

Blacks and the 2006 Midterm Elections

David A. Bositis

Senior Research Associate

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

The following is a brief review of some of the available evidence of what transpired on November 7, 2006, when the Democrats gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The black vote played a critical role in the outcome of a number of closely contested elections, especially for the U.S. Senate. In particular, this review focuses on the behavior and significance of African American voters in the 2006 midterm elections and on the changing number and profile of black candidates for federal and statewide offices, as well as their performance at the polls.

BLACK VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS: NATIONAL

National turnout in the 2006 midterms was up slightly from 2002. According to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, overall turnout increased from 39.7 percent in 2002 to 40.4 percent in 2006.¹ Black voters turned out at slightly higher rates than in 2002, principally reflecting an overall small increase across all groups equally. According to exit polls,² the black share of the 2006 vote was 10 percent (Table 1); the 2002 exit polls were faulty and not released, but the black share was 10 percent in the previous (1998) midterms. This is a smaller percentage than in the 2004 presidential election; however, presidential and midterm

¹ All 2006 turnout figures are from the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate and can be found at <http://spa.american.edu/ccps/pages.php?ID=23>.

² The exit polls were conducted by the Edison/Mitofsky organization and may be found at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/08/us/politics/20061108_ELECTION_PORTRAIT_HOUSE.html?_r=1&oref=slogin and at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/>.

elections are not comparable because the black population is not a national population, but rather is concentrated in about 23 states—many of which had no competitive elections this year. Thus, on balance, there is no evidence of a decline in the black share of the vote nationally.

BLACK VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS: THE STATES

While black turnout nationally increased slightly between 2002 and 2006, the magnitude of black turnout across the country varied significantly from state to state (Table 2). There were several states in which black turnout increased smartly—and the black vote was influential in determining the outcome—and there were several states, including some of the largest states, in which black turnout was flat or declined—in some places significantly.

One of the principal reasons that national—and black—turnout increased only modestly in 2006 was because turnout declined in some large states, mainly because those states lacked any compelling election contests (e.g., California, New York, and Illinois).

While black turnout nationally increased only modestly, black turnout in 2006 was strategically effective in several places, although not enough in others. There were significant increases in black turnout in Florida, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia, and probably a slight increase in Maryland. Black voters were important in electing a Democratic governor (Ohio) and re-electing three Democratic governors (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) and two Democratic U.S. Senators (Florida and Michigan).

More important for the narrative of the 2006 midterm elections, black voters were critical in electing four new Democratic U.S. Senators in Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, which helped the Democrats regain control of the U.S. Senate. In Missouri, overall turnout increased from 45.0 to 48.3 percent from 2002 to 2006, while the black share of turnout in Missouri increased from eight percent in 1998 to 13 percent in 2006. In Virginia, African Americans were 16 percent of all voters in 2006, and overall turnout there rose from 23.1 percent in 1998 to 43.8 percent in 2006. In Pennsylvania, overall turnout increased from 38.6 to 43.3 percent from 2002 to 2006, while the black share of the total vote increased from six percent in 1998 to eight percent in 2006. Finally, in Ohio, state turnout increased from 38.4 to 44.6 percent from 2002 to 2006, while the black share of state turnout increased from 10 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 2006.

Further, the Democrats did not lose a single U.S. House incumbent. Black voters were critical in salvaging the elections of Democratic Representatives Jim Marshall (GA-8) and John Barrow (GA-12) in a poor year for Democrats in Georgia. Black voters also were significant contributors to the election of Democrat John Yarmuth (KY-3), who defeated incumbent Anne Northup.

AFRICAN AMERICAN VOTERS: PARTISAN DIRECTION IN THE 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Nationally, the black vote in U.S. House elections was 89 percent Democratic and 11 percent Republican (see Table 1). There was a gender gap among African Americans in 2006, with black women (91 percent Democratic vs. 9 percent Republican) voting more Democratic than black men (87 vs. 13 percent). However, this is the narrowest black gender gap since the 1980s. The black vote in 2006 was somewhat more female than male, but less so than in recent elections. Young black voters, Independents, and African Americans in the Northeast and Midwest voted more Democratic in 2006 than in 2004; African Americans in the Midwest gave 95 percent of their votes to Democratic congressional candidates.

