

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

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A New Day for the South?

SOUTHERN POLITICS IN THE OBAMA ERA

**SOUTHERN
EXPOSURE**

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COVER PHOTO: Sen. Barack Obama speaks to a rally in Raleigh, North Carolina on October 29, 2008.

Photo by Emmanuel Dunand/AFP.

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OUR STORIES: “I Never Thought I’d See The Day”

The 2008 elections weren’t just historic, they were deeply personal. This was especially true for African-American voters and those concerned about racial justice in the South, where not long ago the election of a black man to the White House was considered unimaginable.

After President-elect Barack Obama’s victory, the online organizing group ColorOfChange.org asked its members for their reactions. They were deluged with nearly 7,500 responses, with a large share coming from the South. Throughout the issue, you will find these stories reprinted from <http://stories.colorofchange.org>

Formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, ColorOfChange.org is an online organizing group which aims to “strengthen Black America’s political voice.” For more information visit <http://colorofchange.org>

A New South Rising

The 2008 elections revealed that the South is rapidly changing and a key political battleground. Then why are pundits saying it's time to write off the region?

By Chris Kromm

At first glance, Gwinnett County looks like any other suburb in Atlanta's ever-growing metro orbit. Nestled between the working-class "in-burbs" of DeKalb County and wealthier enclaves to the north, the county has captured 26 percent of the Atlanta region's growth since 2000.

Until recently, Gwinnett County also symbolized a white conservative political culture taking hold in the suburbs and exurbs of the South. Gwinnett was a lot like nearby Cobb County, which gave rise to Rep. Newt Gingrich (R), one of the leading figures of the New Right. Republicans saw such places as a safe base for consolidating their political hold on the region.

"Just 18 years ago, in the 1990 Census," George Campbell recently wrote in *USA Today*, "Gwinnett was 90% white, rock-ribbed Republican and Exhibit A in the pantheon of suburban Sun Belt counties that supposedly would mold and sustain realignment to a permanent Republican majority."

But like much of the South, Gwinnett County has changed. According to the Census Bureau, Gwinnett County will soon be "majority-minority," with roughly equal numbers of African-American, Asian-American and Latino residents outnumbering whites. Over 100 languages are spoken in the county's schools, which are the fastest growing in the entire Southeast.

And as the 2008 elections showed, the changing face of Gwinnett County is creating an entirely new political landscape. As Campbell notes, the first President Bush got 75 percent of the presidential vote in 1992. Four years ago, George W. Bush got 66 percent. In 2008, Republican nominee John McCain managed only 55 percent.

A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Gwinnett County is at the leading edge of social, demographic and economic changes sweeping through the South — changes that will profoundly impact the region's political future. The South's evolution is uneven and fitful, but the overall broad trends and their political significance are unmistakable:

Rise of Southern Cities: The South's voters are increasingly based in rapidly expanding urban regions that include places like Gwinnett County. Eight of the 10 metro areas in the country with the fastest rate of growth are in the South, including Raleigh-Cary in North Carolina, the Palm Coast of Florida, and Austin, Texas. Similarly, out of the 10 metro areas that grew the most in sheer numbers, six are in the South, including the Atlanta area.

These metro areas are also becoming centers of political power. The infamous maps which divide states by red and blue — and thereby show entire stretches of the country dominated by a single color — conceal an important political truth: In 2008, 50 percent of the nation's voters came from just 237 counties with a density of 500 people per square mile or more. Over 35 percent of those counties are in the South — and in 2008, 58 percent of them voted for Democrat Barack Obama.

Across the South, rising metro centers are challenging Republican control. In eight Southern states, Obama won over 50 percent of voters who identified as "urban" in exit polls; in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia, he garnered over 60 percent.

Even more striking, out of the 111 urban areas nationally that flipped from Republican to Democrat in their votes for president between 2004 and 2008, 32 were in the South.

A New Generation of White Voters: Another piece of the Southern realignment underway is a new generation of young whites that appears to be departing from the political allegiances of their elders.

After the 2008 elections, a steady stream of punditry set out to prove that Southern white voters were out of touch with the rest of the country. One frequently-circulated map from *The New York Times* showed the 22 percent of counties nationally where the Republican vote actually grew between 2004 and 2008; the “McCain Belt,” as it was called, stretched across many mostly white counties in Appalachia and the lower Great Plains.

The lack of support for Barack Obama in mostly-white counties was hardly a surprise: Democratic presidential candidates haven’t won a majority among white voters once in the last 40 years. (Jimmy Carter came closest, getting 48 percent of the white vote nationally in 1976.)

It is true that the percent of Southern whites who supported Obama was a bit lower than the national average: about one-third in the South compared to 43 percent nationally. But perhaps a more interesting story is that in three Southern states — North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia — Obama actually gained with white voters over John Kerry’s 2004 performance at a rate higher than the national average.

The shift in the Southern white vote came from many sources — two being newcomers to the region and independents and white Democrats frustrated about the economy.

But another source was a new generation of Southern white voters. Barack Obama invested heavily in reaching

“He restored my faith in America”

As a kid, I used to think this was the greatest country in the world, that I could grow up to be president. Growing up Hispanic in Texas in the ‘80s and ‘90s took the shine off of those beliefs, and living in Texas throughout the Bush years killed any sense of idealism I had. Or at least I thought it had. Seeing Barack Obama elected President made me feel like a kid all over again. He restored my faith in America, that there are people out there, like me, who want to believe that the ideals we learned as kids are within our reach to make a reality. I can now truly look my kids in the eye and say, yes YOU can!

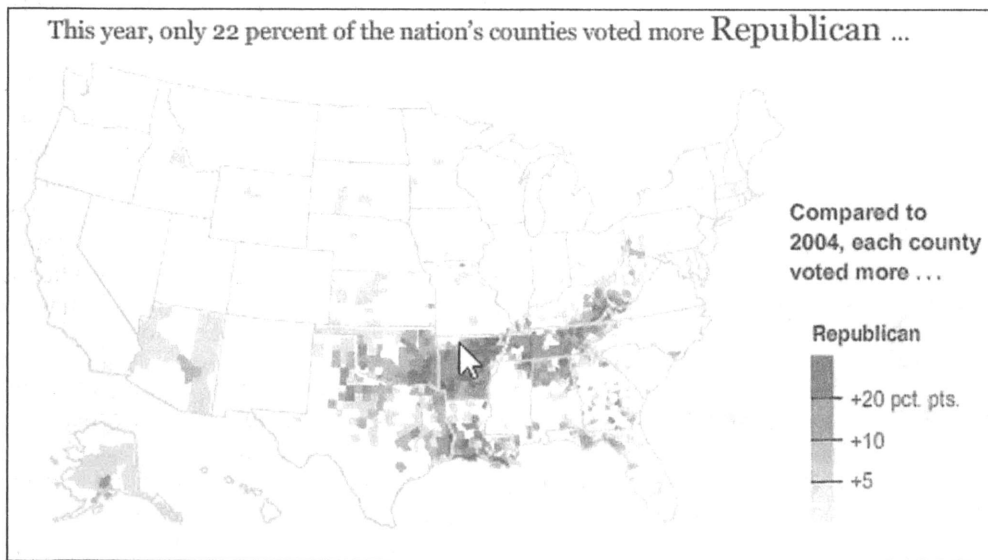
— RODOLFO L., HOUSTON, TEXAS

out to young voters, and in many places young white voters responded. In six Southern states, 40 percent of whites under the age of 30 voted for Barack Obama. In North Carolina, Obama’s level of young white support was 56 percent — one of the highest in the nation.

Black Belt Power: But the media’s focus on white voters is, of course, deceptive — and has more than a tint of racism, given the long history of “Southern” being equated with “white.”

The 2008 elections also showed the growing political power of African-Americans, Latinos and other voters of color. Barack Obama was uniquely positioned to prove that mobilizing this multi-racial base could tip the scales toward victory. An Associated Press analysis found that a 20 percent rise nationally among minority voters — 5.8 million total — was critical to Obama’s victories in several key states.

The voting surge was especially clear among African-American voters in the South, for whom the 2008 elections held a special importance. With over 42 percent of the nation’s black population living in 13 Southern states, African-Americans flexed their political muscle like never before.



THE MCCAIN BELT

22% of counties in the country voted more Republican between 2004 and 2008, concentrated in majority-white counties in Appalachia and the Great Plains. Source: *The New York Times*, November 2008

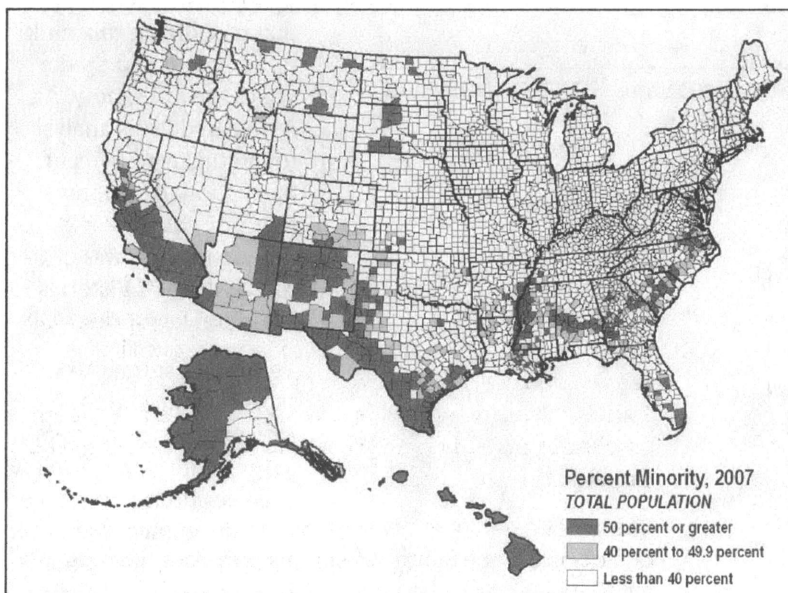
Many pundits dismissed the value of Obama's central strategy of boosting the African-American vote in the South, saying it wouldn't be enough for victory. But it was certainly key to Obama's win in North Carolina, where over 300,000 black voters registered in 2008, and turnout among African-Americans soared from 59 percent in 2004 to 74 percent in 2008.

