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MAGAZINE

African American Vote Significant in Presidential Primaries

By David A. Bositis

With the presidential primary season now in full swing, the significance of the African American vote, particularly in choosing the Democratic nominee, has become increasingly clear. While not particularly significant in the two states that traditionally go first in the process, Iowa and New Hampshire, the black vote will be critical in the primaries in Michigan (Jan. 15), South Carolina (Jan. 26), and Florida (Jan. 29). And on Feb. 5, when voters in states from New York

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The African American Climate Change Crisis: Quiet Nightmare or Subtle Opportunity?

By M. K. Dorsey

We live in a moment in the United States where civil rights are enshrined in the law and racial epithets are considered especially offensive. Ironically, when the attacks on people of color and low-income citizens are of an environmental nature, they are seldom met with condemnation, or modest redress, like remediation or clean-up, let alone prosecution. This reality comes after a decade of data revealing that race, not income, is the best predictor of exposure to hazardous waste, toxic chemicals and environmental harms in general. Researchers from across the country name

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“WHICH WAY FORWARD? THE NATION PREPARES TO DECIDE”

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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CLIMATE CHANGE CRISIS

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the phenomena environmental racism.

According to “Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987-2007: Grassroots Struggles to Dismantle Environmental Racism,” more than half of the 9 million people living within two miles of the nation’s hazardous waste facilities are minority residents. The report, led by Dr. Robert Bullard, a professor at Georgia’s Clark Atlanta University and the director of that university’s Environmental Justice Resource Center, was co-produced by a multi-university team of researchers from the universities of Michigan and Montana. In every single one of the 44 major metropolitan areas in the U.S., blacks are more likely than whites to be exposed to higher air toxics concentrations. California has the nation’s highest concentration of minorities living near hazardous waste facilities. Greater Los Angeles tops the nation with 1.2 million people living less than two miles from 17 such facilities, and 91 percent of them, or 1.1 million, are people of color. Statewide the figure was 81 percent.

While the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) admits “that minority and/or low-income communities frequently may be disproportionately and adversely exposed to environmental harms and risks,” reports from the EPA’s inspector general and the U.S. General Accountability Office criticize the Agency for compromising the fight against environmental racism and securing environmental justice for all Americans—minorities in particular. Indeed President Bush’s 2008 budget recommends a 28 percent cut in funds for EPA programs to combat environmental racism.

Like the disproportionate exposures to hazardous wastes, there is also a stark disparity in the United States between those who benefit from the causes of climate change and those who bear its costs.

In 2004 a joint study from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and the California based not-for-profit organization Redefining Progress revealed:

- African Americans are already disproportionately burdened by the health effects of climate change, including deaths during heat waves and from worsened air pollution. Similarly, unemployment and



Ralph B. Everett, (center), President and CEO of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, announces its climate change initiative as U. S. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and state Sen. Rodney Ellis of Texas (D) applaud.

JOINT CENTER TO BRING AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE INTO CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

WASHINGTON -- The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is launching an effort to engage the African American community on the issue of climate change. The move is being funded by the Bipartisan Policy Center, which is providing the Joint Center with a \$500,000 grant to expand its capacity to conduct climate change research and outreach.

Energy and climate change policies are vitally important to African Americans. Black communities are likely to be disproportionately affected by the health effects of climate change – particularly those related to extreme weather events like Hurricane Katrina and further degradation of air quality. They are also more likely to be harmed by rising energy prices.

“The nation’s leaders are formulating policies for a transition to a new energy economy. Those policies will have varying impacts on different socioeconomic and racial groups, and African Americans need to have a seat at the table in their formulation and implementation,” said Ralph Everett, president and CEO of the Joint Center.

The Joint Center has a long history of tackling issues of concern to African Americans and other communities of color. This grant will allow the Joint Center to build on the work it is already conducting in the environmental, health, education, and governance arenas. The funds will enable the Joint Center to hire a senior research associate, as well as to form a distinguished national advisory committee to provide policy direction and point the way to opportunities to build a broader coalition.

“African Americans are not as involved in climate change policy as they should be,” Everett said. “We need to take assertive action to beef up our research in this area. We need to jump-start the kinds of civic and political processes that are going to help the black community get ahead of the curve on climate change.”

The BPC – led by four former U.S. Senate Majority Leaders (Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole and George Mitchell) – was formed to develop and promote solutions that would attract the public support and political momentum to achieve real progress. The BPC acts as an incubator for policy efforts that engage top political figures, advocates, academics and business leaders in the art of principled compromise. In addition to advancing specific proposals, the BPC also is broadcasting a different type of policy discourse that seeks to unite the constructive center in the pursuit of common goals. Working with its National Commission on Energy Policy, the BPC is working to engage new voices in the climate change policy debate. □

economic hardship associated with climate change will fall most heavily on the African American community;

- African Americans are less responsible for climate change than other Americans. Both historically and at present, African Americans cause fewer greenhouse gases to be emitted; and
- Policies intended to mitigate climate change can generate large health and economic benefits or costs for African Americans, depending on how they are structured.

