

Demos

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Taking Our Seat at the Table:

Black Women Overcoming Social Exclusion in Politics



by CHARLY CARTER and CAROL LAUTIER, PH.D.

About Dēmos

Dēmos is a public policy organization working for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal chance in our economy.

Our name means “the people.” It is the root word of democracy, and it reminds us that in America, the true source of our greatness is the diversity of our people. Our nation’s highest challenge is to create a democracy that truly empowers people of all backgrounds, so that we all have a say in setting the policies that shape opportunity and provide for our common future. To help America meet that challenge, Dēmos is working to reduce both political and economic inequality, deploying original research, advocacy, litigation, and strategic communications to create the America the people deserve.

demos.org

80 Broad St., 4th Fl.
New York, NY 10004

Media Contact

media@demos.org

Introduction

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

– Shirley Chisholm, first African American woman
elected to the U. S. Congress (1968)

Progressive women of color in the Democratic party have demonstrated the power of their voices as candidates and as voters in recent months. The victories of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (New York), Stacey Abrams (Georgia), Deb Holland (New Mexico) and Ayanna Pressley (Massachusetts) have created a new sense of excitement and possibility among Democrats. Abrams and Pressley are especially noteworthy because of the rise of anti-black racism in recent years, and because black women's ability to participate in our democracy as voters and as candidates for elected office has been severely curtailed by social exclusion.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION:

[soh-shuhl ik-skloo-zhuhn]

The complex of laws, policies, and practices that deprive certain groups from robust social, economic, and democratic participation. A set of decisions and actions driven by the economically and politically powerful, enforced by police and bureaucrats, as well as simple and seemingly individual acts.

Demos

From **SOCIAL EXCLUSION: THE DECISIONS AND DYNAMICS THAT DRIVE RACISM**

Social Exclusion, Black Women, and our Democracy

Decisions, policies, and practices continue to obstruct the civic engagement of black women. For the 68 percent of black women who are paid by the hour,¹ employers' lack of flexibility on work hours often combines with poor transit service to limit access to polling sites. Certain overly aggressive voter-roll purge policies will disproportionately impact black women, as black households are more likely than the national average to have moved in the past two years and to have moved against their will.² These and other forms of social exclusion are driven by the economically and politically powerful, and enforced by employers, public officials, and police. Black women made up 6.6 percent of the country's population in 2016, but only 3.1 percent of federal and state elected officials.³ The social exclusion of black women hobbles our democracy by eroding the social safety net for people of color and working-class communities, and bolstering policies that benefit those with more political and economic power in our society.

Historically, state and federal policy and practice are the means by which the social exclusion of black women has been instituted and perpetuated. For example, women won the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, but most black women could not exercise that right because Jim Crow laws—buttressed by racist bureaucrats, police, and vigilantes—blocked African Americans from full democratic participation until the 1960s. Women like Fannie Lou Hamer fought for the right to vote even as they endured assaults by police and mourned national tragedies like the murder of the four little girls who died when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. During this same period, social workers disrupted black families by threatening to deny Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) if a man lived in the home of an unmarried mother.⁴ These experiences fostered distrust and diminished confidence in the role of government as a solution to community problems.

Black Women's Leadership: Making a Way out of No Way

In the face of such challenges, generations of black women have learned to be solution-oriented and resourceful, often 'making a way out of no way,' and their political participation is part of this history of survival. As elders, black women pass down stories about sustaining a family despite poverty and racism across generations. They share first-hand experiences of the fight to win the right to vote—and the means to exercise that right—and younger women take both lessons and hope as they juxtapose those stories with contemporary experiences of state-sanctioned anti-black racism and the ongoing fight for living wages and affordable health care. Through such experiences, black women have developed a keen power analysis.

In short, people of color and working-class communities have an intimate knowledge of how power and the lack of it shows up in their daily lives. When you talk with low-propensity, low-income women voters about power—what it is, how you get it, and what you can do once you have it—they possess a complete analysis of who holds it and why. When we acknowledge both that black women have been blocked from traditional power because of the intersection of race, gender, and economic disadvantage *and* the power that black women can build through organizing and voting, those voters begin to connect democratic reform with the bread-and-butter issues that define their daily lives. That connection is a practical analysis, and one that informs the campaign models of black women.