The surging black vote proved critical in dozens of down-ticket races as well. North Carolina Democrats picked up a U.S. Senate seat and won the governorship on the strength of the boost in African-American voters.

The 2008 U.S. Senate contest in Georgia also offers a cautionary tale for candidates who think they can take the Southern black vote for granted. Democrat Jim Martin was able to force a run-off against incumbent Sen. Saxby Chambliss on Nov. 4, despite winning only 30 percent of the white vote. When African-American turnout dropped in the runoff race, Martin was trounced by a 14-point margin.

The Multi-Racial South: The color of Southern politics in 2008 wasn't just black and white. Gwinnett County and other key areas of the South also offered a glimpse of the South's multi-racial political future, including a rapidly-growing number of "majority-minority" counties.

Southern states have the fastest-growing Latino population in the country. Combined with an already-large African-American electorate and other voters of color, hundreds of Southern counties are, or are poised to be, "majority-minority."



MAJORITY-MINORITY COUNTIES

The South's large African-American and fast-growing Latino populations are giving rise to many "majority-minority" counties. The number is expected to double in a generation. Source: Population Reference Bureau, 2008

The electoral clout of this demographic transformation will be increasingly felt over the next generation. According to Census figures, the number of Southern majority-minority counties is projected to double in the next 20 years, moving entire states like Georgia and Mississippi into the majority-people of color column.

The political power of this new multi-racial majority is already being felt in places like Gwinnett County, Ga. But it's also a harbinger of a broader trend underway in states from Louisiana to North Carolina and even Arkansas, which has the fastest-growing Latino population in the nation.

TIME TO WRITE OFF THE SOUTH?

Despite the South's hotly contested races and signs of change across the region, many of the nation's political observers ironically saw instead in 2008 evidence of the South's marginalization.

"What may have ended on Election Day," intoned Adam Nossiter of *The New York Times* in a widely-circulated piece, "is the centrality of the South to national politics." Dozens of commentators argued that Republicans are becoming a "regional party" based in the South, implying that the region was a bastion of red-state conservatism.

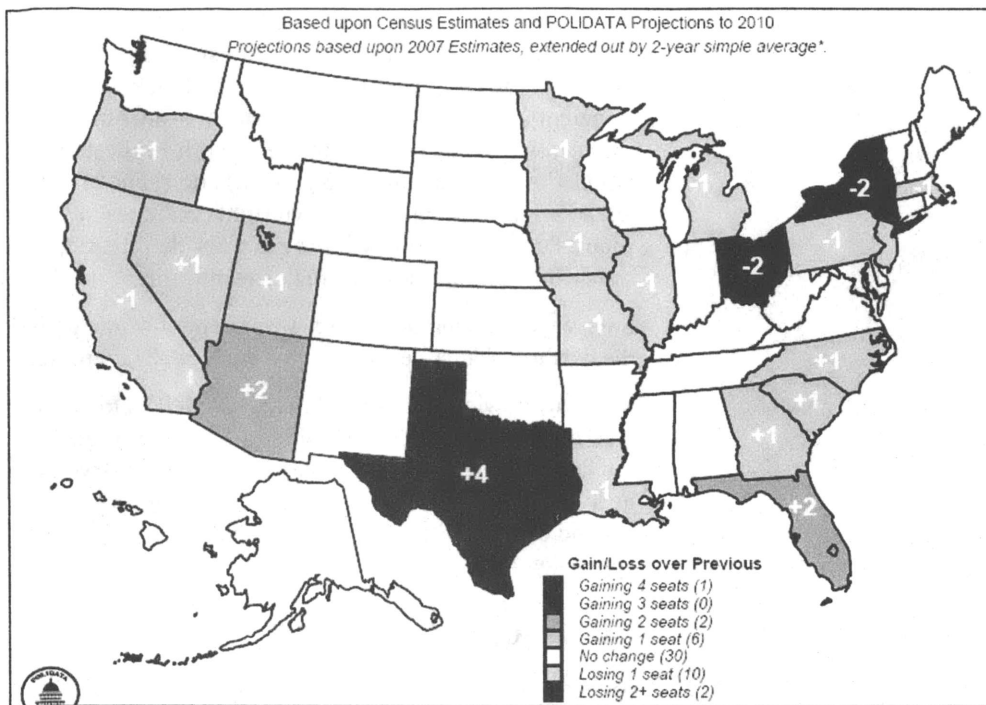
The popular New York website Gawker put it more bluntly: "North finally wins Civil War."

Leading the pack of pundits eager to write off the South was Tom Schaller, a political scientist and author of the 2006 book *Whistling Past Dixie*, which argued that the South was no longer a politically important region, especially for the Democrats.

Schaller's passion for downplaying the South's significance has occasionally put him on the wrong side of history. In July 2008, Schaller declared in a *New York Times* column that "Mr. Obama can write off Georgia and North Carolina" — advice that Obama wisely ignored, winning N.C. and making the Republicans fight for the Peach State.

It wasn't the first time Schaller was wrong. In 2006, he famously declared he was "certain" now-Sen. Jim Webb (D) would lose in Virginia. But the string of bad calls and Obama's success in the South hasn't silenced Schaller and others who see the South as unchanging and irrelevant — it seems to have only emboldened them.

The zeal of pundits to write off the South now is odd not only because it comes at a time when the South is rapidly changing — it's also being said at a moment when the



ELECTORAL POWER SHIFTING SOUTH

After the 2010 Census, fast-growing Southern states are projected to gain nine Congressional seats and Electoral College votes, mostly at the expense of states in the Midwest and Northeast.

Source: PoliData, 2007

South's political clout is clearly on the rise.

The fuel behind the South's rising political stature is its skyrocketing size. Two-thirds of the nation's fastest-growing counties are in the South, and half of the 10 states with the biggest population gains are in the region.

The South's growth is expected to translate into a big jump in electoral influence after the 2010 Census. Every 10 years, Congressional seats and Electoral College votes are reapportioned among the 50 states based on the latest Census counts. If the South's population boom holds steady, this will mean Southern states will play an even bigger role in Congress and choosing future presidents.

"When the phone call came, I cried"

I am a fifty-plus black woman whose mother is still alive in Mobile, Ala. Her family was sharecroppers in rural Mississippi. She voted when there was a poll tax in Alabama, and she and my aunt would save all year to pay it in order to vote. Still it was difficult, but they persevered and overcame these adversities. After the election was called, she phoned me in tears. Until that moment I had not cried. But once the call came from her, I cried for the sheer magnitude of the moment in history that gave my mother the opportunity to finally shed tears of joy. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity that this election has granted — not only for me and my family but most of all for my mother, who is almost 90.

— BESSIE M., MOBILE, ALA.

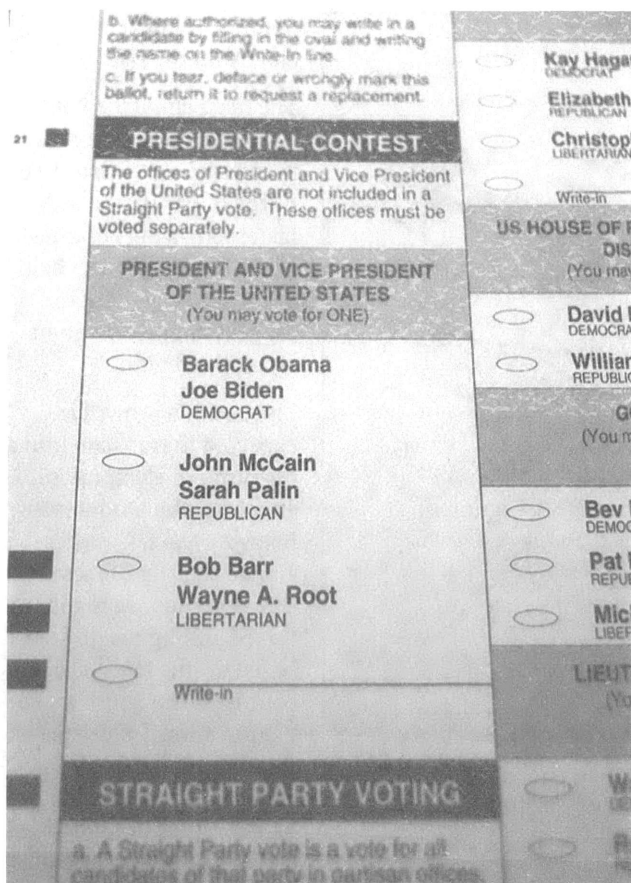
As the Associated Press reported in 2008:

Fast-growing Southern states could gain nine new congressional seats after the 2010 census, largely at the expense of their neighbors to the north, judging from the latest government data.

