

OPINION

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On poverty, candidates should follow their followers



George Curry
Guest Columnist



U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich

As presidential candidates, both Democrats and Republicans, actively pursue middle-class voters, there is growing evidence that when it comes to the issue of supporting the poor, they may be well behind public opinion. In this era of extensive polling, perhaps this new data will force the would-be presidents to follow the lead of their followers.

In a recent article on how Democratic candidates are speaking to the needs of the poor, Washington Post reporter Alec MacGillis concluded, "Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), who has upset some poverty advocates by supporting tougher welfare work rules, talks about helping the poor by raising the minimum wage, reforming immigration and promoting savings. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) proposes expanding the earned-income tax credit and subsidizing temporary jobs but leans this with calls for more personal responsibility, particularly among African Americans. Edwards, on the other hand, calls poverty 'morally wrong' and a 'national shame,' and he proposes paying for his plan by immediately repealing the Bush tax cuts for the rich." To be fair to underdog Dennis Kucinich, his anti-poverty proposals are bold, rivaling those of Edwards.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, made public this month, reveal some startling findings. Chief among them: "Support for government programs to help disadvantaged Americans, as well as sympathy for the plight of the poor, have surged since 1994 and returned to the levels last seen in 1990 prior to welfare reform, with gains occurring among virtually every major social, political and demographic group."

The report found that the biggest gain occurred among political conservatives, Southern Whites and older Americans. In 1993, only 28 percent of conservatives agreed with the statement: "The government should help more needy people even when it means going deeper into debt." By this year, however, that figure had risen to 48 percent.

Concurrently, there was an increase in the number of Whites who sympathize with the plight of the poor. In 1994, only 35 percent of Whites agreed that the poor "have it hard." Today, almost half - 49 percent - agree with that sentiment. The share of Whites who say the poor "have it easy" declined from 56 percent to 37 percent over that same period.

The softening attitudes of Whites toward the poor still trail those of African-Americans. In 1994, for example, 65 percent of Blacks said the poor have hard lives. In 2005, that figure was virtually unchanged at 64 percent.

Overall support for the poor was measured by those who agreed with three state-

ments: The government should help the needy, even if debt increases; food and shelter should be guaranteed by the government to all people and the government should take care of people who can't take care of themselves. Using that measurement, the greatest gain in support from 1994 and 2007 was among those 65 and older, a jump from 16 percent to 38 percent. Those in the lowest income quartile (\$19,000 or less) improved from 29 percent to 38 percent. Support in the South increased from 29 percent to 49 percent. College graduates support increased from 20 percent to 36 percent. And support from Independents improved by 15 percent (from 27 percent to 42 percent). Democrats by 14 percent (from 41 percent to 55 percent) and Republicans 9 percent, from 16 percent to 25 percent.

Among the announced presidential candidates, only former Sen. John Edwards and Rep. Dennis Kucinich have produced detailed plans to fight poverty. The two plans call for universal health care for all Americans, increasing access to pre-school programs, expanding affordable housing, and either safeguarding workers' rights or expanding jobs. Each candidate has a different approach to protecting the Social Security Trust and dealing with the Bush tax cuts that mostly benefit the wealthy.

Although it's still early in the campaign season, it's not too early to begin addressing this critical issue.

There are 37 million people living in poverty, about 13.7 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Census Bureau. The poverty rate declined every year of the Clinton administration, from 15.1 percent in 1993 to 11.3 percent in 2000. However, it has increased every year under George W. Bush, who has diverted large sums of money to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

After tougher work requirements imposed by Bill Clinton, a Democrat, and the hardening of public attitudes toward the poor under the Republican Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, this is an ideal issue that could galvanize bipartisan support. But we must first get the leaders to follow their followers.

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of *Emerge* magazine and the NNPA News Service, is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. He can be reached at george@georgecurry.com or through his Web site, www.georgecurry.com.



Letter to the Editor

House smoking bill

To the Editor:

Drifting tobacco smoke kills more people than motor vehicle accidents, AIDS, all crimes, illegal drugs, etc. Studies show that even very brief exposure to second hand smoke can restrict blood flow to the heart and cause a heart attack as well as create a host of problems for our lungs, because unlike our other organs, lungs are very vulnerable as they have no protective barrier as a shield from the elements. According to the EPA, babies and children are

especially at risk because of their faster breathing rate and developing lungs and bodies and many thousands of them develop pneumonia or bronchitis every year from breathing second hand smoke.