Ayanna Pressley shared, on a recent panel about black women on organizing, voting and winning elections in 2018, that attention to relationships with people across social and economic strata was a critical component of building support for her campaign. The median donation to her campaign was \$64, and she received \$1 donations from people experiencing homelessness. Further, 250 men in a Massachusetts correctional facility organized their families and friends to vote for Pressley. The lesson was simple: "If you show that you care about people, people will care about democracy."

One way that we indicate whose concerns we care about is polling. Panelist Latosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter, warned that "polls are often wrong because they are talking to the wrong people." Whether to poll on policy

priorities—polls that often miss communities without landlines—or to turn out voters, short-form canvassing is less effective in black communities. Black communities’ well-earned skepticism of government means that they are not easily won over by strangers knocking at their door and are less likely to let their guard down for a 3-minute conversation with politicians. Historically, black women have not had the option to vote for candidates who look like them and who share their social and economic concerns. As a result, they have not seen their lives improved by voting as much as white men, black men and white women have.

Black women are often deterred by a number of factors when they decide to run for public office. First, finding donors to support the candidacies of black women is daunting because black women have been excluded from traditional pools of financial support. Wealthy donors who fund political campaigns are not just richer, whiter, and more often male than the rest of us; they also have very different views and priorities, especially about how to structure our economy and how to prioritize the issues that matter most to black women.⁵

Black women who understand the economic struggles of their community may find it difficult to imagine how to tap their networks to raise thousands of dollars to run for office. [Women like Stacy Abrams, who achieve academic and professional success, are often the wealthiest person in their families.](#) As a result, poor and working-class family members “back home” often turn to them in times of crisis. Many black women bear responsibility for their families, often taking care of their children, elderly parents and others in their communities.

Black women also tend to downplay their talents and their existing leadership in their communities, which may look different from the archetypes of leadership associated with political office. Black women often do not see themselves reflected among political leaders because most are white, male and/or affluent. From the county level up to Congress, 90 percent of our elected officials are white (65 percent are white men).⁶ Each of these factors is a result of social exclusion—racism, sexism and economic injustice codified into laws, practices, and social capital that comprise systemic inequality.

Year of the Black Woman

“

Civic engagement becomes an expression of relationship, resilience and agency in communities constrained by social exclusion.

Political participation—through voting, volunteering, and seeking public office—is a survival strategy, especially at the local level. While the state of Alabama voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, voters in the state also elected 9 black women as judges, suggesting the power-building potential of local and state races. This year, black women in Alabama are **running for public office** in unprecedented numbers, months after political pundits were **widely crediting black women voters in Alabama** for Senator Doug Jones’ victory against Roy Moore. DeJuana Thompson, founder of Woke Vote and 2018 Dēmos *Transforming America* Honoree, began to mobilize millennials and black women because she saw the seat vacated by Attorney General Jeff Sessions as an opportunity to elect someone responsive to the needs of black communities. Leading up to the November 2018 election, the groundbreaking candidacies and powerful organizing of black women indicate that voting is a form of civic engagement that reveals our relationship to each other as much as to our democracy.

Relational organizing can help circumvent social exclusion. For example, not long ago a campaign to raise the minimum wage began by canvassing Baltimore beauty salons. Hair salons are both the leading business for black women entrepreneurs and a central spot where women freely talk about family, community, and politics. Once patrons were engaged in conversation about their lives, including economic issues, there was consensus around the problems they faced and the goals of the organizers. That moment of consensus was the point when organizers made clear the connection between lived experience and democracy reform by saying, “Here’s how we build power in our communities.” They used that moment to teach folks how reforms like rank choice voting and democracy vouchers can help them elect politicians who will support policies that advance fair housing, good schools for their children and health care, as well as minimum wage increases that help raise the standard of living in their communities. Civic

engagement becomes an expression of relationship, resilience and agency in communities constrained by social exclusion.

