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# VOTE

BLACK WOMEN ARE THE MOST POWERFUL VOTING BLOC IN AMERICA. NOW, MORE THAN EVER, THE WAY WE USE OUR VOICES IS PARAMOUNT IN SHAPING OUR FUTURES

BY DONNA M. OWENS

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**T**he stakes are high for Black women in the coming 2016 presidential election. Since we last cast our ballots for a commander in chief, the political, social and economic pendulums have swung dramatically. We have gone from experiencing the euphoria of seeing Barack

Obama elected and reelected to the highest office in the nation to feeling anguish as our brothers and sisters have been killed and brutalized at alarming rates by police.

Moreover, African-American women are still struggling to recover from the 2008 recession. Earlier this year, Black Women's Roundtable, a national civic engagement group, released its annual report, *Black Women in the U.S., 2015*. It showed that while the nation's unemployment rate fell to 5.5 percent—the lowest in seven years—the jobless rate among Black women rose to 8.9 percent, the highest percentage among any female demographic within the country.

There is good news, however. African-American women are emerging as a powerful force in American electoral politics. In the 2012 presidential election, we voted at a higher rate than any other group across racial, ethnic and gender distinctions, according to a report from the Center for American Progress.

Further, several Black women have announced their candidacies for the U.S. Senate, where there hasn't been an African-American female member since Illinois' Carol Moseley Braun's term ended in 1999. Contenders include California attorney general Kamala Harris, Maryland congresswoman Donna Edwards and Andrea Zopp, a former Chicago Urban League president. Given the record numbers of Black women who ran in statewide and federal elections in 2014, momentum is expected to build around us as a key voting bloc. How we harness that burgeoning power and clout has the potential to determine our future for generations to come. ▶



Millennials like Allyson Carpenter (who, at age 18, was sworn in as an advisory neighborhood commissioner in Washington, D.C., and became the youngest elected official in the history of the nation's capital) are particularly interested in engaging in the process. "Young Black women are trying to conceptualize what our futures are going to look like," says Carpenter, now 19 and a junior at Howard University. "Black women need someone [in the White House] who will help us push through barriers such as generations of poverty, wage inequality and other systemic issues that have disenfranchised our community."

Noting that African-American women have historically pledged our allegiance to certain causes, political parties and groups generally without similar levels of reciprocity, the Cleveland native threw out a challenge: "This upcoming election is the perfect time for Black women to finally say, 'Let's be a little selfish. Let's vote [in] our self-interests. How can we end up on top?'"

In order to assess the power of the Black woman's vote, ESSENCE teamed up with Black Women's Roundtable to launch The Power of the Sister Vote poll online and via social media platforms. The results were revealed in September at a news conference during the 45th Annual Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Legislative Conference. Asking what Black women want from the next president of the United States, the poll

reducing taxes for low- and middle-income Americans, improving relations between the Black community and law enforcement, and increasing the federal minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour are more likely to get the Black woman's vote.

That affordable health care is so important to many Black women does not surprise Veronica Joyner, a Philadelphia educator who founded a public charter school that focuses on math, civics and the sciences. "I believe our overall health and well-being, including domestic violence, has to be addressed by any future president," says the 65-year-old wife and mother, who proudly noted that she votes in "every" election and has registered voters, too.

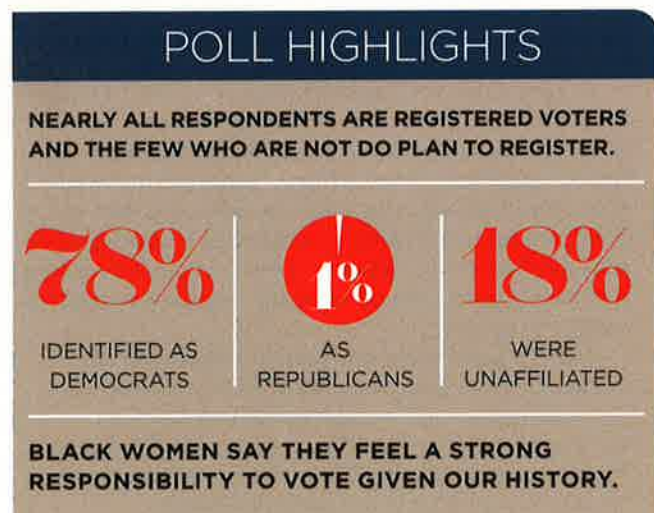
Valeisha Butterfield-Jones, 37, a North Carolina resident, is founder and CEO of the Women in Entertainment Empowerment Network. She says any presidential candidate seeking support from African-American women must give more than lip service to the gender wage gap. Black Women in the U.S., 2015 shows that a Black woman with a bachelor's degree earns on average \$49,882—about \$10,000 less than a White man who holds an associate's degree.

"While White women make 78 percent to the dollar of every man, African-American women make a startling 64 percent," says Butterfield-Jones, who previously served in the Obama administration, after cutting her teeth as a National Youth Vote director in his 2012 campaign. "The pay gap also goes beyond wages and includes the fact that women are less likely to have retirement savings plans, access to paid leave, and are less likely to have an offer of health insurance from their employer."

