

USA: Why Race Matters in the 2012 Elections

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We sometimes hear that the drive by the Republican Party and the far right to “suppress the vote” — attempting to ensure the election of a Republican president and win control of the Congress — is just hardball politics, not about race or racism.

Yet the primary target is people of color. Not since the days of Jim Crow segregation in the Deep South, where poll taxes were used to prevent African Americans from voting, has such an orchestrated effort taken place across the country. After the Civil Rights laws were adopted in the 1960s, the state and federal governments took steps to increase voter participation, not suppress it.

No wonder many believe the current campaign is racist, with a broader goal of rolling back many of the social and economic gains won by African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Attorney General Eric Holder correctly calls the new voter suppression laws a new “poll tax.”

Too Simplistic Analysis

Yet it is too simplistic to say that new voter suppression laws reflect a rise of racism among whites in general. In fact, the proportion of whites who voted for Obama in the 2008 election was on par with other (white) Democratic presidential candidates since the adoption of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Obama will likely get 40% of the white vote again.

What’s new is that the far “Tea Party” right has taken over the Republican Party and both major capitalist parties have shifted to the right on most issues.

Obama’s policies on war are fundamentally no different than those of George W. Bush. Obama says it is perfectly legal to assassinate American citizens abroad if he alone declares them “terrorists” without charging them and holding a trial.

Obama’s domestic agenda is also conservative in the traditional sense, including on the issue of health care. With the exception of Gay rights, his positions on most issues are more conservative than recent Republican presidents including Richard Nixon. He’s done little to improve the condition of African Americans with double digit unemployment, inferior schools and housing. He’s also stepped up deportations.

The far right, however, sees the first Black president as an opportunity to advance an agenda they could not accomplish under the last Democratic president, Bill Clinton — to suppress votes permanently and roll back civil rights and other social gains.

No Counter Offensive

Meanwhile it’s clear that the traditional Black leadership is more concerned about having Obama’s back than pushing state institutions and Wall Street on issues of concern to African Americans. There is no serious counteroffensive against the Tea Party agenda, no viable or visible independent civil rights or left movement responding to the far right’s attacks.

Racism and extremist positions are more common, even though they don’t reflect majority public

sentiment. The right is heavily funded and backed by the courts. Race and racial solidarity, in that context, are tools that the far right uses to advance its anti-Obama and anti-civil rights campaign.

The extreme right has no problem with Black conservatives who agree with them. They will vote for those African Americans such as Allen West in Florida who agree with their ideology. Under legal segregation, West could not vote and his conservative views did not matter.

Institutional and psychological racism nevertheless remains deeply embedded among a large minority of the white population. When pundits say Obama can't connect with "blue collar workers," they mean white workers. Black and Brown blue collar workers are never mentioned.

White workers, like all voters, think about their self-interests. They see their interests as protecting white advantages — getting an edge — over other ethnic groups in the labor market. Poor and working-class whites, especially, see the gains won by Blacks as an immediate threat to their position. It's why many white unionists have opposed affirmative action programs, busing to desegregate schools and other steps to level the playing field.

At United Airlines where I worked as a mechanic for two decades, Blacks had to file legal action in the 1970s in order to force the company to change its hiring and promoting process to allow qualified African Americans and others to become pilots and mechanics. The unions opposed the court-ordered consent decree. Instead of seeing the workers below them on the economic ladder as potential allies to take on the boss, many white mechanics circled the wagons to keep African Americans from advancing.

The prevalent false view was that the pie is only one size, and for mechanics to get better wages and benefits must mean taking from lower paid co-workers. These divisions within the class are exacerbated among racial groups.

It is no accident that the Republican Party played the race card in the 1970s after Blacks won back the right to vote in the South. Whites of all social layers saw it as giving Blacks more political influence and power, and quickly changed party affiliation from Democrat to Republican to keep Blacks down.

Today, in fact, a vast majority of Democratic elected officials in the South are in gerrymandered Black districts. The same is true in states where Latinos, especially Mexican Americans, are a growing minority. The right preaches individualism and "Americanism" to attack those who support diversity, ethnic culture and immigrant reform.

Narrowly perceived white self-interest determines their opposition to many economic and social programs, even though white people also benefit from them. They're conscious that backing certain candidates is intended to prevent minorities from achieving more political power.

For the same reasons a majority of whites are willing to accept discriminatory practices to "protect" real advantages of being born white. (How many whites are stopped by cops for "Driving While White"?) "White skin privilege" is unique to Americans who are Caucasian.

Organize and Mobilize

Why is all this important to understand? Racial divisions and tensions can begin as benign. The danger is that fascist-like demagogues can mobilize physical violence against minorities. It was racist vigilante groups attacking freed slaves that eventually led to African Americans being disenfranchised in the South by the 1890s.

The fundamental problem, however, is not that there is white skin privilege or reactionary nationalism — it's that working people don't have a mass independent political party representing their true interests and capable of uniting the racial and ethnic groups.

The challenge is to look beyond the 2012 presidential election where 95% of African Americans (those who are allowed to vote) will vote for Obama and 60% of whites will vote for Romney.

The key immediate task is organizing and mobilizing to defeat the far right — by utilizing the tactics of mass pressure, civil disobedience and focusing demands on the institutions of the state.

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P.S.

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