

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Melissa Fay Greene: Black Georgians have become kingmakers. But will they all vote?



(Chloe Coleman/The Washington Post; iStock)

“Do you think your vote matters?” an Atlanta professor recently asked a focus group of African Americans in Dougherty County, Ga.

The mostly male subjects from the majority-Black county in the Cotton Belt sounded dejected.

“The people in power are White and higher class,” one said. “Our issues, you know, don’t get solved.”

Four years ago, the votes of Black Georgians — one-third of the population — mattered mightily. They were kingmakers, flipping Georgia for Joe Biden. Whether they deliver the swing state again this fall is what everyone wants to know. Black *women*, loyal voters, will return. But will Black men navigate the state’s new voting impediments without a Barack Obama or Raphael Warnock on the ballot?

From near and far, the voting patterns of Black male Georgians are being tracked as closely as the migrations of Amur falcons, whose numbers thrill ornithologists from Siberia to Angola. “Look at the horizon — they’re coming!” could arise from either set of onlookers.

One observer is Kevin Sparrow, assistant professor of political science at Georgia State University, in partnership with the nonprofit Justice for Southwest Georgia (JSWGA).

“What do you look for in a candidate?” Sparrow asked the volunteers.

“My parents always said, ‘Pick the least dangerous person,’” said George Fox, 76. “It wasn’t ‘Hey, who’s the best candidate?’ Back in the day, it was ‘Who’s the least likely to do something dastardly to us?’”

As part of a field experiment, Sparrow showed them four text messages designed to spur Black turnout in the May primary.

“TOMORROW is Election Day. For information, please visit ...” didn’t offend anybody.

But another did. “DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY — VOTE!” it exhorted.

“Well, that’s irritating,” Fox said. “Don’t be telling me what to do. Because I’m already going to do it.”

“It’s not engaging,” said Chris Sloan, 31. “What about ‘Come on down to the polls?’”

The third message offered a map that would display, after the election, the names of who voted and who stayed home, as a form of social pressure.

“In my experience,” a 28-year-old commented dryly, “a lot of people don’t appreciate their information being out there.” A man who revealed he’d once been a voter with a good job but was now unemployed, unhoused and unregistered protested, too: “I’ll feel shame.”

The last message urged African American voters to stick together.

“No,” said Fox. “Because each African American got their own problems.”

The JSWGA sent text messages at random to 7,000 local Black adults on May 20, while a control group of the same number received none. The next day, citizens voted (or not) for the U.S. House of Representatives, county commission, sheriff and school board.

It wasn’t a high-stakes election, and turnout was low. But Sparrow was able to cross-check who voted against who received which text message.

The texts had zero effect on Black women, perhaps because they didn’t need them. But *all* the texts positively influenced Black men, who voted at higher rates than nonrecipients.

What’s the lesson? When Sparrow had asked, “Do you think your vote matters?,” it was practically like asking, “Do you think *you* matter?” Focus group members had said no.

Evidently, when texts pinged the phones of a random sample of local Black men, it meant something. However briefly, somebody somewhere thought they mattered.

Melissa Fay Greene is a nonfiction author based in Atlanta.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/07/09/2024-political-postcards-dave-barry/>