Georgia and North Carolina's delegations in the U.S. House would overtake New Jersey's, for example, while Florida would catch up with New York, according to projections based on a July 2007 population snapshot released by the Census Bureau last month. Texas would be the biggest gainer.

This hardly sounds like a region in political decline. But that's exactly what pundits have argued after the 2008 elections. Adam Nossiter's Nov. 11 story in the Times, entitled "For the South, a Waning Hold on National Politics," argued that this year "voters from Texas to South Carolina and Kentucky may have marginalized their region for some time to come."

This reveals Nossiter's first mistake: He changes the definition of "the South" to suit his purposes. Leaving out Florida, North Carolina and Virginia — the Southern states that make up one-third of the South's Electoral College votes — certainly makes it easier to downplay the South's importance. But is it right?



(Photo by Digital Papercuts/Flickr)

How soon the pundits forget: Just years ago, these states were electing Senators like Jesse Helms in North Carolina and George Allen in Virginia. Virginia was the capitol of the Confederate States of America from 1861 and 1865, and Richmond is still home to the only Museum of the Confederacy. And the same demographic and economic changes underway in a state like North Carolina can also be found in Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. Are they also at risk of being defined out of the South?

But The New York Times analysis also reflects a larger failure to understand the extent and impact of such changes in the South. For example, Nossiter's dispatch from a small town in Alabama fails to quote a single non-white expert or person-on-the street. This racial blind-spot, typical of much Southern political coverage, leads to passages like this:

Less than a third of **Southern whites** voted for Mr. Obama, compared with 43 percent of whites nationally. By leaving the mainstream so decisively, the **Deep South and Appalachia** will no longer be able to dictate that winning Democrats have Southern accents or adhere to conservative policies on issues like welfare and tax policy. [emphasis added]

Note the casual conflation of “the Deep South and Appalachia” with “Southern whites,” especially bizarre given that the Deep South is home to the Black Belt. Apparently, Nossiter couldn't find any African-American voters in Alabama, a state with the seventh-highest black population in the country (26 percent) and scene of the iconic Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches in the 1960s. Or any other non-white voters, for that matter, in a state where 22 counties are “majority minority.”

Even white Alabama Democrats, 47 percent of whom pulled the lever for Obama, seem to escape the New York reporter.

But to acknowledge these realities — as well as the more than 19 million voters in 13 Southern states who voted for the first African-American president in history — would be to also admit that the South remains a vibrant, changing and critical political region, something many pundits appear loathe to do.

A NEW SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Aside from affirming the South's competitiveness and clout, the 2008 elections also pointed to the outlines of a new progressive Southern Strategy for political change. A few of the lessons and elements for success revealed this election year:

Mobilize the New Majority: Barack Obama's campaign was successful in key Southern states because of its unique ability to mobilize the core elements of the New Majority in the South: a growing coalition of African-American, Latino, urban and young white voters. Other demographic groupings, like single women and Asian-American voters, are also part of a changing electorate that is realigning Southern politics.

Build at the Base: Nationally, political parties have gradually moved from neighborhood-based institutions to high-tech operations focused on TV ads and direct mail. The Obama campaign revived a “bottom-up” style of organizing reminiscent of the civil rights movement — and, more recently, the Christian Coalition — that greatly expanded its vitality, reach and impact. In North Carolina, Obama

“It's mind-boggling”

My father was a part of the civil rights movement. He was active in his small town to get people to vote. His life was threatened several times, but he continued. To know that information and to see that we have a black president after not being able to vote is mind-boggling.

— VITA, ROCKY MOUNT, N.C.

had 50 field offices and some 21,000 volunteers and staff fanned out across the state, knocking on doors, engaging voters and making sure they got to the polls.

The Power of the Pocketbook: The economy was the big issue in 2008, and showed how economic populism can resonate with a diverse range of Southern voters. In a state like North Carolina, with everything from banks to manufacturing in crisis and the unemployment rate edging above 8 percent, the ability of Obama to speak to “Main Street” pocketbook issues was critical to victory. It also helped win over a share of working-class and poor whites: While only 35 percent of N.C. white voters overall picked Obama, the number jumped to 42 percent for whites making under \$50,000 a year.

Defend Voting Rights and Promote Electoral Reform: Voting reforms played an important and under-reported role in helping progressive candidates in 2008. Millions of voters used no-excuse early voting in eight Southern states, and activists successfully used early voting to ensure voters got to the polls. In Florida and Virginia, bi-partisan reforms of draconian felon disenfranchisement laws restored the voting rights of tens of thousands of voters — especially African-Americans. North Carolina’s new law allowing same-day registration and voting during the early voting period was especially critical, being used by 92,000 new voters.

You Win When You Try: On the Monday before Nov. 4, Barack Obama visited three states to make his all-important final case for the presidency: Florida, North Carolina and Virginia. Obama’s last-minute stumping capped

“I wish he had lived to see this day”

I am white, my husband was black. He passed away last year. I wish he had lived to see this day. But I was a volunteer for this campaign and through me he did. We won.

— CLAUDE R., BAY HARBOR ISLANDS, FLA.

dozens of visits to these states by campaign surrogates. He targeted the South with tens of millions of dollars in TV ads, set up hundreds of campaign offices and mobilized hundreds of thousands of volunteers. The pay-off of 55 Electoral College votes showed what happens when candidates ignore the conventional wisdom and have the will and resources to fight for Southern states.

One can only hope that progressives absorb these lessons — and when looking at the South, they continue to ignore the pundits and instead say, “Yes, We Can.”

Chris Kromm is executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies and publisher of Southern Exposure and the Institute’s new online magazine, Facing South.



(Photo by Steve Rhodes/Flickr)

“The country that we loved had not loved us — but if we persisted, a change would come”

Growing up in East Los Angeles in the early 1940s in a multicultural community helped to shape my perceptions of life. When my family moved back to Texas in the late 1940s, I was in cultural shock. The diversity I had known was gone. I attended a black school, went to a black movie theater, all of our neighbors were black. It was then that I experienced racism. Being chosen by my teachers to speak on school programs because of my flawless pronunciation but being criticized by my classmates because I talked “too proper.”

The next cultural shock was having to sit at the back of the bus ... seeing the little sign that had “white” on one side and “colored” on the other. It was the point of demarcation. But, it moved further back as more whites needed seating space. Los Angeles did not have those restrictions and/or designations.

The next cultural shock for me was at the age of 6, when my Mama took me shopping. When I needed to go to the bathroom, I could not help but notice there were two ladies’ rooms. One had a sign that read “WHITE.” The other had a sign that read “COLORED.” Being a curious child, I went into both. There was no difference.

Then came the water fountain experience. Side-by-side, at Weingarten’s, where we rode the bus to do our grocery shopping, were two water fountains. One read “WHITE,” the other “COLORED.” I drank from both. I thought surely the “COLORED” water fountain must put out some delicious flavored water. You know, something like Kool-Aid. I was wrong.

It must have been those early childhood experiences that motivated me to become a civil rights activist at the age of 17. I marched. I sat. I carried signs. These things I did against the wishes of my parents. I had to do it. It was gratifying to protest at the very stores that I had so often visited with my Mama.

In early 1960, I moved to Washington, D.C. with the younger of my two brothers. He was entering medical school at Howard University. Another culturally shocking experience. This was a city where black people were everywhere. They had great jobs,

drove fine cars and many lived in very nice homes. There were no “COLORED” and “WHITE” signs around.

Within a week I had taken the civil service exam and obtained a job working for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. A couple of years later, I got a job at Freedmen’s Hospital, adjacent to Howard University. Black people were different there. They discussed politics and social issues, and employment opportunities were abundant.

Then, I became an activist once again. There were activities with people like Stokely Carmichael, Rev. Walter Fauntroy. Then, in 1963, the city was all revved up because the March on Washington was to be held there.

I had to work at Freedmen’s Hospital that day. But by 1 o’clock I could not work any longer. I told my supervisor that I had to go. There was no way that I could be there and not participate in the march. I could not miss the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak. It was an experience I shall never forget. The sea of people of all colors, of all backgrounds and income levels marching together for equality of all.

And now, on Nov. 4, 2008, the nation has voted, overwhelmingly, to elect Barack Hussein Obama as president. For me, this was not a campaign that began on the steps of a building in Philadelphia. Rather, it was the culmination of the efforts of thousands of people, just like me, who had realized the need to create a more perfect union, that the country that we loved had not loved us but if we persisted, if we would try and try again, a change would come.

This election represents the sacrifices of all of those who have been here and gone. People like Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, Rev. Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till and countless others. It is the victory of the prayers of our enslaved ancestors who prayed for real freedom and equality. And now, the torch has been passed to Barack Obama to serve as a beacon of light for all the world to see.

— JOAN C.M., HOUSTON, TEXAS

“A Divide Has Been Erased”

*Civil rights veteran and co-founder of the Institute for Southern Studies
Julian Bond reflects on the meaning of Barack Obama's victory*

By Brevy Cannon



Julian Bond watches coverage of Election Night 2008. (Photo by Jane Haley)

Julian Bond has several things in common with President-elect Barack Obama.

