

## *Words of Wisdom*

### **Trump and African American Voters**

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During a campaign speech in Dimondale, Michigan, a predominately white suburb of Detroit, presidential candidate Donald Trump asked African American voters, “what do you have to lose by trying something new?” (LoBianco and Killough 2016). In similar speeches the same week, Trump pledged that he would do better than any Democrat since Lyndon B. Johnson has done to address the high poverty rates and joblessness in the African American community. Perhaps, African Americans are “trying something new”. But, the renewed participatory efforts among African Americans have not been in the direction Trump may have hoped.

Trump’s appeals were criticized by African Americans for being insincere and illegitimate, especially considering his past behavior (V. Williams 2016). Trump faced a federal lawsuit in 1973 for racially discriminating against African American tenants in his housing developments (NPR 2016). In 1989, he placed a racially charged, full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* calling for the death penalty for five African American and Latino males who were falsely accused of raping a woman in Central Park. Despite DNA evidence exonerating the youth, Trump insisted on their guilt in a 2016 statement to CNN (Holmes 2016). Beginning in 2011, Trump promoted “birther” claims that President Obama was not born in the United States. And, during his presidential campaign rallies, he praised a supporter for punching an African American attendee.

Still, Trump was not the only presidential candidate unable to capitalize on high participation rates in the African American community. In 2016, voter turnout among African Americans declined for the first

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time in almost two decades (Krogstad and Lopez 2017). The decline in voter turnout was in part due to Hillary Clinton's tepid support among African American youth, particularly young men (Ruffini 2017). Clinton was reluctant to engage with the Black Lives Matter movement and represented a political establishment that failed to adequately address issues important to African Americans (J.P. Williams 2016). Still, voting for Trump or remaining loyal to the Democratic Party by voting in its favor are not the only options available to the African American community.

Amid the controversy of the 2016 election and Trump's presidency, a new generation of African American candidates ran for and achieved local, state, and national offices. To reference a few, Kamala Harris (of African American and Indian descent), became the first African American, a female senator in 2016. In 2017, African American women won mayoral races in Atlanta, Georgia; Charlotte, North Carolina; Greensboro, North Carolina; and New Orleans, Louisiana; and at least seven cities elected their first African American mayor. Additionally, progressives Chokwe Lumumba and Randall Woodfin were elected as mayors of Jackson, Mississippi, and Birmingham, Alabama, respectively. These historical elections were accompanied by social movements, like the Movement for Black Lives and the Moral Monday movement, which demanded better representation and accountability during protests.

These participatory efforts are not centered around opposition to Trump but on confronting the racial projects that define this nation (Omi and Winant 1994).<sup>1</sup> Promises to "Make America Great Again" refer to an American tradition that subjugates African Americans to a second-class citizenry and that will not disappear with an incendiary president. Yet with both institutional and extra-institutional participation, African Americans are advancing issues that counter the American racial project that Trump's election represents. The participatory efforts also challenge a Democratic Party that depends on the African American vote for its electoral success but has unfulfilled its pledge to adequately represent the community's interests. In future elections, both major parties will have to contend with the active and engaged participation of African Americans.

## NOTE

1. Of course, African Americans are not the only groups engaging in historical elections or social movements. Women, transgender, and non-white candidates have won many historical elections during and after the 2016 campaign season. The Women's March, anti-Muslim ban protests, anti-white supremacist rallies, and other movements have also been widespread in recent years.

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