As climate worsens, African Americans will continue to disproportionately bear the substantial public health burden. EPA data reveal that more than 70 percent of African Americans live in counties that are in violation of federal air pollution standards. The number of affected African Americans will increase as rising mean air temperatures, driven by global warming, further degrade air quality by increasing low-level ozone formation.

The joint Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and Redefining Progress Report found that in the U.S., African American households emit 20 percent less carbon dioxide than white households. The report added that, “despite emitting less greenhouse gas, African American families are more vulnerable to shifts in the prices of fossil fuels, since African Americans spend a significantly higher fraction of their expenditures on direct energy purchases than non-African Americans across every income” level. Ironically then, the responsibility for driving climate change does not lie primarily with African Americans, but black communities will continue to bear the brunt of the harm as the problem worsens.

Adding pain to misery, those most adversely affected by energy prices are those living at or below the poverty line. African Americans are more than twice as likely to live in poverty and fall deeper into poverty in subsequent generations. Thus, increases in the price of energy will harm African Americans more significantly than members of the general population.

In the face of these crises there is some room for hope. But like past civil rights struggles, progress and ultimate victory will not come without a fight.

As the climate crisis worsens, reducing

carbon dioxide emissions through meaningful multilateral cooperation—coordinated by a forward thinking U.S. administration in agreement with existing international bodies like the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—is the key to protecting the nation and African American livelihoods in particular. Properly structured policies to reduce carbon dioxide have the potential to generate considerable secondary benefits by reducing emissions of particulates, oxides of sulfur and nitrogen, as well as heavy metal contaminants—all crucial to enhancing African American health and well-being. Increasingly, it will be necessary to coordinate greenhouse gas reductions with efforts to enhance air quality. The larger the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, the larger collateral health benefits might be. Small or marginal reductions in carbon dioxide will be unlikely to significantly mitigate health threats from climate change, and may even exacerbate public health problems.

There are possibilities that effective climate change legislation could generate vast revenues to mitigate existing environmental degradation presently unchecked in African American and other people of color communities, as well as protect against future harm from worsening climate change. As of early December 2007, the most recent version of the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act, the first such bill to make it through any committee in Congress, calls on the EPA to allocate what could amount to more than \$1 billion each year to “a Program for Tribal Communities to deliver assistance to those Tribal Communities within the borders of the U.S. that face disruption or dislocation as a result of global climate change.” To be sure, tribal communities deserve such compensation and arguably much, much more for generations of harm and injustice inflicted upon them by the U.S. government. Yet, failure to think and professionally legislate against heretofore, widespread and growing environmental racism faced by all people of color, Native Americans, African Americans, as well as Latinos and Asian Americans, is irresponsible. Failing to recognize or even point out such obvious shortcomings in landmark legislation by environmental groups like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Center for Clean Air Policy (CCAP) and a host of other proverbial policy-minded-

overseers underscores continued policy-blindness on the extent of environmental racism. Smart, sane climate policies are derived only when there is cooperation and consultation with grassroots community organizations and representatives across color and class lines of the country. Anything less is a recipe for further marginalization, entrenching environmental racism and climate catastrophe.

Transitioning the economy away from fossil fuels, or breaking what President Bush refers to as our addiction to them, is crucial to winning the fight against climate change. Such a transition can mean huge benefits for African Americans and communities of color broadly defined. Nine out of ten of the last economic recessions were preceded by rising fossil fuel costs. During the course of each of these downturns, African Americans were disproportionately harmed and pushed further into misery.

Kicking the addiction to oil is one key part of repeating such crises. Further on, as globalization forces further blue-collar job evaporation, labor intensive renewable energy production stands to force a tectonic economic shift from blue collar to “green collar” jobs. Just one, well planned effort, the Green Jobs Act, which passed in the House of Representatives, authorized \$125 million for a federal green job-training program -- including \$25 million specifically allocated for “pathways out of poverty” programs. Unlike the early versions of the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act, the coalition that led to House passage of the Green Jobs Act actively engaged a broad coalition of African American communities, leaders and organizations directly, in tandem with Native American, Latino and Asian Pacific Islander groups, as well as those representing disadvantaged people of all ethnic backgrounds.

On a global level, the December 2007 United Nations climate talks, held in Bali, Indonesia, are a crucial juncture for pressing for legally binding greenhouse gas reduction commitments, through coordinated multilateral action, to avert climate catastrophe. This time is also marked as moment when the African American voice is firmly inserted into the U.S. national climate change debate. □

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