Both were state legislators for several years before running an unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Both gave stirring speeches at the Democratic National Convention that launched them into the national spotlight. Both eventually mounted a presidential campaign — though with wildly different results.

Obama's 2008 victory came more than 40 years after Bond was first elected to the Georgia Legislature in 1965,

and much has changed in the intervening years. Bond has had a front-row perspective on many of those changes, from his personal involvement in the civil rights movement, beginning with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s to his leadership as chairman of the NAACP since 1998, a position he has announced he will step down from in 2009.

Today, Bond is also a professor of history at the University of Virginia, where he has talked with black leaders (including President-elect Obama) through the Explorations in Black Leadership project. In this interview with UVA Today

“The call for action has been sent out”

YES I CAN! Barack Obama's victory has inspired me to get more involved in my community and politics. Both Michelle and Barack have encouraged me to be of service to others less fortunate, and passionate in what I believe in. The call for ACTION has been sent out.

— KAREN, CONYERS, GA

magazine, Bond reflects on Obama's victory and its connection to the Southern movement and social change.

UVA Today: What seminal moments of the Civil Rights Movement led to Obama's election?

Bond: In the modern-day Civil Rights Movement, by which I mean the movement of 1960s, the most important moments would have been the beating at the Selma bridge and the subsequent passage in Congress, and signing into law by President Johnson, of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

That absolutely transformed the politics of America. It gave black people in the South access to the franchise, which they had been absolutely denied in the previous hundred-odd years. It created a great shift in Southern politics, as resistant white Democrats fled to the Republican Party, and it made the Republican Party the party of choice for white Southerners. And it enabled black people to begin electing other black people to public office.

I got elected to the Georgia Legislature in the afterglow of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Literally dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of others followed in the wake.

So, those collected events — the march on the bridge, the beating on the bridge and the passage of the Voting Rights Act — those things are the significant moments in the modern-day Civil Rights Movement that created Barack Obama.

UVA Today: You were quoted previously as saying that you didn't think the election of an African American to president would come to pass in your lifetime.

Bond: No, I had no indication that it would or could. I had seen Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton run for president. I ran myself in 1976 in a spectacularly unsuccessful campaign. But I had no indication that something like this could happen. I didn't think white Americans would vote for a black candidate in any appreciable numbers, and, as a consequence, there was no way this could happen. So, it was not until Obama won Iowa, and I could see that in the whitest of American states, a black candidate could come out triumphantly, that it

began to be possible to me.

UVA Today: So, do you think America has changed more than you had given it credit for?

Bond: Yes I do. I don't want to overemphasize the change, but I think to ignore it is to blind yourself to the reality of what happened. A divide that existed between the political fortunes of black and white Americans has just been erased, and I guess it's been erased for all time.

I think this will happen again, perhaps not in the immediate future, but it will happen again. Again it will happen with a woman candidate. The things we used to think could not happen, have happened. And once having happened, they'll happen again

UVA Today: Could you summarize what you think Obama becoming president means for young black Americans?

Bond: Well, first it means for their parents, they don't have to lie when they say, “You can be anything.” Now they are telling the truth. The possibilities are just endless. ... Not everybody can do everything, but you can do this, and you can do much more.

I think it's going to make a great change in black America. People whose ambitions may have been limited to, say, the McDonald's counter or some kind of menial job requiring little or no education, are going to see what can happen if you prepare yourself, if you make yourself ready.

Not everybody has to go to Harvard or Harvard Law School. Not everybody has to be in the upper atmosphere of American education. But you now see what happens when you are trained and ready and experienced. Then great things open up to you.

I think younger black people are going to take that lesson and prepare themselves in ways we've not seen them prepare themselves before. And I think parents, of course, will take that lesson and say to their children, “Look what happens when you bear down, study hard; when you pull your pants up and you don't walk around with droopy drawers; when you act like you are somebody, that you think you're somebody, then other people will think so too.”

UVA Today: Is there anything people shouldn't take from this election?

Bond: I think they are probably some white Americans who voted for him enthusiastically, who thought to themselves, “If I vote for him and he wins, racial discrimination and prejudice will have vanished in America, and his election will be proof of that.” I think that's just 2,000 percent over-emphasis on simply casting a vote and simply electing this person of African descent. It's a signal moment in America. It's a great moment for all of us. It's a great

moment for the country. We demonstrated something to ourselves and we demonstrated something to others.

But we haven't eliminated racial discrimination, and we ought not take his election as proof of that. This is proof that we're a better country now than we were the day before. But you can't overemphasize it and make it into something it's not.

UVA Today: Does Obama remind you of any particular black leader from the past?

Bond: He did remind me of someone, and that was Roy Wilkins, who was a longtime head of the NAACP. The points of similarity among them are that both were mild-mannered people. I never heard Roy Wilkins shout or yell. I heard him speak a number of times; he never raised his voice. He almost spoke in a monotone. He always was deliberate in speech, deliberate in what he said.

They're different in political outlook because I'm not sure Roy Wilkins would have opposed the Iraq war or would have even engaged it at all.

UVA Today: What about from the standpoint of political presentation?

Bond: [Obama] didn't try to hide his race, but his race wasn't the basis upon which he was running for office. ... But it's very much a part of him, a part of him he's not ashamed of. So, he's not pushing it to the side. He's saying, in effect, "This is me. This is my story. This is my biography. This is where I come. This is what shaped me. And I'm an American like all the rest of you."

Of course, he had trouble convincing people of that. Some people today believe he was foreign-born, and that he's a Muslim. There are people that will go to their deaths thinking that he is a Muslim, no matter how many times he says he's not. He found a way of presenting himself [that's] not an adopted pose, or contrived situation. It's just the way he is. He thinks of himself as a biracial American.

UVA Today: A recent article in *Mother Jones* magazine notes how your speech to the 1968 Democratic National Convention was received with similar enthusiasm to that generated by Obama's speech at the 2004 convention, which launched his national political career. Have you reflected on the parallels between your lives?

Bond: There are some parallels, but there are so many differences, as well. Both of us made a mark at a convention. Both of us got elected to the state legislature. Both of us tried to get elected to Congress; both of us lost. And that's where the parallel ends.

Although I did run for president 1976, as I said earlier, it was spectacularly unsuccessful and really went nowhere. If you follow Obama's life and my life from the time we

both ran for the Congress and lost, there are great divergences. Part of the differences came because of where we lived. I lived in Georgia and, beyond getting elected to Congress, there was no hope that I could get elected to any higher office than that. With him, the reach for the U.S. Senate was a big reach but it was possible, and of course he proved it could be done.

UVA Today: Many, if not all, of those differences are a reflection of society's changing attitudes toward race from 1976 to today.

Bond: Surely. He enjoyed the benefit of changing times and changing attitudes, which I did not. Now, whether or not I could have over time, we don't know.

UVA Today: Do you reflect back on how things could have gone differently?

Bond: I tend not to look back and reflect. I look forward. I do have a basement full of bumper stickers from '76 that I'm trying to get rid of.

Brevy Cannon is a general assignment writer for *UVA Today*, an official publication of the University of Virginia.

*"My parents did not live to see this day
— this election was a win for them"*

I grew up in Tuskegee, Ala. in a family of activists. Although my parents were federal employees, they were also staunch supporters of the Civil Rights Movement. My sister and I were plaintiffs in the case of *Lee vs. Macon County Board of Education*. We marched, demonstrated and were very visible in the protest in our state. I would see my father come home from his job at the V.A., drawn, tired, and strained. I did not learn until I was grown with a family of my own that he was being harassed at work, denied promotions, threatened with termination, and falsely disciplined, all because of my sister's and my involvement in the integration of the public schools and the local demonstrations. He had been told that all his worries at work would be over, he'd get his promotion, if he just pulled his daughters out of the school and stopped them from participating in the demonstrations. My father never said a word to us, but instead, urged us on supporting us every step of the way. My parents did not live to see this day, however, this election was a WIN for them and for so many like them.

— WILMA S., MADISON, MISS.

