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the corner

Wednesday, October 21, 2009

Understanding Black Political Apathy [Abigail Thernstrom]

Only the conservative press is paying attention to the story of Justice Department interference in an election-procedure decision made by the voters of Kinston, N.C. — but it's paying a lot of attention. My little gauge is the number of radio and television interview invitations that are coming my way. To repeat an obvious point already made by my betters: The [Obama](#) folks are trying to do the impossible. They hope to silence administration critics, who don't seem intimidated.

Both [Hans von Spakovsky](#) and [Ben Conery](#) have done splendid jobs telling the Kinston story. The small city had voted two-to-one to get rid of partisan labels on candidates running for local office, but the Department of Justice (DOJ) decided such a move was discriminatory. Blacks are a majority of registered voters in Kinston, but they are usually a minority on Election Day. In the eyes of the DOJ, that makes them a racial minority in need of protection. Under the 1965 Voting Rights Act, they are entitled to constitutionally extraordinary shelter when a change in the method of voting diminishes their opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

Joseph Tyson, a Democrat interviewed by Conery, expressed his disappointment "with the apathy that we have in Kinston among the Afro-American voters." In fact, black voters were not apathetic when [Barack Obama](#) was on the ballot. But Kinston is both majority-black and majority Democrat, so election outcomes are quite predictable. As a consequence, black turnout tends to be low, as it is in the majority-black districts that the DOJ forces jurisdictions to draw to ensure the election of black candidates (this is not, of course, the DOJ's publicly stated rationale).

Relatively low black turnout in southern jurisdictions is partly a consequence of political apathy created by a long history of black disfranchisement. But numerous scholars have concluded that majority-black settings aggravate the problem. Vanderbilt University law professor Carol Swain found that turnout in black-majority congressional districts across the country was especially low. She noted, for example, that just 13 percent of eligible voters showed up at the polls in 1986 in Major Owens's 78-percent black district in New York City. If voters in Owens's district felt more empowered with a black man representing them in Washington, it certainly did not inspire many of them to bother to vote.

James E. Campbell, a political scientist at the [University of Buffalo](#), has supported Swain's findings. Campbell found that in 1994, more than 60 percent of congressional districts in which minorities were the majority ranked in the bottom *quintile* in levels of voter turnout. Other scholars have looked at the data and come to the same conclusion.

The low-voter-turnout point applies to both black-designer districts and black-majority cities and towns. Places like Kinston are not the creation of an overly intrusive Justice Department; nevertheless, since the DOJ used low black voter turnout as the excuse for rejecting the nonpartisan-voting proposal, it is worth noting the similarity in voting-participation patterns in majority-black towns and artificially created majority-black districts. In both settings, black political apathy should tell the Justice Department to keep out. The DOJ is acting aggressively to remedy an alleged wrong that has nothing to do with discrimination.

— *Abigail Thernstrom is the author, most recently, of [Voting Rights — and Wrongs: The Elusive Quest for Racially Fair Elections](#). She is an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.*

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