

## The Root: Black Voting Is Up, but Will It Stay?

By Corey Dade

Now that the government has confirmed that African-Americans in 2012 voted at a higher rate than whites for the first time -- and were the only group to boost its turnout -- groups such as the NAACP are claiming credit.

But Barack Obama has left the campaign trail. Without his name on the ballot, will black voters keep it up?

"With two elections you can make a line, but it's hard to extrapolate from that," says Emory University political science professor Andra Gillespie, author of "The New Black Politician: Cory Booker, Newark and Post-Racial America." "I would not be surprised if black turnout goes down."

There are plenty of examples of black voting behavior in jurisdictions that had their first black mayor, U.S. senator or governor. After those historic elections, Gillespie says the "novelty" wore off, and turnout for the next contest declined.

However, the novelty of Obama appeared to wear off in 2012 for most everyone except African-Americans, according to Census Bureau data released last week. The agency's survey of voters reinforces a Pew Research Center analysis published in December.

Blacks were the only racial or ethnic group to increase their rate of turnout, at 66 percent. Non-Latino whites voted at 64 percent, down two percentage points from 2008.

Entering 2012, many strategists predicted that black turnout wouldn't approach the record high of 2008 due to voter frustrations about the weak economy, high unemployment and displeasure with Obama's policies.

The NAACP on Friday attributed the counterintuitive results primarily to its more robust and sophisticated use of voter data for registration drives in 12 key states, where the organization says blacks achieved many of the turnout gains.

The NAACP also credited its leadership in the pitched battle against Republican-led state voting restrictions such as photo-identification laws. Numerous civil rights groups and the Obama team fomented a backlash among black voters with a "Don't let them take away your vote!" message.

"This did not happen by mistake. It didn't happen simply because Obama was at the top of the ticket and ran a good campaign," NAACP President Benjamin Jealous told reporters on a conference call. "It happened because . . . the NAACP ran the most effective voter-registration drive we have run in 100 years. We did that by raising the consciousness of the country possibly more than we had [before]."

Overall, non-blacks dragged down America's turnout by nearly two percentage points from 2008, to nearly 62 percent of eligible voters.

The showing by Latinos, despite being the largest minority and the fastest-growing group of voters, dipped slightly to 48 percent. Turnout for Asian-Americans didn't change, at 47 percent.

Blacks' historic outperformance of whites last year reflects their steady gains in every presidential election cycle since 1996, the Census Bureau notes. In that span, blacks closed a eight-point gap with whites.

For the downward trend of white turnout, it's fair to partially blame (or thank) Obama. Since peaking at 67 percent in 2004, the white voting rate has

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dropped in the past two presidential contests.

If blacks are to continue the upward trend, more of them must participate in non-presidential election cycles, which the majority of Americans ignore.

NAACP officials say they plan to use last year's election strategies to engage blacks on local issues. They cited the example of their phone-banking effort in Maryland, which built support for the state's recent successful repeal of the death penalty.

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Dade, an award-winning journalist based in Washington, is a former national correspondent at NPR and political reporter at Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe and other news organizations.

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