

An Open Letter to African-Americans

Although we acknowledge the deep support President Obama received from many groups and from the American people generally, African-Americans were a critical constituency both nationally and in battleground states such as Ohio, where African-American turnout increased from 2008 and whose vote share was greater than its share of the electorate as a whole. Congratulations and thanks to us all for helping re-elect the President and for all the other progressive changes that we helped usher in on Election Day. The entire world will benefit from our actions and the future will be brighter for all.

Before you turn away from the long and sometimes exhausting political season, there is one more thing we must do. It is vital that we state and more forcefully insist that President Obama and Congress begin to address the critical needs of the black community. There has been a deafening silence from both the White House and Congress about the needs of our community as well as from us. With few exceptions, we have not been vocal or organized as to what we as citizens and strong supporters of the President should require or even expect from our government.

We should not expect President Obama to be responsive to us just because he is black, but rather because he is president. The fact that we supported him to become president just adds to the strength of this position.

In a democracy, the government must be responsive to the needs of the people. People have different needs. It should not strike us as strange that the LGBT community expects the president to be responsive to their demands. Nor should we be surprised when he responds favorably. The same is true for Latinos, labor and other groups. While the president and Congress need to respond to all Americans, there is often an expectation and understanding that supporters of policy makers will be given at least an audience and serious consideration, if not more. Detractors often refer to this as advocacy for special interests, but our motto *e pluribus unum*, "one out of the many," recognizes that each distinct part of our country is essential to the whole.

As President Obama is the first African-American president, much of the country is more than a little excited when talking about race or more particularly African-Americans. The right wing can talk about Obama as a food stamp president or how he may not really be American. We knew such attacks on the president and the black community often had serious racial overtones. Yet, if this observation was made, not only would they deny these accusations, they would cry foul: that critics

were playing “the race card.” With the heat turned up we would, too often, shrink from the conversation.

Many African-American leaders worried that if Obama or we join the public discussion of race, it would make it more difficult for the president to get re-elected or govern. While there may have been some support for this concern, one need only recall the flak the President received following his comments on the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates. Some believed this concern was overstated, but, in any case, we are now beyond the election. We should no longer let the right-wing control the racial narrative about us or the president while we quietly express frustration, but remain publicly invisible. We must talk about race and other issues that affect us, but in a skillful manner. But we also need to go beyond talk and move to action.

Some policy makers and at times even the president have suggested that the best way to address black needs is to bury them in universal strategies, assuming that we will benefit without drawing attention to race. While this may have some political appeal, too often it does not work. Researchers have concluded that universal strategies too often miss the mark. The simple reason is that different groups are situated differently.

Consider the goal of moving everyone from the first floor to the fifth floor of a building, and that the means of conveyance is an escalator. For most people, an escalator will suffice. For a person in a wheelchair, an escalator is useless. Nor would anyone insist that tide walls built for New York also be built in Kansas. The strategy employed must be mindful of how people are situated in the world. Universal approaches fail in this regard.

For more than 50 years experts have known that neighborhood conditions influence life chances. African-Americans are more likely than their white counterparts to live in neighborhoods where the majority of people are low income. This creates multiple challenges that are not experienced as much or in the same degree as other groups. A simple universal policy that does not appreciate or attend to these differences will as likely exacerbate as reduce inequality.

There is another problem with the apparently race-neutral universal approach: it acquiesces to anxiety about race, and in practice, is likely to have a negative racial impact. While many Democrats have tried to avoid discussions of race, some Republicans have been stoking white racial anxiety for political gain. This has been the most extreme in the South, so much so that at one point the chairman of the Republican National Committee acknowledged that they were deliberately stoking racial anxiety and resentment toward blacks to activate their base and generate support. This approach has been labeled the “Southern Strategy”, which has been used to drive the South into the right wing camp of the Republican Party since the ‘60s. More recently, the approach has been called dog whistle racism, where coded phrases are used to transmit signals to a right-wing, resentful white base that

politicians are sensitive to and even supportive of their racial resentment, while at the same time having a position of deniability for more moderate whites.

