

United States Midterm Elections - Black Voting in 2022: three key lessons

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This analysis was prepared by Malik Miah for a December 11 Solidarity members' and friends' discussion of the midterm elections and U.S. politics.

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THERE ARE THREE key lessons of African Americans and their votes in the recent midterm elections. It includes the two votes in November and December in Georgia's Senate race between two Black men — a first in the Deep South.

First lesson: Black people are some of the most sophisticated voters in the country. They don't primarily vote by skin color as most racists and many liberals believe — it is a factor, but secondary.

It did happen in the 1970s and 1980s an expression of "Black Pride" after decades of being excluded from full political and economic life. Once Black elected officeholders became more common, Black people saw the impact of Black political influence as more important: Were the Black leaders helping the community, or out for themselves?

At the same time, Black representation in the government remains important, especially in the South where anti-Black policies are more blatant.

Black people voted with pride and defiance in the Georgia Senate general election, and the December runoff, for Democrat Raphael Warnock and against Republican Herschel Walker. The contest symbolized two kinds of Black politics — one for helping Black people, the other showing the worst aspects of subservience to white rule.

As reported by *The New York Times* (November 30), "Black voters say the choice is stark: Warnock, the senior minister of Martin Luther King's Atlanta church, echoes traditional liberal notions of the Black experience; and Walker, a University of Georgia football icon, speaks the language of white cultural conservatism and mocks Warnock's interpretations of King, among other matters.

"Republicans seem to have thought they could put up Herschel Walker and confuse Black folks," said Bryce Berry, president of Georgia's Young Democrats chapter and a senior at Morehouse College, a historically Black campus where both King and Warnock graduated."

This was the first time that two Black men faced off in a Senate election in the South. Georgia has a majority white population where African Americans are about 35 percent of the state.

Race and the Runoff

Why was a runoff necessary after Warnock won the most votes in the November election?

Most federal and state elections are won by the rule of “first past the post,” meaning a plurality of votes even if less than 50 percent. That happens when there are more than two candidates on the ballot. Bill Clinton defeated President George H. W. Bush with a plurality in 1992, because there were three candidates (including independent Ross Perot).

Although the current law is well-known in Georgia, many people don’t realize that it is rooted in the state’s history of white supremacy. On June 24, 1964, shortly before the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, the state legislature adopted the law. It also passed a literacy test law to limit voter registrations. That was invalidated by the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Georgia’s segregationists decided to change state law to stop future Black candidates from winning elections. The goal was to have two candidates in the runoff — so if one were Black, the other would likely be white.

In the 2022 Georgia election, a Republican Trump-backed Black “know nothing” was running against a mainstream liberal Black Democrat. Two competing Black candidates in a Senate race is so unusual that the last time it happened was in 2004 in Illinois (when rightwing ideologue Alan Keyes parachuted from Maryland to challenge Barack Obama).

In that election, Obama won with 70 percent of the vote. In Georgia, Warnock won with a margin of 90,000 votes out of nearly four million cast. The first and second runoff election had similar turnouts, but fewer than five percent of Black people voted for Herschel Walker.

Republicans knew that their candidate Walker was a hypocrite, denounced by much of his own family. They backed a former football star to give them one more vote in the Senate. They hoped for 10-15 percent of the Black vote, showing their cynical and racist view of Black people.

Growing Disillusionment

Second lesson. The 2022 elections showed that Black voters in general are becoming disillusioned toward the two major capitalist parties. It is not a surprise since the country does not have independent working-class parties — neither labor nor Black.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there was some discussion of forming an independent Black political party and labor party. Not today.

Black people voting Democratic has been eroding steadily. Some don’t vote at all — “what for?”, many say.

A *New York Times* on November 30 showed a significant decline in Black voting, especially in big cities. The drop compared to white voters is double digit. Significantly, “The average Black turnout rate in Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina was more than 25 percent lower than among white voters, per state records.”

This didn’t impact the outcome in most statewide elections, except in Wisconsin where the Republican Senate incumbent Ron Johnson defeated Democrat Mandela Barnes. Crucially, voter suppression rules resulted in depressing the Black turnout in Milwaukee.

During the Covid pandemic, all states made it easier for everyone to vote. There were more mail-in ballots allowed in most Western states. Mail-in ballots and early voting were encouraged even in Georgia and other southern states.

But after the 2020 presidential elections with Biden's win, Republican-led states like Georgia cracked down on voting rights. It passed a major voter suppression law in 2021. The primary target were Black voters. Republican vigilantes, many with guns, sought to intimidate registered Black voters to remove them from the rolls.

So even though Warnock won, it was much closer than it should have been if all Black people could vote. Some whites were also stricken from the rolls, but rural areas did not face long lines to vote. African Americans in Atlanta were defiant and waited hours to stick it to the racists who control the state legislature and governor's office. But even with Warnock's win, the Black turnout was less than expected.

No doubt, Republican governor Kemp is planning more restrictive voting laws before the 2024 presidential election. It will make it harder for the on-the-ground Black Voters Matters activists to get out the vote.

Mass Action for Physical Survival

Third lesson. Self-preservation. Physical survival.

Black people historically saw winning voting rights as a form of resistance against structural racism. It was for physical survival and self-preservation against Jim Crow segregation laws and lynchings that were prevalent not so long ago.

That reality remains a living memory for many African Americans. But voting rights began with mass action — both legal and extra-legal where the laws were based on white supremacy.

The Trumpification of the Republican Party, which is now the home of armed extremists and white supremacists, reminds Black people of the history of deep racism and violence.

African Americans are a nationally oppressed and exploited people. As the Black Lives Matter movement showed in 2020, fundamental change only comes through popular uprisings. It's what forces the ruling class to change laws.

The relative period of democratic rights for Black people began in the late 1960s. Black people were allowed to join the major parties' leadership bodies and institutions. Most joined the Democratic Party.

Many civil rights leaders became candidates for public office. Some were elected as mayors, legislators and other took other opportunities once denied to African Americans, including executives in business.

The result was a historic integration into the capitalist system. It meant the beginning of the decline of the civil rights organizations and protest movement. Victories won, like affirmative action programs, were ultimately nullified and other setbacks followed.

It is important to recall that the first African American elected to the U.S. Senate was from Mississippi during post-Civil War Reconstruction. Later he was driven out and Black people lost the right to vote. The white racist backlash was brutal and deadly.

The goal of modern-day white supremacists is to repeat previous history to return to total white domination. That's why Black people will vote if not denied by racist laws for Democrats. They voted for Warnock as a response to white racism.

But physical survival and self-preservation begins with marches and popular uprisings that were the only weapons available to African Americans to fight back for most of their existence.

The Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 around George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin was an example of street politics. Without mass action the politicians will never advance or approve positive legislation.

Defiance, disillusionment, and the power of mass protests - those are the three key lessons for African Americans from the 2022 midterm elections.

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