There was no partisan shift toward the Republican Party among black voters in 2006 despite Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman's outreach and the prominence of three high-ranking black GOP nominees. There were individual Republican candidates who fared better with black voters than the black population's partisanship might suggest—e.g., Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (CA) and U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (TX), who each received 26 percent of the black vote in their states. However, this variability is exhibited every election year, as the idiosyncratic features of particular candidates and issues manifest themselves in the electorate.

In several key U.S. Senate races, black voters were important to Democratic victories. In Maryland, where Benjamin Cardin (D) defeated Michael Steele (R) 55 to 44 percent, black voters represented 31 percent of Cardin's total. In Michigan, black voters were 19 percent of Debbie Stabenow's (D) vote in her victory over Mike Bouchard (R) by 57 to 41 percent. In Missouri, where Claire McCaskill (D) narrowly defeated incumbent Jim Talent (R) 50 to 47 percent, black voters represented 24 percent of McCaskill's total vote. In Ohio, black voters represented 18 percent of Sherrod Brown's (D) voters in his 56 to 44 percent win over incumbent Mike DeWine (R). And, in Virginia—one of the biggest surprises of the 2006 midterm

elections—black voters were 27 percent of Jim Webb's (D) vote in his very narrow victory over incumbent George Allen (49.6 to 49.2 percent).

The three prominent black Republican nominees lost their elections with varying degrees of black support. GOP gubernatorial nominee Ken Blackwell in Ohio received 20 percent of the black vote, which is above the 10 percent national average for Republican candidates. However, previous white GOP candidates for governor and for U.S. Senator in Ohio have generally won larger shares of the black vote; when U.S. Senator George Voinovich was re-elected as governor of Ohio in 1994, he received 42 percent of the black vote.

Hall of Fame football star Lynn Swann was unable to effectively shift his talents from the gridiron to the political domain; he lost his race for governor of Pennsylvania, while receiving only 13 percent of the black vote.

Maryland Lieutenant Governor and GOP U.S. Senate candidate Michael Steele appears to have been the most successful Republican candidate courting black voters, receiving 25 percent of their votes in his losing effort. However, given the poor record of the Maryland Democratic Party in incorporating African Americans into their leadership ranks—with Democrat Kathleen Kennedy Townsend's notorious 2002 Lieutenant Governor choice emblematic of that neglect—Steele's increased share likely represents a protest vote against the Democratic Party there. Those protest votes were not entirely irrational. Black voters comprise a similar proportion of the electorate in Georgia, a Republican-leaning state, and Maryland, a strongly Democratic-leaning state. However, in Georgia, three of the eight Democratic nominees to statewide constitutional office in the 2006 elections were African Americans; two were re-elected. In Maryland in 2002, none of the four top Democratic nominees were black, although in 2006, gubernatorial nominee (now Governor-elect) Martin O'Malley selected State Representative Anthony Brown as his running mate; Brown will become Maryland's next Lieutenant Governor.

BLACK CANDIDATES FOR STATEWIDE CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICE IN 2006

There were 13 black candidates who sought statewide constitutional office in 2006, two fewer than in 2002 (Table 3). The 13 candidates included 11 Democrats, and two Republicans. Of the 13 black candidates for statewide office, seven were winners—all of whom are

Democrats. In 2002, all four black GOP statewide candidates won, while only four of 11 Democratic candidates triumphed.

Among the Democratic black statewide nominees, the most prominent victors were Massachusetts Governor-elect Deval Patrick, only the second elected black Governor since Reconstruction; New York Lieutenant Governor David Paterson, the state's first black lieutenant governor; Maryland Lieutenant Governor Anthony Brown; Georgia Attorney General Thurbert Baker; Georgia Commissioner of Labor Michael Thurmond; Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White; and Connecticut Treasurer Denise Nappier. Baker, Thurmond, White, and Nappier were all incumbents.

Overall, Democrats picked up six new governors' offices previously held by Republicans (Arkansas, Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio); there are now 28 Democratic governors. The Democrats have not held the majority of governorships since 1994.