Election 2008 by the Numbers

Number of Southern states Barack Obama won: **3 (Florida, North Carolina and Virginia)**

Out of a combined 33 presidential elections in those three states since 1968, number of times they had previously voted for a Democrat: **3**

Percent of the South's total Electoral College votes those three states represent today: **33**

Of the 10 states nationally with the biggest increase in voter turnout between 2004 and 2008, number in the South: **6***

Of the 111 urban U.S. counties that shifted Democrat in the presidential vote, number in the South: **32**

Percent of the 2008 presidential vote nationally that came from urban or suburban counties with a population density of 500 people per square mile or more: **50**

Percent of those counties that were in the South: **35**

Percent of those Southern high-density counties that voted for Obama: **58**

Of the 100 fastest-growing counties in the nation, percent in the South: **66**

Number of Electoral College and Congressional seats Southern states are expected to gain after 2010 Census: **9**

According to exit polls, percent of white U.S. voters who voted for Obama: **43**

Percent of white North Carolina voters who voted for Obama: **35**

Percent of white North Carolina voters under 30 who voted for Obama: **56**

Percent of self-identified Hispanic voters who voted for Obama: **67**

Percent of Miami-Dade Cuban-Americans over age 65 who voted for McCain: **84**

Percent of Miami-Dade Cuban-Americans 29 or younger who voted for Obama: **55**

Number of Southern states that now have Democratic governors and legislatures: **3****

Number with Republican governors and legislatures: **4*****

Number where control is split between the parties: **6******

Number of voters on Florida's "no match" list whose votes were at risk of going uncounted in 2008: **more than 12,000**

Percent of those on the no-match list who are African-American or Hispanic: **55**

Of 20,000 voter registration applications processed in Florida over a three-week period before the election, percent that came up as mismatches due to typographical or administrative errors: **75**

Number of states that got letters from the Social Security Administration questioning the "extraordinarily high" number of requests to match newly registered voters with Social Security information: **6**

Number of those states that are in the South: **3 (Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina)**

Number of match requests submitted by Georgia, excluding duplicate submissions caused by computer error: **more than 747,000**

Total number of new voters registered in Georgia in 2008: **406,000**

Number of registered Georgia voters told they would have to cast "challenge" ballots that wouldn't be counted on election day because their citizenship was in question: **4,770**

Number of hours people in Georgia's Cobb County stood in line to cast early ballots in November 2008: **2**

Wait for some early voters in Georgia's Clayton County, a predominantly African-American suburban community: **12 hours**

Length of the wait to cast an early ballot in some parts of Florida: **5 hours**

Year in which Florida's Republican-controlled legislature restricted the capacity of early voting sites: **2005**

Date on which Florida Gov. Charlie Crist (R) issued an executive order reversing the legislature and extending early voting hours: **10/28/2008**

Estimated number of Americans who have currently or permanently lost their voting rights because of a felony conviction: **5.3 million**

Of those, number who are ex-offenders that have completed their sentences: **2.1 million**

Number of African-American men who are disenfranchised as a result of a felony conviction: **1.4 million**

Factor by which African-American men's disenfranchisement exceeds the national average: **7**

Given current incarceration rates, portion of the next generation of black men who can expect to be disenfranchised at some point in their lives: **3 in 10**

Number of states that deny the right to vote to all convicted felons for life: **2**

Of those states, number in the South: **2 (Kentucky and Virginia)**

Percent of South Carolina elections officials who answered incorrectly when surveyed shortly before the 2008 election about ex-felons' voting rights: **48**

Estimated number of ex-felons who were unable to vote in Florida during the 2004 election: **960,000**

George Bush's winning margin over John Kerry in the state: **380,978**

* In descending order, the states are: North Carolina, Virginia, District of Columbia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, Alabama, Indiana, Rhode Island.

** Arkansas, North Carolina, West Virginia

*** Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas

**** Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia

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Hope For The Gulf Coast?

President-elect Barack Obama made Gulf Coast recovery a key theme of his campaign. Today, thousands of struggling residents – including those still displaced by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike – are prepared to make sure Obama lives up to his promises.

By Sue Sturgis

“Let New Orleans be the place where we strengthen those bonds of trust, where a city rises up on a new foundation that can be broken by no storm. Let New Orleans become the example of what America can do when we come together, not a symbol for what we couldn’t do.” – Barack Obama campaign speech in New Orleans, Aug. 26, 2007

More than three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast, the ongoing disaster in the region appears to have vanished from the Bush administration’s radar — at the very time the region is struggling with fresh destruction from a new round of deadly storms in 2008.

Indeed, the last pronouncement from the White House about the Gulf Coast came on Aug. 31, when President Bush announced he was forgoing the Republican National Convention to visit evacuees of Hurricane Gustav, the Category 2 storm that made landfall on the Louisiana coast, causing \$4 billion in damage and killing 43 people in the U.S.

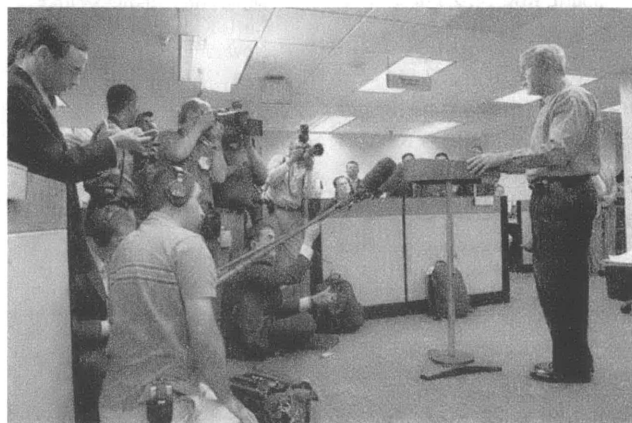
Less than two weeks later, Hurricane Ike — another Cat 2 storm — came ashore at Galveston, Texas, killing 82 people and racking up \$27 billion in damage to become the third-costliest U.S. hurricane since Katrina in 2005 and Andrew in 1992.

With their communities’ needs over-shadowed by the 2008 elections, leaders across the Gulf expressed frustration over the lack of federal attention to Gustav and Ike’s devastation. A week before Thanksgiving, Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R) blasted what he called a “broken” federal recovery system for allowing displaced people to still be sleeping in cars and tents while mountains of storm

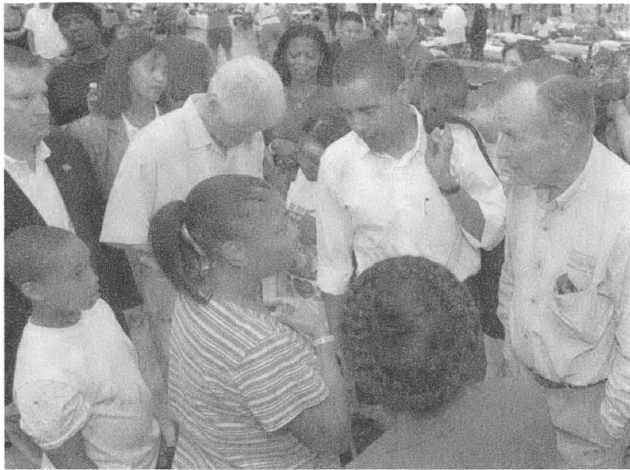
debris — possibly containing human bodies—festered untouched. Local officials in Texas and Louisiana complained that FEMA was slow to reimburse them for storm-related expenses, pushing local governments to the brink of financial collapse.

But Gulf Coast recovery advocates see hope in the election of Barack Obama, who has long championed the region’s needs.

“It means a chance for a do-over,” says James Perry, executive director of Americans for Gulf Coast Recovery, a citizens’ lobby created in 2006. “Katrina fatigue had become the norm, but this new administration has said Gulf Coast reconstruction is a priority. We’re already getting calls from people close to the administration asking about what they need to go back and correct.”



At an August 2008 FEMA briefing on the threat presented by Hurricane Gustav, President Bush announced that he would skip the Republican National Convention to meet with evacuees. (White House photo by Chris Greenberg)



Barack Obama joined former presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush in meeting with Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Houston's Reliant Center in September 2005. (Photo from Harris County Joint Information Center)

THE PRESIDENT'S PROMISES

Perry, an attorney who also directs the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, argues that Obama and Congressional Democrats owe their 2008 electoral successes in part to the Bush administration's mishandling of the Katrina crisis, which was a key political turning point.

"Before the disaster, it was difficult to criticize the Iraq War," Perry says. "But when the storms happened, people started to question the administration. How can they handle a war if they can't save New Orleans? This created an opening, and it's part of why the Obama campaign had great respect for the region."

Perry and others point out that Obama's concern for the Gulf Coast didn't start only after he entered the presidential race. Days after Katrina blew ashore, the Senator from Illinois visited evacuees in Houston along with former Presidents Clinton and Bush — the first of Obama's four official post-disaster trips to the region. Afterward, Obama blasted the "unconscionable ineptitude" of the government storm response:

"[W]hoever was in charge of planning and preparing for the worst case scenario appeared to assume that every American has the capacity to load up their family in an SUV, fill it up with \$100 worth of gasoline, stick some bottled water in the trunk, and use a credit card to check in to a hotel on safe ground," he said. "I see no evidence of active malice, but I see a continuation of passive indifference on the part of our government towards the least of these."

Obama went on to introduce a number of Katrina-related proposals in the Senate. They included legislation to create a national emergency family locator system, launch an emergency volunteer corps, establish better oversight of recovery spending, speed tax refunds to Katrina victims, require evacuation plans to account for the most vulnerable, extend the Child Tax Credit to low-income parents in disaster-affected counties and end no-bid reconstruction contracts.

Obama also made the need for Gulf Coast rebuilding a key theme of his presidential campaign. He released a plan that included proposals to strengthen New Orleans' levee and pumping systems, boost crime control, ensure federal reconstruction money reaches local communities, rebuild hospitals, and recruit doctors to the region. He also called for fixing FEMA by requiring the director to have professional emergency management experience, serve a fixed six-year term to insulate him or her from politics, and report directly to the President.

"The words 'never again' cannot be another empty phrase," Obama said during an Aug. 26, 2007 campaign tour of New Orleans' hard-hit Gentilly Woods neighborhood. "It cannot become another broken promise."