It is therefore amazing that on May 2, the N.C. Legislature choose to focus on private property rights while ignoring a chance to prevent all these needless deaths as well as the wishes of a majority of state citizens to breathe clean air by voting against HB259, which would have created clean air workplaces statewide. Of our local

representatives, only Larry Womble cared enough about our health and our right for clean air to vote for the bill. As for private property rights, laws against public smoking would not be as nearly as restrictive as our many other common sense laws designed to reduce needless deaths and injury such as the law that requires us to wear seat belts or having special car seats for children in our private automobiles.

Interestingly, N. C. Legislators have banned smoking at all legislative buildings in order to protect

their tender hearts and sensitive lungs but there are many in my opinion that are too busy picking the large, very deep and far reaching pockets of big tobacco to care about our health.

But, until we can get some protection on a state or local level, our elected leaders like Larry Womble as well as our local business owners who care enough about their employees and patrons to create clean air workplaces deserve our continued gratitude and support.

Barry Carlton

Did Barack Obama lie?



Harry Alford
Guest Columnist

This caught us by surprise. The Washington Post quotes Barack Obama, "In Chicago, sometimes when I talk to the black chambers of commerce, I say, 'You know what would be a good economic development plan for our community would be if we make sure folks weren't throwing their garbage out of their cars.'"

First of all this sounds very derogatory - like Amos 'n Andy or Stepin' Fetchit. Our chambers have sound and progressive economic development plans and they are far more intricate than stopping litter. Second and most importantly, Senator Barack Obama refuses to meet with any and all Black chambers of commerce.

There are 21 Black chambers of commerce in the state of Illinois which is the most for any state in the nation. They are well run, hardworking and dedicated to the economic development of Black communities throughout the entire state. They are respected by their Governor, the entire Illinois Legislative Black Caucus and the powerful Chicago political machine. But they get no props from Senator Barack Obama. He appears to despise Black chambers of commerce.

There are 100 senators on Capitol Hill and the National Black Chamber of Commerce can make appointments with 99 of them. "Brother Man" refuses to allot time while we interact with the leadership of the Senate on a daily basis. I guess it's the syndrome "The White man's ice is colder." Yes, I think it is clinical.

The best example of his problem happened in New Orleans last July at our 14th Annual Conference. It was coincidental that three U.S. Senators were in the area, Sens. John Kerry, Mary Landrieu and Barack Obama. Two of them, Senators Kerry and Landrieu, jumped at the



The Obama family is seen here on a recent Christmas card.

opportunity to visit our conference. In fact, Sen. Kerry gave an inspiring keynote address while Sen. Landrieu was eloquent with her welcoming remarks. They stayed one and a half hours networking with chamber executives and entrepreneurs from around the nation.

Where was Barack? He refused to come. He actually peeled off from their touring party while the other senators met with us. He just couldn't do it even though 15 Black chambers from Illinois were there.

At first, we thought it might be a heritage thing. He isn't a descendant of slaves, sharecroppers and victims of Jim Crow like us. But no that can't be it because he will run from the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, an affiliate of ours, in like fashion. The next time he goes to Kenya he might want to allot 15 minutes with them.

They will tell him that the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA, is flawed with serious loopholes. China brings in raw materials such as cotton and produces fabrics to be sold to US companies tariff free

under AGOA. This assault has killed jobs for hundreds of thousands of African workers and has decimated agri-business in various nations including Kenya. It's kind of insulting to go over there, smile and give out some cheers but be brain dead on the economic issues.

If Sen. Obama ever decides to really speak to any of the Illinois Black chambers, he had better come correct. The topics will be Tax Incremental Financing, TIF, for neighborhood developments; the \$280 million in annual contracts the Chicago Housing Authority denies local Black-owned businesses; the front scandals at O'Hare Airport that denies real Black owned franchises; the terrific job the Black chambers have done in Central Illinois by employing every Black contractor at 100 percent capacity on Illinois highway projects (this should be expanded state wide); the opportunities along the rebuilding of the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago; restructuring and improving our dismal school system. It can go on and on but be assured it will be real

business. It won't be about "throwing their garbage out of cars."

We don't need him! We are doing fine and making great strides. The NBCC accounts for more Black dollars in the Gulf Rebuilding than the federal government. We are providing opportunities at every level of the American economy. The NBCC is the largest Black business association in the world and no one senator who has a phobia about meeting a group of Black business persons is going to stop us. The Illinois State Black Chamber just took 60 Black business owners to the capital, Springfield, and met with the Illinois Legislature to discuss a business agenda. We are having proud moments and great successes. He has a problem but it is his problem not ours. Let's pray for him.

Senator, you don't have to meet with us. But don't say you do, when you don't. We don't need the lies or the jive.

Harry Alford is the cofounder, president and CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, www.nationalbcc.org.