BLACK CANDIDATES FOR FEDERAL OFFICE IN THE 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

In 2006, there were 57 black candidates for federal office—54 for U.S. House seats and three for U.S. Senate seats (Tables 4 and 5). This was a decline from 62 in 2004, but more than in the 2002 midterm elections (55). The 2004-2006 decline came from the Republican side (six fewer candidates), while the number of black Democratic candidates increased by one and was a new record.

Of the 48 black Democratic nominees in 2006, 39 were incumbents and nine were challengers or running for open seats. None of the nine Republican candidates was an incumbent. There were more black women among the Democratic nominees than ever before (17), and there were 17 CBC members who were unopposed for office. Thirty-seven black Democratic nominees ran from majority-minority districts (77 percent); three-fourths of those with opposition faced white opponents. The black GOP candidates had a higher proportion of women (44 percent) and there were no unopposed black Republican candidates.

The outcomes of the 2006 midterm elections for black federal candidates were generally unsurprising (Table 6), albeit with some new additions to the CBC. All black Democratic incumbents won on November 7 save for U.S. Representative William Jefferson (D-LA), who won a run-off against Democratic State Representative Karen Carter on December 9. There were three non-incumbent black Democratic candidates who were victorious: Hank Johnson (GA-4),

Keith Ellison (MN-5) and Yvette Clarke (NY-11). Ellison is the first black U.S. Representative from Minnesota and the first Muslim elected to the U.S. House. The black Democrats who faced opposition averaged about 73 percent of the vote. All black Republican nominees lost, averaging 32 percent of the vote.

THE STATE LEGISLATURES

While it is still too early to report on the changes in the number of black state legislators, the news from the 2006 midterm elections was generally favorable to them, since most are Democrats. The Democrats gained 320 seats in the state legislatures and gained control of nine new state legislative chambers. The Democrats now control both houses in 23 states, while the Republicans control 15; ten states are split. This is the first time since 1994 that the Democrats have controlled the majority of state legislative bodies in the country.

THE CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS IN THE 110TH CONGRESS

All CBC members are Democrats, and since the Democrats gained the 15 seats needed to take partisan control of the U.S. House of Representatives, three CBC members will become chairmen of full standing committees in the 110th Congress. These members are John Conyers (MI), who will chair the House Judiciary committee, Bennie Thompson (MS), who will chair the House Homeland Security committee, and Charles Rangel (NY), who will chair the House Ways and Means committee. Congressman Thompson will be the first black member from the South to chair a full House committee. In addition, Representative Juanita Millender-McDonald (CA) is poised to become chair of the House Administration Committee.

In addition to the new CBC full committee chairs, James Clyburn (SC) has been elected Assistant Democratic Majority Leader (i.e., Democratic Whip), the third ranking Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives following Speaker-elect Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (MD).

There are at least 15—and maybe as many as 18—CBC members who are poised to chair subcommittees in the 110th Congress. The committees that will have the largest number of CBC subcommittee chairs are Government Reform (4), Judiciary (3), and Transportation and Infrastructure (3). The subcommittees likely to be chaired by CBC members are as follows:

- Management Integration and Oversight (Homeland Security), Kendrick Meek (FL)
- Energy and Resources (Government Reform), Diane Watson (CA)
- Federalism and the Census (Government Reform), William Clay, Jr. (MO)
- Federal Workforce and Agency Organization (Government Reform), Danny K. Davis (IL)
- Government Management & Finance Accountability (Government Reform), Edolphus Towns (NY)
- Housing and Community Opportunity (Financial Services), Maxine Waters (CA)
- Africa, Global Human Rights, and Int. Operations (International Relations), Donald Payne (NJ)
- Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security (Judiciary), Robert Scott VA)
- Commercial and Administrative Law (Judiciary), Mel Watt (NC)
- Immigration, Border Security and Claims (Judiciary), Sheila Jackson Lee (TX)
- Tax Finance and Exports (Small Business), Juanita Millender-McDonald (CA)
- Railroads (Transportation and Infrastructure), Corrine Brown (FL)
- Water Resources & Environment (Transportation and Infrastructure), Eddie B. Johnson (TX)
- Economic Development, Public Buildings & Emergency Management (Transportation and Infrastructure), Eleanor Holmes Norton (D.C.)
- Oversight (Ways and Means), John Lewis (GA)