"Because of this election I am optimistic about my son's future"

My father Ezekiel Rankin was one of five black men to register in Jefferson County, Miss. since Reconstruction. He served this country as a military policeman in the Army and saw some of the most degrading situations on the way home from World War II. One that stands out in my mind is when he and some other soldiers were waiting to get on a bus to come home and an elderly white woman said something to a soldier from Chicago and he was beaten right there at the bus station because the woman stated that he was an "uppity nigger." This stood out in my father's mind until death, because if he had gotten involved he would not have made it home himself. He stated that you could see the hatred in others' eyes as they entered the bus. Oh, how I wish my dad was here to express to me his feelings about the election. Because of this election I am very optimistic about my son's future. I now can say to him without reservation that you can be anything that you set out to be.

— REGINA R., LORMAN, MISS.



Residents of Oak Island, Texas were still living in tents made of tarps in late October 2008, more than a month after Ike destroyed their homes. (FEMA photo by Patsy Lynch)

A STALLED RECOVERY

Gulf Coast residents are hoping this is more than just political rhetoric as they grapple with a host of formidable obstacles to recovery.

One of the most daunting is a severe shortage of affordable housing. Skyrocketing rents — 46 percent higher in New Orleans today than before Katrina — have made it difficult for many storm-displaced families to find affordable housing. At the same time, government programs to help small landlords rebuild have proven ineffective.

A recent Associated Press investigation found that \$850 million in federal aid meant for mom-and-pop landlords was stuck in bureaucratic red tape at Louisiana's Small Rental Property Program, which is run by private contractor ICF International of Virginia—the same company whose troubled performance running the state's Road Home rebuilding program for homeowners led state lawmakers to call for the cancellation of its contract. While the Small Rental Property Program promised to help as many as 13,000 small landlords, as of November 2008 it had made grants to only 352.*

The post-storm policies of the Bush administration have only exacerbated the situation. In New Orleans, for example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development

allowed private developers to demolish almost 5,000 public housing units that sustained relatively little storm damage, with plans to replace them with mixed-income communities. HUD also allowed Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour (R) to divert \$570 million in federal funds meant for post-Katrina housing needs to expand the Port of Gulfport.

The 2008 storms further deepened the region's housing crisis, flooding 12,000 homes in Louisiana alone, according to the Louisiana Recovery Authority. Many of those displaced by Gustav and Ike were still homeless two months later. And while FEMA is no longer distributing the temporary travel trailers that were found to be contaminated with dangerously high levels of health-damaging formaldehyde after Katrina, it still hasn't come up with a functional alternative for providing temporary housing after disasters.

The region's housing crisis isn't confined to renters. Two of every three homeowners in Louisiana — and four of every five in New Orleans — assisted by the state's Road Home program didn't get enough money to cover needed repairs, with homeowners in historically African-American communities facing the largest shortfalls. In addition, many of those same African-American communities remain vulnerable to future disaster, with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers flood risk maps for New Orleans' neighborhoods affected by the post-Katrina levee breaches showing a reduction in potential flood levels of 5.5 feet in predominantly white neighborhoods but only between 6 inches and 2 feet in predominantly black neighborhoods.

* "Rents up in New Orleans while \$846m sits unclaimed," by John Moreno Gonzales, The Associated Press, November 24, 2008.

Serious public health problems created or exacerbated by the disasters are another barrier to recovery. These include tuberculosis among New Orleans' increased homeless population, respiratory and other health problems caused by formaldehyde in FEMA trailers, and an epidemic of malnutrition-related anemia among children living in Louisiana's largest FEMA trailer park.

At the same time, the region's badly damaged medical infrastructure has been slow to rebuild, leaving many Gulf Coast residents without adequate health care — especially New Orleans' African American residents, whose death rate jumped an estimated 50 percent in Katrina's wake.

A NEW AGENDA FOR THE GULF

Advocacy groups like Americans for Gulf Coast Recovery are gearing up to make their case to the new administration, drawing up a set of proposals to dismantle the biggest obstacles to rebuilding.

A new Gulf housing policy, Perry and others say, must start with the idea that affordable housing for those uprooted by the storms is a basic human right, as enshrined in the U.S.-approved United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

"There's an obligation to make sure every person has the right to return, regardless of income," Perry says.

While Obama's Gulf Coast recovery plan mentions the general need to boost the region's supply of rental property, Perry has some specific suggestions on how to do that. In addition to fixing Louisiana's troubled Small Rental Property Program, he also calls for increasing available tax credits that require developers to set aside some reduced-rent apartments for families earning significantly less than the area's median gross income.

Jobs are another priority for recovery advocates. In fact, many of them — including Americans for Gulf Coast Recovery — are part of the Gulf Coast Civic Works

"Change is finally here"

Before my daughter came along, race had never affected me personally. I understood why African Americans felt the way they did about history, but until I had a bi-racial (Caucasian and African-American) child, it never touched my heart the way it does now. For the first time ever, I voted. As I watched Obama's speeches, I couldn't help but look over at my 3-year-old daughter who seemed to be mesmerized by his sincere words. Even someone with little knowledge of this world recognized a gentle and genuine soul. As I prepared to vote on Tuesday, November 4, 2008, my daughter was in the distance shouting, "Go Obama, go Obama." Together, we watched the polls as Obama took the lead and my eyes teared up as I thought to myself, "Wow, I can truthfully look at my daughter one day and tell her she can be ANYTHING in the world that she wants to be and sincerely mean it." Change is finally here.

— RICKY M. LOUISVILLE, KY.

Campaign, a nonpartisan partnership of community, faith, student, labor and human rights organizations advocating federal legislation based on House Resolution 4048, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act. This legislation would establish a regional authority to fund resident-led recovery projects, creating 100,000 good-paying jobs and training opportunities for local and displaced workers to rebuild infrastructure and restore the environment — a proposal similar to Obama's plan to address the recession by making the largest investment in the nation's infrastructure since the 1950s.

A New Deal-style public works program in the region would be a major departure from current policy, but momentum for the Gulf Coast Civic Works program has been growing since Obama's election. On Nov. 14, 2008, students from 26 U.S. colleges gathered in New Orleans to draw up a campus action plan to help pass the act in the first 100 days of the Obama administration. Less than a week later, the New Orleans City Council endorsed the legislation. And in early December, the Center for American Progress — a leading liberal think tank from which Obama pulled many transition team members — requested that \$1 billion for Gulf Coast Civic Works be included in the second economic stimulus package being considered by Congress.

Meanwhile, Americans for Gulf Coast Recovery has launched a petition drive reminding Obama of his campaign promises to help the Gulf rebuild. The petition



During one of his several official trips to the Gulf Coast, Barack Obama helped paint a house at Habitat for Humanity's Musicians Village in New Orleans. (Photo from New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity)

“My mother never allowed us to say ‘I can’t’”

I am overjoyed that Barack Obama is our new president. I, along with my family, was overcome with tears of joy, pride, sorrow, and a sense of relief.

All through the election I have been discussing the struggles of our ancestors, and the fact that the struggles are still taking place. There has been change, but we have so much more to accomplish. Obama won, but he was still judged by the color of his skin. It didn't matter to some that he is the most articulate and intelligent person to ever run for president.

As I watched Black people standing in long lines to vote, young and old, I sat and cried. I also cried as my mother told me about sitting in the back of the bus, and that some buses had curtains across the back seat so whites didn't have to look at them. I thought about all of the people who were killed trying to vote, and how people are still being denied the right to vote. I thought of the sub-standard books and equipment given to Black schools, where the white schools were given all of the new books, equipment, etc. They tried to hold us back, but still we persevered. I haven't been so touched by an event in history since Dr. Martin Luther King's speech in Washington, D.C.

I pray that this election will touch our people in a way that will motivate them to strive for success, and they won't make excuses for failure. We have to remember to say, “Yes I can.” That is so important. My mother never allowed us to use “I can't,” and that has been passed down to our children. It's not in our vocabulary. Let's all instill this in our children, and one day they will see that nothing is impossible.

— GLENDA A, KATY, TEXAS

calls on the federal government to give families a voice in the recovery process, ensure access to education, invest in small businesses, streamline the federal bureaucracy, repair wetlands and create long-term disaster recovery plans for every U.S. region.

“The key is to get our new leaders' attention and to remind them of the need,” Perry says. “We have to start anew here.”

Sue Sturgis is editorial director of the Institute for Southern Studies and author of several Institute reports on the Gulf Coast recovery, most recently “Faith in the Gulf: Lessons from the Religious Response to Katrina” (2008).

“I yelled at the top of my lungs”

I sat at the back of the bus as a child during the late '50s and '60s in Alexandria, La. and was chased out of the bathroom, which said for “WHITE WOMEN ONLY.” I just wanted to see what was different than the bathroom that said “COLORED WOMEN ONLY.”

But Praise be to God, last night when Mr. Obama became the first African-American President, I went to my front door and opened it and went outside in my nice retirement community that's (of course) predominately White and YELLED to the top of my lungs: “BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.” Then my 14-year-old granddaughter decided she wanted to join me so I yelled it again. I also went to backyard and yelled it again two times. My neighbors were shooting firecrackers. It was AWESOME!!!

My granddaughter said, “In four years, Grandma and Mama, I can vote.” She also said she will be the first African-American woman President. She can, I told her, since she is already an honor student.

— JUNE M.M., MISSOURI CITY, TEXAS

Unblock The Vote

Elections in the South and around the country ran a little smoother in 2008 — but our election system still keeps millions from having a voice.

