

VOTE ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4

The Vote of a Lifetime

Next Tuesday, November 4, the nation will go to the polls to vote for president of the United States. For America, it will be a historic election. But for those of us in the black community, it will be a day that many thought they would never live to see. This will be the vote of a lifetime.

I only wish that my father, Thomas R. Jones, had lived to see it. He was a Brooklyn Assembly member and State Supreme Court judge who founded the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and co-founded the Bedford Stuyvesant Political League.

A Free Vote

There is one reason above all others to vote in this election. A free vote, freely given, is the very essence of democracy. For many years in many parts of this country - north and south - people of color took their lives in their hands if they tried to register and vote. To fail to use this precious right that earlier generations fought and died for would dishonor their memory as well as the struggles of the civil rights era.

There are many policies that will be determined by this election, affecting the lives of all of us: what to do about the sinking economy, millions of home foreclosures, a fast rising unemployment rate, millions of Americans without adequate health insurance, two wars in the Middle East, a tax policy that cuts rates for the very wealthy, education standards and funding, and environmental degradation, to name a few. Many of these issues go to the heart of our nation's security.

The Poverty Issue

But of all the issues raised in the campaign, one – poverty – is hardly ever mentioned. Yet persistent poverty – a feature of every large city and many rural communities – is a condition that damages the social fabric of the nation.

Here in New York City, 3.3 million people live at or near the federal poverty line. Yet more than 80 percent of New York City's low-income households with children include an employed adult.

The truth is that the working poor are down for the count. The American dream is fading away for millions of New Yorkers because of low wages, insufficient benefits, and few prospects of career advancement.

Economic insecurity is at its highest level since the depression of the 1930's. The latest survey by the Community Service Society, "The Unheard Third," reveals that one in four low-income black families in the city are in debt because of medical bills and 44 percent have credit card debt. Now consider that one-third of low-income blacks report having no money in savings.

The outcome of this election may determine whether we will have government policies that support working families, policies that improve wages, benefits, and other work supports and increase the number of adults enrolled in education and skills-developing programs. No family with a full time worker should have to live in poverty. That many do is a national disgrace. There is a critical and urgent need to invest in greater economic opportunities for the many people living on the margins of society. The return on this investment would be the stronger, smarter workforce that our nation needs to successfully compete in a global economy.

Turnout Important

While every political analyst tells us that New York is hardly a battleground state – its 31 electoral votes are really not up for grabs – voter turnout in the state will be important for several reasons. It is crucial that communities of color maximize turnout. Public officials rarely respond to the concerns and opinions of groups that fail to vote in large numbers. Low turnout allows politicians to ignore our needs. A visit to schools and hospitals serving our communities and the lack of access to government illustrate how deadly this can be.

And a large turnout in our communities could help to shape politics in the state for a generation. While neither the governor's office nor a U.S. Senate seat is up in this election, control of the state Senate is in the balance. Several state Senate races in the city are being hotly contested. Although races for president and Congress are high profile, many of the laws affecting our lives are written by legislators in Albany. These races should not be ignored.

Most importantly, candidates elected to the state Legislature this year will be the ones who decide on redistricting the state after the 2010 Census. Redistricting will not only go a long way to determine our representatives in Washington and Albany. It will also determine the distribution of billions of federal tax dollars over the next decade.

If you are registered to vote but are not sure where your polling place is located, call the New York City Board of Elections at 212-868-3692 for help. Be a part of history. On Tuesday, go and vote.

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