

# Voting is Key to Empowerment

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*"A slave who dies of natural causes will not balance two dead flies on the scale of eternity."*

- Eldrige Cleaver, Black Panther Party for Defense

The opening quote was made in the 1960s and may evoke images of the Antebellum South when trade in the human flesh and souls was legal. It applied to the situation in America over 200 years ago and, unfortunately, it applies today.

The statement makes the simple and poignant point that if you do not do anything to make positive changes in your life and the lives of those in similar situations, then you will have lived in vain. It urges us to resist the status quo and challenges us to continue the legacy of social change started by the first African who jumped ship.

Although African Americans face many issues that threaten our existence, I want to address the issue of enfranchisement. In a capitalistic society such as America, there are two things that equal power.

When I talk of power, I talk about it in today's reality, not as reality should be. Our reality should be one in which people act on moral and ethical standards, from the goodness of their hearts.

It should be a society where children do not have to go hungry, uneducated, cold, etc. Instead, it is a reality that only respects power and despises the powerless. In the reality that is America, circa 1994, power comes in two forms—organized money and organized people.

Voting is a form of organized people power. Voting for those who truly represent our interests as well as holding them accountable would be a way begin to settle some of the other issues adversely affecting African Americans.

Black people need to stop being the objects of American politics. We need to be the subjects as well. We need to be involved in the decision-making that affects our lives. This is

called self-determination, an African value. The days of waiting on white liberals to represent our views and interests in government and to speak for us are long gone. Having someone to constantly do these things for you creates a destructive sentiment of paternalism.

Today, the rising feeling of conservatives is that "the blacks

is inexcusable.

Wake up! We live in a democratic society where you elect, by popular vote, the people who represent your interest.

During Reconstruction, blacks swarmed to the polls and elected numerous blacks to office. They cherished the right to vote because it was withheld from them all of their lives and they know the potential it held for

people's cry for enfranchisement...and white liberals' silence.

What I am saying is that every time an eligible black person does not cast a ballot he/she does at least two things: First, he or she sends a message to conservative whites that black people (noting that voting is an individual right it is normally viewed in terms of a group

community itself possesses a tough question of how and for whom to vote.

Of course we cannot give an effective voting bloc when the majority of the people do not vote. We have to become politically active. This does not mean that everyone has to run for office or practice the back stabbing brand of politics so prevalent in America today.

This does mean, however, that we become cognizant of the candidates' platform, past experience, and history in order to make an informed decision. It also means that we make a pact, in the true spirit of *ujamaa* (cooperative community building and vision sharing; familyhood), to vote for the most qualified and responsive candidate as a community.

We must also keep the candidate, if elected, accountable to the black community. *Ujamaa*, then, is critical and crucial to the term "Power to the People." It is the truest sense of "democracy." Without it, we swim in quicksand—the more we struggle, the faster we sink politically, socially, economically and culturally.

We must, as Malcolm X suggested, come together on the basis of the things we have in common and put aside our differences in order to fight our common foe. Malcolm also advocated the practice of what he called "positive neutrality," something similar to what Kwame Nkrumah use in Ghana, non-alignment. Simply put the black community accepts any positive aid from any group, with no strings attached, to be used in the way that the community sees fit. This way, outside influences will not control the community. We must stop bickering amongst ourselves, making it easier to be divided and exploited. We must unite.

So the question becomes, "Who should I vote for?" Would you vote for someone who does not have your best interest at heart, no matter how "qualified?"

The criteria for choosing a candidate are experience and sincere concern for the



**Malcolm X**  
one of the biggest advocates for "the bullet or the ballot."

have been helped long enough. They should be able to stand on their own two feet now; they have achieved equality." I need not comment on the statement of equality, but I will say this—we will stand on our own two feet in spite of your unlevel playing field.

A part of standing on our own two feet is solidarity in voting. In order to cast votes of unity, though, the community's individuals have to vote. Sadly to say, there is not enough voter turn out from the black community, especially on this campus, to optimize our political power.

Reasons for not voting range from scheduling conflicts to sickness to apathy. In those cases where it is impossible or proves an incredible hardship to cast a ballot, it is understandable. But when the reason for not voting is general apathy and, "I don't get into things like that," it

improving their lives. They also know that voting was a right held by citizens and now that they were citizens, they could employ a right that was once held exclusively by white land-owning males.

After Reconstruction and the advent of the Compromise of 1877, many blacks were lynched, burned, and even chopped to pieces for attempting to exercise the right which we have today taken for granted.

The hunger for freedom and justice led thousands upon hundreds of thousands of blacks to live in fear, to suffer deaths of loved ones, to go homeless after their house had been burned to the ground and to spend sleepless nights watching for KKK raids.

These conditions contributed to young black boys and girls growing up believing that they were second-class citizens. All of this was the result of the white supremacist's reaction to black

phenomena) don't want to vote, are apathetic and lazy, and want someone else to speak for us. To these conservatives, blacks look as if they are sitting on their behinds waiting for a handout.

Second, he or she not only desecrates the countless graves of those who died trying to cast a vote but also the thousands of black soldiers who died fighting American wars. These hopeful and deluded soldiers fought under the assumption that fighting for Uncle Sam and human rights for others would insure their rights in America. A sad commentary on their dashed hopes is that many black soldiers were killed on their return from the foreign theaters of World War I...while still wearing their uniforms.

All of this about voting with solidarity and strengthening the community looks good on paper and in theory, but the reality of diversity within the black