By Desiree Evans and Chris Kromm

For all of our nation's claims of being a beacon of world democracy, each election year voters discover a more troubling reality: The U.S. voting system is in fact fragile, confusing and prone to break-downs — and fails to express the political will of many citizens.

The 2008 elections were no exception. This year proved a vital testing ground for the country's election system. The conventional wisdom holds that our nation passed the test. But across the South and country, millions of voters were again denied a voice in democracy.

Long lines, dirty tricks, voting machine failures and other problems on Election Day were eased this year by an army of election watchdogs able to expose and trouble-shoot problems —including the Voting Rights Watch project of the Institute for Southern Studies, which helped bring national attention to key voting controversies in the South.

But the need for outside groups to hold election officials accountable only highlighted systemic weaknesses in the voting system. These episodic obstacles were coupled with more fundamental problems in the election system,

including battles over voter registration and denial of voting rights to citizens who have served criminal sentences.

These election glitches are more than an affront to our ideals of democracy: As 2008 reminded us, it can also tip an election. This year, the presidential race was “too close to call” in three states on election night; in North Carolina, just .32 percent — or 14,177 votes — ended up separating John McCain and Barack Obama. Three U.S. Senate races were equally close, with the Georgia seat going to a run-off.

The 2008 elections reminded us that every vote counts — but can we depend on the election system to ensure every citizen's vote is counted? Here are five areas where we can draw on the lessons of 2008 to bring us closer to a truly modern, 21st century election system that brings us a few steps closer to true democracy.

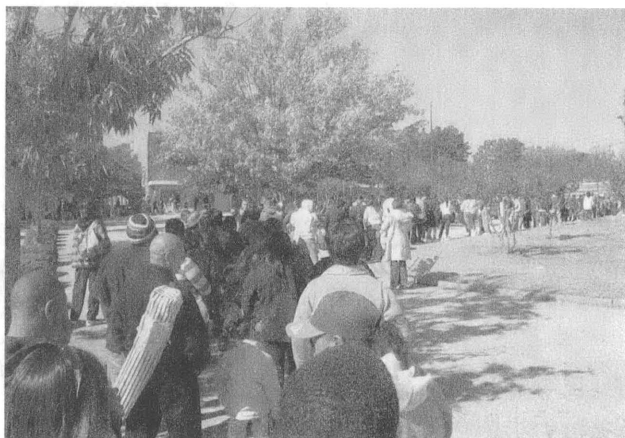
1. MAKING THE LIST: VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the weakest links in our election system is the way citizens sign up to vote. A patchwork of conflicting and restrictive laws makes it difficult for citizens to even get on the voter rolls, much less cast their vote.

In 2008, the nonprofit Election Protection coalition declared that registration problems were the most “alarming challenge to our electoral process today.” The problem isn't new: As the bipartisan Task Force on the Federal Election System chaired by Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford concluded in 2001, “The registration laws in force throughout the United States are among the world's most demanding ... [and are] one reason why voter turnout in the United States is near the bottom of the developed world.”



(Photo by Voxefxtm/Flickr)



(Photo by Boxercab/Flickr)

An October 2008 report by the Brennan Center for Justice, a nonpartisan public policy and law institute at New York University Law School, explains the ultimate impact:

Currently, in nearly every state, eligible voters are not placed on electoral rolls unless they first take the initiative to register and otherwise satisfy state-imposed requirements for voter registration. Even after they have registered, voters must start the process all over again virtually every time they move ... The result is a system where many eligible citizens are unable to vote. They fall off the rolls; they never sign up in the first place; they drift ever further away from electoral participation. Some fifty million eligible American citizens are not registered to vote.

In key Southern states, voter registration became an important battleground in 2008 — especially the issue of “vote purging.” Election officials regularly clean up or “purge” lists, but over-zealous purging put thousands of voters at risk:

- In Florida, officials reinstated a controversial “no match” law two months before the elections that removed voters if their personal information didn’t exactly match information in government databases. But the databases are notoriously plagued with errors: Florida officials found that 75 percent of about 20,000 voter registrations from a three-week period in September were mismatched due to typographical and administrative errors.
- Georgia flagged over 50,000 voters for mismatches with the national Social Security Administration database. Republican Secretary of State Karen Handel claimed she was simply complying with the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which mandates cross-checking new voter registrations. Georgia submitted 2 million names to be checked, though it chalked up many of those to a computer error. But even the 747,000 state officials

intended to send was the second-highest amount in the country — and more than the actual number of new voter registrations.

- Purging can create especially serious problems in places like the Gulf Coast, where voters have been uprooted by natural disasters and aren’t easily notified by officials. In Louisiana, officials purged 21,000 voters in 2008 — including many in areas devastated by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Gustav.

One practical solution, say voting advocates, is National Voter Registration — a system used by 24 other countries. Under this system, the federal government would have the responsibility of registering citizens and ensuring they remain registered. For example, one proposal would create a registration roll modeled after the Social Security database that would assign each person a unique voter-identification number, which would remain the same regardless of where the voter moves.

National Voter Registration would be great for voters, helping them avoid the confusing maze of conflicting state-based registration rules and requirements. It would relieve local elections officials who get bogged down each election year with new voter registrations and spend precious resources to update and verify lists. It would also allay the fears of those concerned about voter fraud by eliminating the possibility of a voter casting a ballot twice in two different states as well as ensuring glitches in voter purges don’t deny eligible citizens the right to vote.

If National Voter Registration is too big of a jump, a state-based reform that proved successful in 2008 was same-day voter registration, which allows voters to register and cast votes at the same time. First implemented in Maine in 1973, same-day registration — or Election Day Registration — is also practiced in Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming. A 2007 brief by the New York-based policy group Demos found that states with same-day registration out-perform non-EDR states in election turnout by 10 percent.

In 2008, North Carolina had its first big test with a form of same-day registration passed in 2007: same-day registration and voting at early-voting centers before Election Day. Between the primaries and general election, more than 91,700 voters in North Carolina took advantage of the law, especially historically disenfranchised voters including youth and African-Americans. North Carolina’s success has prompted states like West Virginia to also consider same-day registration during early voting.

2. EASING PRESSURE AT THE POLLS: EARLY VOTING

Early voting is one of the major success stories of the 2008 election. Thirty-two states have some form of early voting, and nearly a third of all ballots counted on Election Day came days, weeks or even a month early in the states that allow voters to cast ballots early.

Early voting helps voters not only by giving them more options about when to cast their vote, but also by providing extra time to resolve problems such as eligibility requirements. Early voting is a valuable safeguard to protect voting rights, as *The New York Times* pointed out in an Oct. 29, 2008 staff editorial titled “The Success of Early Voting”:

“Early voting actually makes it harder for the forces of disenfranchisement to stop eligible voters from casting ballots. If election officials try to require voters to present ID when it is not required by law, early voting gives voters a chance to simply return the next day. Dirty tricks are also harder to pull off. If political operatives want to jam get-out-the-vote telephone lines, as they did on Election Day in New Hampshire in 2002, it would be harder to do if people voted over two weeks.”

Although many election sites were unprepared for early voting, resulting in waits of up to six hours in Florida and Georgia, overall early voting helped smooth out problems this year. States that allowed voting as early as two weeks before Election Day experienced fewer delays and problems, and lines were shorter on Election Day in battleground states with early voting. North Carolina stood out as an especially successful example.



(Photo by Steve Rhodes/Flickr)

“I’ve seen some changes through the years”

When I was a teenager, I lived to see the white people sit on a bus and I had to stand. If I was sitting I had to let the white person set down if they were standing. I went to visit my grandma in Georgia every summer. One summer my sister and I went to one of their stores. We had to wait until the cashier finished with all the white people and then she took our money. I live to see when we went to the movies in Georgia they put all the blacks upstairs and the whites downstairs, where you can see the movie better. I’ve seen some changes through the years. I wish my dad and mom could have been here to see this.

— JEWELL L.J., MIAMI, FLA.

3. SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY: ENFORCEMENT OF VOTING LAWS

Every election year, dirty tricks and deceptive election practices rear their head, seeking to confuse, mislead and ultimately disenfranchise voters. Such practices have an especially sordid history in the South, where underhanded strategies were used by those seeking to deny African-Americans the vote after they had gained legal access to the ballot box.

Among the tactics that surfaced in Southern states in 2008:

- In Virginia, official-looking flyers distributed in the largely African-American Hampton Roads area in October 2008 instructed voters that, due to expected heavy turnout, Democrats would vote on Wednesday, Nov. 5 instead of Nov. 4. The source of the bogus flyers was never found, and Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, called in the Department of Justice. “While state officials have promised an investigation,” he said, “the violation under state law is merely a misdemeanor and does not carry the weight of federal enforcement.”
- In the North Carolina presidential primaries, the Institute for Southern Studies exposed the source of anonymous, confusing robo-calls made to tens of thousands of voters. The calls, which featured a “Lamont Williams” and encouraged the recipients to register to vote, were made by Women’s Voices Women Vote, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. Because the calls came after the registration deadline, they led many voters to fear they weren’t registered — a problem that

had cropped up from the group's activity in several other states. After the N.C. Attorney General threatened to prosecute, the group paid a \$100,000 fine that was earmarked for North Carolina schools.

