some modifications in rhetoric but her husband continues to attack the new movement as supporting “murderers” and criminals when Black Lives Matters (BLM) protesters attack her language about “super predators” in the 1990s when she was supporting Bill Clinton's harsh legislation.

The most important social movement for African Americans is the BLM. It is not relying on the elections to bring “political revolution” or even to spark a bigger social revolution from the outcome. It sees the electoral arena (correctly) as a way to confront the deeper social problems and explain why the entire state apparatus needs to radically change.

The problems facing Blacks are class and racial. African Americans don't have the luxury of “privileging” one over the other. They are combined in our everyday life.

Pragmatism rules in electoral politics when there is no mass direct action alternative aimed at both ruling parties.

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Blacks of course support fundamental revolutionary change if and when it is realistic and in motion. Until then, the greater good (lesser evil) is how they will continue to vote.

To “Feel the Bern” is a concept but not a mass movement. The Clintons are a known quantity, and understanding the choice between Hillary Clinton or Trump/Cruz, African Americans hope for the best with the known quantity.

It will not work. But it does emphasize why movements like Black Lives Matters are so important to bring about real change.

The African-American voter whether in the old South, Midwest, Northeast or West seeks the same goal of ending racism and winning economic justice. What Martin Luther King advocated and Malcolm X explained can only be accomplished by mass direct action.

The protests against reactionary anti-gay/transgender legislation in North Carolina, Mississippi and other Southern states show that non-electoral resistance is growing. The potential of economic boycott is another positive sign.

This article will appear in the May/June issue of Against the Current