Marcia S. Price is a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and the director of the Virginia Black Leadership Organizing Collaborative (VA BLOC), a non-profit committed to increasing African-American civic engagement in the Hampton Roads/Newport News area. At a recent panel about black women's electoral power, Price noted that people in the communities she serves understand that people gave their lives so that African Americans would have the right to vote, but she finds that the history of voting rights alone is not enough to move them to the ballot box. She paraphrased what she hears from young people: "I respect the fact that someone died so I can vote. But showing me that I was evicted because politicians are more committed to meeting expectations of developers than people like me, *that* gets me engaged, active and voting." Making these connections also lays the groundwork for building relationships between and beyond election cycles.

Long-form canvassing and one-to-one organizing—both forms of relational organizing—allow time to identify common experiences and interests and to build a relational foundation based on common goals. Deeper relationships that establish trust and reciprocity are necessary to create an inclusive participatory democracy.

Lastly, if we understand low-propensity voters as people with whom our government has failed to establish fair and equal relationships, then constructive attention to those relationships can point toward new opportunities to build power for communities of color and working-class communities. Black women as voters, candidates and elected officials encourage focus on grassroots organizing. Black women organizers conduct voter education by going to barber shops and beauty salons, churches, community-based clubs and organizations where they listen to the concerns of their communities and center racial equity in reciprocal conversations about democracy reform.

Charly Carter, a veteran political organizer and strategist, is the founder of Step Up Maryland and the Maryland Progressive Pipeline Project.

Carol Lautier, Ph.D., a relational organizer and scholar, is Partnerships Manager of the Inclusive Democracy Project at Dēmos.

“

...I respect the fact that someone died so I can vote. But showing me that I was evicted because politicians are more committed to meeting expectations of developers than people like me, that gets me engaged.

— **MARCIA S. PRICE**
Director of (VA BLOC)

Endnotes

- 1 Aditi Sen and Connie Razza, *Hour by Hour: Women in Today's Workweek*, Center for Popular Democracy, May 2015: 12, http://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/HourbyHour_final_0.pdf.
 - 2 US Census Bureau, "2017 National-Housing Migration-All Occupied Units," *American Housing Survey*, (US Census Bureau: September 6, 2018), https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/data/interactive/ahstablecreator.html?s_areas=a00000&s_year=n2017&s_tableName=Table1&s_byGroup1=a1&s_byGroup2=a1&s_filterGroup1=t1&s_filterGroup2=g1&s_show=S. To determine moves against the will of the mover, we looked at people who responded that they were "Forced to move by landlord, bank, other financial institution, or government" or "Forced to move due to natural disaster or fire."
 - 3 Andre M. Perry, *Analysis of Black Women's Electoral Strength in an Era of Fractured Politics*, Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and Higher Heights, September 2018: 4. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018.09.10_metro_black-women-office_Perry_Final-version-sep10.pdf.
 - 4 "AFDC Income Attribution: The Man-in-the-House and Welfare Grant Reductions," *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 83, no. 6, 1970, pp. 1370–1386. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1339820.
 - 5 David Callahan & J. Mijin Cha, *Stacked Deck: How the Dominance of Politics by the Affluent & Business Undermines Economic Mobility in America*, Dēmos, Feb. 2013. http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/imce/StackedDeck_1.pdf; Adam Lioz, *How the Racial Bias in Our Big Money Political System Undermines Our Democracy and Our Economy*, Dēmos, July 23, 2015. http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/StackedDeck2_1.pdf. See also, e.g., Every Voice Center, *The Color of Money: Early Presidential Fundraising Shows White, Wealthy Donor Base*, Aug. 2016, <http://www.everyvoicecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ColorOfMoneyFinalVersion.pdf>; Rahna Epting, "Race, Presidential Politics, and the Challenge of Creating a Democracy for All of Us," HuffPost, Aug. 7, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rahna-epting/racepresidential-politic_b_7956634.html.
 - 6 Women's Donor Network, *Who Leads Us?*, <https://wholeads.us/electedofficials/> (last visited Feb. 1, 2018).
-

DEMOS .Org