

Why a Presidential Call for Unity Can Never Be Enough

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The American Democratic party experienced a swell of minority voter turnout after the 2008 presidential election. Among Black, Latinx, and Asian communities, individuals voted for the Democrats [95%](#), [67%](#), and [62%](#) of the time, respectively. It seemed that the kind of hope that Obama represented inspired millions of people in those communities to trust and support his progressive party. However, even after 4 years of xenophobic, fear-based rhetoric from Donald Trump, which would seemingly strengthen minority support of Democratic candidates, today’s left is not enjoying the same loyalty. A poll done by the [Pew Research Center](#) in September of 2021 showed that Joe Biden’s approval rating among those same three groups fell by 18%, 16%, and 14% from a similar poll taken in the spring. Evidently, the actions of the Democratic party are no longer garnering the kind of minority support it used to, which suggests that a new strategy is needed if they desire to expand their voting base among minorities and keep winning elections.

Since the 1968 presidential election, the first in which minority groups had voting rights, the conservative party in America has appealed to white voters as opposed to minority voters. There are a few plausible reasons as to why this has been the case, with the most salient being that conservative rhetoric and policy at that point shifted to being unapologetically fear-based. The Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, declared during his [acceptance speech](#) at the Republican National Convention that it was time for new leadership in America when “the strongest nation in the world can be tied down for four years in a war in Vietnam with no end in sight... when a nation that has been known for centuries for equality of opportunity is torn by unprecedented racial violence...”.

Nixon’s first allusion, of military efforts as a means of asserting us domination, was in reference to U.S. funding for the war in Vietnam which increased by nearly [\\$100 million dollars](#) from 1966 to 1968. This massive increase allowed for the United States to strengthen its battle against communism, appeasing the fears that his own party had drummed up within its base about communism’s horrors. His second reference was to the outcry against police violence from the Black community after what was an extremely tumultuous year. On April 4th, 1968 Martin Luther King Jr., a symbol of nonviolent protest, was assassinated by a [Memphis cop](#). Two days later, ‘il Bobby Hutton, a new member of the Black Panther Party, was murdered alongside Eldridge Cleaver by members of the Oakland police department. During a shootout, [one of the police’s bullets caught fire](#), and Hutton and Cleaver had to surrender in order to not be burned alive.

Cleaver was much older than the 17-year-old Hutton, and he advised Hutton to walk out completely nude, to ensure that it would be clear that he was unarmed. Hutton was shy, and left his pants on. Reports suggest the cops fired at least 10 bullets at Hutton, although a number of Panthers suggested that the number was much higher. Hutton’s murder sparked a huge influx of young Black men and women into the Black Panther Party. By stating that the country is being “torn by racial violence” Nixon completely dodges the fact that one group of people was propagating the violence, and that Black people in America were its target. By leaving out any mention of responsibility, Nixon was implicitly blaming Black and Brown communities. The most egregious example of this tendency came with the 1971 launch of the ‘War on Drugs.’ This ‘war’ was a ploy to criminalize Black and Brown communities, resulting in catastrophically [disproportionate rates of incarceration amongst minority groups](#). This fear-based tactic, employed primarily by Republicans, afforded them huge success among their majority-white base, which continues today.

Donald Trump is such a good friend of Roger Stone, a political consultant who worked on Nixon’s first run for president, [that he pardoned his 40-month prison sentence](#), and built his political

platform around a similarly hateful rhetoric of fear. His reference to ‘shithole countries’, his ban on travel from predominantly Muslim countries, and his denunciation of a [fake migrant caravan](#), all spring from fear-based rhetoric and policy. This not only strengthened the loyalty in the majority-white Republican base, but it also increased voter turnout amongst that group. These tactics failed in 2020, as stark racism and xenophobia stirred up enough minority and moderate white support to get Biden into office. However, now that he is in office, the actions of his administration are failing to rouse support in the way his campaign promises did.

When members of today’s Democratic party attempt to speak to and engage with minority communities, their calls for ‘working together’ and ‘unity’ seem to fall on deaf ears. In [Biden’s inaugural address](#) he said the word ‘unity’ 11 times, but calling for unity in a time of social unrest that’s being provoked by one specific group functions the same as Nixon ignoring the source of and culpability for racial violence in 1968. Frustration with such ignorance concerning issues around race has been exemplified by grassroots voting rights organizers. W. Mondale Robinson, founder of the [Black Male Voter Project](#), worked hard to convince those in his community to vote for Biden. Not even a year into Biden’s presidency, Robinson is already saying that maintaining such support has gotten much harder.

An important turning point occurred early on, when Democrats agreed to significantly weaken a police reform bill in order to get Republican support. The [disappointments continued](#) after Biden failed to push for changes to the filibuster to enact a \$15 minimum wage, and failed to halt a wave of legislation restricting voting access in Southern states. The anger around Democratic inaction was multiplied when it was reported that during private calls with voting rights groups White house officials expressed confidence that it is possible to “out-organize voter suppression.” The President of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Sherrilyn A. Ifill, replied that “[we cannot organize our way out of this.](#)”

The Democratic party must stop taking the minority voter turnout they saw with Obama for granted, and start committing to helping, through funding and legislation, those who are on the ground, in under-resourced communities. Such individuals have a better understanding of the problems impacting their specific communities and thus understand best how to solve them, but they can’t do it alone. [W.E.B. Du Bois](#) proclaims as much when he asserts that Black, as well as other minority communities, cannot hope for success without “the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group.” Until Democrats stop prioritizing bipartisan successes and start focusing on getting legislation passed that will help minority communities, such as the [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#), minority support will continue to dwindle. They must engage in a new strategy, abandoning ‘come together’ and committing to understanding that since the government helped create these inequalities, it must help ameliorate them by passing progressive legislation and increasing government funding to nonprofit, grassroots organizations. The Republicans have a winning formula that keeps their white base coming back: fear of the other. If the Democrats are interested in winning elections in the future, they will have to provide more than a facade of concern for injustices that disproportionately impact minority groups. The veneer of ‘unity’ is simply too feeble.