

Lawmakers List Issues That Would Mobilize Black Voters

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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Now that the Affordable Health Care Act has been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court – a major win for President Barack Obama – other key issues of importance to Black voters must also be espoused by the Obama campaign say members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

In some national polls, President Obama is slightly ahead of Republican candidate Mitt Romney. In others, they are neck-in-neck. With African-American voters as a dominant base of the Democratic vote, many predict Blacks will once again be a major deciding factor in who wins the race. In recent interviews, CBC members listed numerous issues that would incite African-Americans to the polls.

"I think African-Americans want to hear an agenda that's going to really speak to closing the economic disparities and how the American dream is going to be afforded for all of us – what we've been about historically and we're going to continue to fight until that dream is real," says U. S. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) "When you look, for instance, at the unemployment rate, still over 13 percent – unacceptable; when you look at health disparities, when you look at the disparities in education, when you look at environmental injustice, when you look at the foreclosure crisis, when you look at all of the systemic and structural issues that are still prevalent in the African-American community, we've come a long way and have a long way to go."

So far, civil rights leaders have leaned heavily on the voter suppression issue to draw a distinctive line between Republican Mitt Romney and President Obama. A record number of states across the nation are engaged in changes to voting laws, many of which rights leaders believe are intended to diminish or discourage the Black vote.

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The question is: will this be enough to inspire African-Americans to return to the polls to vote in record numbers as they did in 2008 during the historic election of Obama, the nation's first Black President? CBC Chairman Emanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.) doesn't seem to think so.

"Make no mistake, we do have an enthusiasm gap that was not present in 2008. And all of the polling data suggests that while African-Americans are committed to supporting President Obama in the November election, the question is how many will come out?" Cleaver said. "Many think that the president will get 95 percent of the Black vote, but the issue is 95 percent of what?"

To mobilize the maximum Black vote, Cleaver says strategy will be just as important as topic. Interviewed during a Washington, D.C. convening of the Conference of National Black Churches, he says the Black church will be key in coming months.

"The only way to get that turned around is for the clergy to go back to their congregations and let them know that there is a concerted effort to try to discourage them from coming out to vote," Cleaver said. "I think when ministers lay out to them what's going on in terms of government's attempt to push them away from the ballot box, they're going to be infuriated and we want that furor to propel them to come out and vote."

But, U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), says despite the fact that the Republican voter initiatives are discouraging people from voting, other issues of equal or more importance are being ignored.

"Unfortunately all of this voter ID stuff and voter registration has diverted attention from the fact that Republicans want to repeal Medicare, that they want to have tax care for the wealthy and pay for it with important programs," Scott says. "The Agriculture Committee was tasked with finding savings. Rather than cut back on subsidies to millionaire farmers, they cut food stamps and WIC nutrition to pregnant women and children. They're coming up with mandatory minimum sentences... We're trying to repeal the ones on the books and Republicans are trying to pass new ones. Those are the kinds of things we need to be talking about, but here we are talking about how to vote."

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The Supreme Court decision in favor of the health care law last month was viewed as a fluke in that it was the first time that conservative Chief Justice John Roberts actually voted 5-4 with the liberal members of the court. This is why Congresswoman Donna Christensen (D-V.I.) says the issue of Supreme Court appointments – which are conducted by the President and confirmed by the U. S. Senate - should also be on the minds of Black voters, given the risks of the court overturning key future cases that might affect laws of importance to African-Americans, such as affirmative action and voting rights.

"Do we want to have another Roberts or Scalia on the Supreme Court?" she quizzed. "Their decisions, the Supreme Court decisions, have not gone in favor of African-Americans, of the poor of any racial and ethnic minorities and even women in some cases. So, this should scare you. The Supreme Court has been our last refuge when everything else has failed. And if it is not there for us then we're in real trouble."

However, now that the Supreme Court has voted in favor of the Affordable Care Act, it would help for Black voters to know the meaning of the law and how it will help improve their lives; therefore the need to elect Democratic lawmakers – including the President – who will keep it in place, says U. S. Rep. Jim Clyburn. Clyburn is assistant Democratic Caucus chair, making him the highest ranking Black member in Congress.

"All of us need to be talking about health care more than anything else," Clyburn says. "The fact of the matter is that health care is not about Obamacare. Health care is about those children born with juvenile diabetes being able to have insurance and they cannot have it otherwise; it's about women with breast cancer, men with prostate cancer not being denied treatment. It's about children being able to stay on their parents' insurance policies up until their 27th birthday."

Clyburn adds that there are other issues and Obama policies that should inspire Black voters to the polls when weighing the difference between a President Romney and a President Obama.

One is the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, among the first pieces of legislation signed by President Obama in late January, 2009. It helps women more easily file equal-pay lawsuits in discrimination cases.

"Women, for the first time in their lives, got legislation that allows them to stand on equal footing

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when it comes to wages with men. No other president has done that. This president did," Clyburn says. "No other president gave us access to health care. This president has. No other president put Osama Bin Laden where he needs to be. This president has...What we've got to decide is whether or not we want to have four years of Mitt Romney or whether we want to continue with Barack Obama. That's the only issue we ought to be thinking about."}{comments on}