Stefanie Brown James, 34, founder and executive director of Brown Girls Lead, Inc., a leadership development organization, echoed those sentiments. "Economic stability, equality and empowerment are at the top of my list of issues that could especially help African-American women progress in this country," says the D.C. resident, who was formerly a national field director for the NAACP. "Considering that more than one in four Black women are living below the poverty line, while [often] playing the primary caretaker roles within our families is disturbing. It represents an urgent crisis in the community." The differences between what Black women bring home in their paychecks versus the higher salaries that White males and others earn demands attention, she says. "When you look at this long term, how can Black women create generational wealth for their families, if they can't even afford to put food on the table every day or afford to send their children to college? This is not just an issue for the next administration to seriously address, but one for civil rights and social justice organizations to prioritize, as well."

Indeed, there's a whole new class of Black female leaders heading their own nonprofits, think tanks and political action committees. More and more, they're pushing candidates on issues that heretofore have not gotten much play.

Among them are Kimberly Peeler-Allen and Glynda C. Carr, cofounders of Higher Heights for America. The nonprofit works to build national infrastructure that empowers Black female



garnered 1,862 respondents from around the country. About 35 percent were college graduates, with another 28 percent indicating that they hold graduate degrees. About 32 percent reported having children under 17 in their household.

Questioned about what top three issues are most important in the upcoming 2016 presidential election, they said affordable health care was number one, followed by living wage jobs and college affordability. For Black women ages 18 to 34, quality public education and criminal justice reform are more important, along with college affordability.

The findings also revealed that candidates who focus on

leadership. "Black women represent a major political constituency, consumer base and volunteer base. Yet we have largely been left out of important debates related to everything from economic to reproductive justice," says Carr, 43.

Peeler-Allen adds, "At a time when we are celebrating major political victories from access to affordable health care to marriage equality, we are faced with attempts to roll back 50 years of progress."

Higher Heights has been hosting salon conversations with Black women in living rooms, community centers and beauty shops across the country, and plans over the next couple of months to create its own 2016 presidential survey. The organization aims to compile the responses and send an open letter to every declared presidential candidate.

Meanwhile, Black Women's Roundtable will also submit questionnaires to presidential candidates. Besides queries that cover health care, education, affordable housing and equal pay, the contenders for commander in chief will be asked if they support restoring key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, if they will consider nominating a Black woman to the Supreme Court, and what senior advisory positions African-American women hold in their campaigns.

Carr says she is waiting to see if the presidential candidates are planning to engage Black women in a significant way. "Candidates and their campaigns cannot wait to pour millions of dollars into the Black community 14 days before the election. What was proven in 2008 and 2012 is that Black women are a key component to a winning coalition," says Carr. Peeler-Allen adds, "Candidates must invest and effectively communicate with Black women and not take our vote for granted."



Tara Wall, 45, a senior media and engagement strategist for the Republican National Committee (RNC), concurs. She's well aware that Black women overwhelmingly vote for Democratic candidates, but she's not convinced that strategy is working. "Ask yourself if you're doing all you can to ensure the candidate that represents you is really representing you and your set of beliefs. Be honest with yourself about

the candidates you've supported or may be thinking about supporting. Examine their promises made versus those kept and assess whether they mesh with your ballot box goals."

Predicting that 2016 will be among the "most interesting election cycles in modern history," Wall believes this crop of presidential candidates should articulate how their policies would impact small businesses owned by minorities and women; create an environment where government "gets out the way" of common sense, and foster innovation without stifling growth while keeping what she dubbed "overly burdensome" taxes and regulations to a minimum. "The bottom line is that the more Black women have both sides vying for every vote, as opposed to one or two segments of the country, the better off we are as a nation and equipped as an electorate," she says. "No one candidate or party can or should take a single vote for granted and we shouldn't let them."

Social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name, along with criminal justice reform, were cited as important issues of this 2016 race, especially for Black millennials. Carpenter reinforces, "No candidate should earn a single Black vote without committing to repealing the racist laws and policies that have tormented our communities for decades." □



## LOOKING FORWARD TO 2016

**Melanie L. Campbell**, convener of Black Women's Roundtable, has been a leader in civil, women's rights and social justice movements for two decades. Of her work, she says, "Achieving victories for Black women is my passion." Here, she talks about the power of our vote and what's next for BWR

**ESSENCE: Describe the work of the BWR.**

**MELANIE CAMPBELL:**

We're a diverse, intergenerational group of Black women civic leaders from regional, national and international organizations and institutions. We champion fair and equitable public policy on behalf of Black women and girls, promoting their health and wellness, economic security and prosperity, education and global empowerment.

**ESSENCE: Were any of the poll responses surprising?**

**CAMPBELL:** No. These issues don't exist within a bubble; they are interrelated. Health care is such a big issue because in many states where Black people live, some governors have rejected the Affordable Care Act and not taken advantage of Medicaid expansion opportunities that affect poor people.

**ESSENCE: What does BWR have planned for 2016?**

**CAMPBELL:** We are organizing campaigns across the country, not just at the presidential level, but at the local and state level. We're also in phase two of our Healthy, Wealthy, Wise National Empowerment Tour, which provides women in key states, like Florida and North Carolina, with resources focused on economic empowerment, entrepre-

neurship, holistic health, civic engagement and leadership development.

**ESSENCE: What would you say to Black women about the importance of voting?**

**CAMPBELL:** When a Black woman pulls the lever, it's not just about her. We are influences to our families, husbands, partners and children. Know that you have that power and people are paying attention.