- At George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. someone hacked into the e-mail system and sent students a message that appeared to come from the provost telling them — falsely — that the election had been moved to Nov. 5.

As the Virginia flyer case illustrates, the enforcement of voting laws is uneven, and violators are rarely subjected to federal prosecution. In the first five years of the Bush administration, the Voting Rights Division in the Department of Justice brought suit in only three cases under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits states and municipalities from enacting voting procedures that discriminate on the basis of race, color or a minority language group.

4. RESTORING THE VOTE: FULL CITIZENSHIP FOR FORMER FELONS

More than 40 years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, policies of felony disenfranchisement — laws that prohibit voting by people with felony convictions — still harken back to the Jim Crow era. According to a September 2008 report by The Sentencing Project, these laws bar some 5.3 million former and current felons in the United States from participating in democracy — including many who have completed the terms of their sentence.

The South has always been disproportionately impacted by felony disenfranchisement, and with the region's legacies of voter suppression and Jim Crow, these policies have been exacerbated by racial disparities. Nationally, an estimated 13 percent of African-American men today are barred from voting due to their involvement in the criminal justice system, making black men the single most disenfranchised demographic in the United States, according to The Sentencing Project.



(Photo by Esther G/Flickr)

“The pride in her voice moved me to tears”

This has been a remarkable journey. I called my Mother who lived through the years of the Civil Rights Movement, who had to sit on the back of the bus here in Alabama. To hear the pride in her voice moved me to tears. To see that a man that looks like my 6-year-old son can make a difference in this world means more to me than words. I truly believe that this is MY country now. At 36 years old, I finally feel that I am an American and not someone that just lives in the U.S. I finally feel that my voice has been heard!

— KIMBERLY P.D., BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

Since 1997, at least 19 states have amended felony disenfranchisement policies in an effort to reduce their restrictiveness and expand voter eligibility. In Florida, Republican Gov. Charlie Crist recently pushed through changes that enabled 112,000 people with felony convictions to cast ballots in 2008. In Virginia, which along with Kentucky is one of only two states that require felons to receive a reprieve from the governor to vote, Democratic Gov. Tim Kaine helped speed up approvals, enabling thousands more ex-felons to cast ballots this year.

But in Florida, only 9,000 of those who were newly enfranchised actually voted in 2008 — pointing to another problem: lack of education about the law. Vast differences between state policies and changes in state laws have confused not only voters but also election officials. According to an October 2008 study by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Brennan Center for Justice:

Across the country there is persistent confusion among election officials about their state's felony disenfranchisement policies. Election officials receive little or no training on these laws, and there is little or no coordination or communication between election offices and the criminal justice system. These factors, coupled with complex laws and complicated registration procedures, result in the mass dissemination of inaccurate and misleading information, which in turn leads to the de facto disenfranchisement of untold hundreds of thousands of eligible would-be voters throughout the country.

Groups such as the ACLU and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have brought lawsuits to challenge felon disenfranchisement, and others are calling on states to better inform voters about their rights.



(Photo by Digital Papercuts/Flickr)

5. TAKING MONEY OUT OF POLITICS

For years, election reform advocates have proposed measures to limit the influence of big money in politics. But the 2008 elections sent an ambiguous message about campaign finance reform. President-elect Barack Obama reversed an earlier pledge to accept public financing, and his campaign went on to shatter fundraising records: Campaign reports show that Obama raised nearly \$1 billion for his campaign and related election efforts, such as the White House transition.

Indeed, an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics found that most national races in 2008 were won by the candidate who spent the most. Following the pattern of previous U.S. elections, the bigger spenders won the presidency, 397 of 426 decided House races, and 30 of 32 settled Senate races.

“The 2008 election will go down in U.S. history as an election of firsts, but this was far from the first time that money was overwhelmingly victorious on Election Day,” said CRP Executive Director Sheila Krumholz. “The best-funded candidates won nine out of 10 contests, and all but a few members of Congress will be returning to Washington.”

But there are signs of hope for those concerned about the influence of money in politics. In 2002, North Carolina became the first state in the country to offer public financing — or “voter-owned elections,” as advocates put it — for candidates in judicial races. In 2008, 11 out of 12 candidates opted into the system, cutting the role of outside money.

The massive sums raised by judicial candidates — especially in states such as Alabama, Georgia and West Virginia — have always raised the specter of justice being up for sale. For example, Brent Benjamin of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals cast the deciding vote in a 3-2 ruling that spared a coal company, Massey Energy, from paying a \$50 million settlement. Massey’s chief executive, Don Blankenship, contributed \$3 million to

Benjamin’s campaign for the court in 2004; Blankenship’s money amounted to more than 60 percent of all Benjamin’s contributions. As James Sample, an attorney with the Brennan Center, argued: “It’s an egregious example of what is becoming ... [the] norm, which is that massive contributors or financial supporters for judicial candidates are now appearing in litigation before the very judges that they supported.”

“All day I had a new walk”

I grew up in rural Mississippi and helped to integrate the public school system in 1967 at the age of 15. After completing high school, I attended Jackson State University. I learned to hate from the treatment I received in high school, from the teachers and principals to the lunchroom staff. After graduating from college I was thrown into working with majority-white businesses. Because of the treatment in high school, I never learn to have a meaningful relationship with any whites. I truly thought they were devils and I treated them as such until I realized that in order to make a living I had to learn not to hate as it was causing me more harm than any of the white supervisors or co-workers. For the most part, through prayer and meditation, the hate mostly subsided. However, my level of trust had barely changed.

When I first had the opportunity to hear President Obama, I felt he could make a difference in this world. He was cool; he appeared to know the way even when we were angry at him for not getting angry. His campaign was the first that I ever donated money to. I never doubted that he would be President. On Nov. 4, 2008, I voted early in morning when I usually voted late in the evening. All day I had a new walk. I went to the Democratic celebration and I felt like I was walking on air. The question was asked of supporters of President Obama, “What if he was not able to turn around the economic conditions in this country?” My response was: The only expectation I have is that he stay as clear of mind, address the issues to best of his ability and treat everyone with respect. He did not create this nightmare. He is not GOD. But I do trust his judgment. I learned from him to begin to love everybody. That it would set me free to make the difference I want to make in my world. Thank you.

— VELMA T., JACKSON, MISS.

“He is not one — he is millions when he goes to his people”

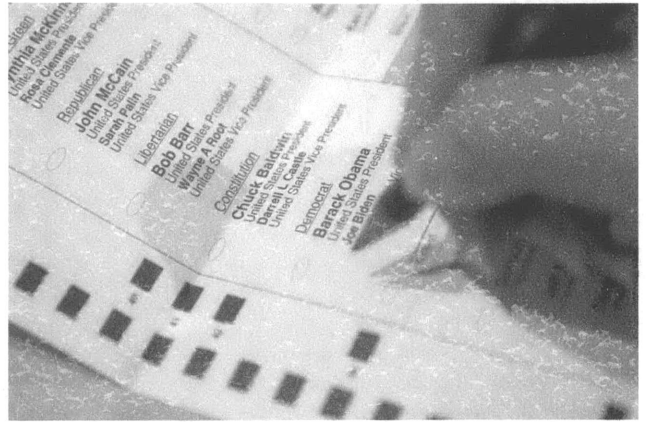
I am ready to help in the real work now that this first step is taken. When our president is in need of our support, and needs us to write or call our representatives and hold them accountable, to pressure them to get behind what our president and our nation needs, it is my deepest hope that President Obama will email us again and utilize this great grassroots network that he has ORGANIZED. AMAZING how the “organizer” was vastly underestimated!!! After all, he is not ONE, but he is MILLIONS when he goes to his people.

— HENRY M., TALLAHASSEE, FLA

A NEW MOMENT FOR REFORM?

What are the prospects for voting reform? The effort to expand and perfect democracy has a long and uneven history in the United States. As Harvard historian Alex Keyssar notes in his seminal book, *The Right to Vote*: “The history of suffrage in the United States is a history of both expansion and contraction, of inclusion and exclusion, of shifts in direction and momentum.”

At the state level, the success of early voting, same-day registration and the recent loosening of draconian laws disenfranchising ex-felon citizens give voting advocates hope that a window of opportunity has opened for expanding the franchise.

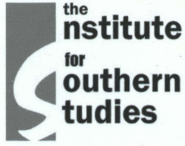


(Photo by Sacred Destinations/Flickr)

There are some hopeful signs in the transition of power in Washington as well. For example, Melody Barnes, a Virginia native tapped to lead the Obama administration’s Domestic Policy Council, is a long-time voting rights advocate, helping shepherd through Congress a 1992 amendment to the Voting Rights Act that expanded bilingual voting options — an increasingly important issue in the South.

But as the history of our country’s long struggles over voting suggest, prospects for reform ultimately depend on the electorate’s willingness and ability to demand change.

Desiree Evans is a research associate at the Institute for Southern Studies and co-editor of the Institute’s new online magazine, *Facing South*. Chris Kromm is executive director of the Institute and has authored several studies on election reform in the South.



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Founded in 1970 by civil rights veterans, the Institute is a nonprofit center that combines research, media and organizing programs to promote a democratic, just and sustainable future in the South. The Institute publishes Southern Exposure, an award-winning bi-annual print journal that explores in-depth issues important to the region. It also publishes Facing South, a widely-followed online magazine.

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