President Reagan gave his the first post-convention speech of his 1980 campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where civil rights workers had been killed, promising to restore “states rights” and local control. Similarly talk of food stamps, welfare, government dependence and the inner city have all been used as a dog whistle to resentful whites. Democrats have too often felt the need to move away from the concerns of blacks -- even if those needs were found to be legitimate and good policy -- in order to try to hold on to support of white resentful voters. When one looks at the solid red south on an electoral map it is clear this Republican strategy is built on racial anxiety, and that resentment has been effective in winning the South. The good news is that those strategies are no longer enough to win the White House. The Republican Party knows it must look for more voters and be more inclusive. They have not looked our way.

There is little doubt that race continues to define many aspects of American life including where we live, go to school, severity of criminal laws and employment, notwithstanding Obama’s impressive achievements.

If universal strategies do not usually work, what is the alternative? What we usually turn to are targeted strategies. But this is also a very limited approach. This approach is likely to be seen as requesting special treatment, ignoring the needs of others and divisive. But an even more important reason that targeted strategies fail is that they usually do not command the political support to get them enacted or see them sustained over time.

During the current downturn, there was a period when unemployment went down for the general population and increased for the African American population. At one point the Congressional Black Caucus tried to get President Obama to focus on central cities and the black community. The President responded that he was President of the entire country and could not focus on the black community. The President’s response does not acknowledge the unique situation and disparate position of the black community.

Policymakers too often adopt a universal strategy instead of a universal goal. The Congressional Black Caucus could have asked for a universal goal while acknowledging that there were hard hit areas being underserved or central cities that were being left behind by a universal, national strategy. The goal could be to get unemployment below 6%, with no community having an unemployment rate of 50% higher than the national average. Still, some may protest that this is an approach targeted to help the black community. The response should be that this approach is designed to help everyone, and to ensure that no group is left behind, including the black community.

There are exceptions to the limitations of targeted strategies, and we may be witnessing such an exception with Latinos and the issue of immigration. Latinos are currently viewed by both Democrats and Republicans as a critical constituency in both this election and in elections to come. Even though blacks still make up a larger percentage of voters than Latinos (13% and 10%, respectively) we are not seen as important. There are a number of reasons for this. On the Democratic side, for more than a half century, we have been the most loyal group to Democrats. Groups that support a party are often given an audience and particular consideration. But this is not always the case, especially if the group can be taken for granted.

Another reason is that part of the successful Southern Strategy by Republicans was to point out to whites that Democrats were responsive to blacks in the '60s, playing on white resentment. Democrats effectively decided to create distance or at least ambivalence toward the needs of the black community based not on the 'ask' of the black community, but on concern for possible white resentment. We have not fully moved beyond the politics of resentment by Republicans and silence by Democrats. But this election suggests the country is changing. So even though Romney won the white vote by more than 20%, he lost the election. It is no longer an effective strategy at the national level to rely entirely on the white vote, nor will stoking the fires of white resentment produce a majority in national elections.

Let us turn to our 'ask'. It is important that we advance our requests in a way that creates a focused list of priorities that can be framed as important for the entire country. This does not mean that these requests need a universal strategy, but they do require universal goals. The strategy to achieve these goals and implementation should be based on our situation and needs. We call this targeted universalism. The goal is universal, but the strategy is targeted and tailored to our circumstances.

What might this targeted universalism be? There are a number of possibilities. Here we suggest a few, but it is more important that we come together as part of a network and movement to address this question. The ask must be part of a movement of sustained pressure on the administration and the Congress, and must bring us together. Two possibilities for targeted universalism are employment and housing. Note that employment has already been singled out as a national issue. It is therefore easy to make the case that the goal of addressing employment is universal. What is missing is the understanding that unless employment solutions are also targeted to communities that are most impacted by high unemployment, we may have a strategy that works for the majority of Americans and leaves blacks with double-digit unemployment. A targeted universalism approach to unemployment is likely to benefit other groups also left out by universal strategies, such as rural whites, young people, and others.

Targeted universalist strategies are likely to include other groups as well as blacks, and this is a good thing, but it is critical that African-Americans not be left out for political or other reasons. The possibility of exclusion suggests that we not only

make an ask, but that we organize and have a seat at the table. We must communicate our needs to the President, Congress and our statehouses, but we might start with black organizations and leaders already charged with representing our collective interest. These discussions have already begun. So let's move beyond the celebration, and tell the President and Congress that we will not allow them to take us or our vote for granted, and that we are more than a political pawn. We, too, are Americans.

Sincerely,

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