

Mobilize Underrepresented Voters

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In Beaumont, Texas, 1978 was a political year like any other except for one little-noted difference—a small office downtown, staffed by three African-American activists. There weren't many African-American businesses in the city at the time, and even fewer downtown. The new office and its staff trio were designated a Get Out the Vote (GOTV) project, funded by a local Democratic power base. They would focus their efforts on the underrepresented, politically nascent African-American community.

Leading this GOTV effort was Dennis Graham, the first black professional political organizer I had ever met. Under his leadership, we registered voters from minority groups, with the hope that those in power would take notice and that new political activists would emerge from the masses of the newly registered.

We began by bringing voter registration opportunities to people at churches, parks, public events, and shopping centers. We also went to local, state, and federal offices that provided services to nontraditional voters. Very productive locations included the local public assistance office serving low-income mothers under the Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition program, the county and city public health offices, unemployment offices, senior citizen service centers, and locations where water and other public utility bills were paid. I would add to this list bingo night. Our method dramatically increased the number of registered voters from one or two per household to as many as six. Families were commonly seen going to the polls together, which encouraged neighborhoods to vote at record numbers. Voter participation in the African-American community living in Jefferson County and Texas City increased dramatically from averages between 26 and 47 percent to more than 50 percent during that year's primary election and nearly 80 percent for the November election.

The local political projections about election outcomes turned out to be inaccurate, since they were based on past voter participation (when there was low black voter turnout). The unanticipated increase in black voter

participation increased margins of victory, and the dynamics of political influence drastically shifted. The once-ignored black vote became a symbol of raw political power, with enough influence to determine the outcome of critical local, state, and federal primary and general elections.

Despite—or perhaps because of—our rousing success, fiscal support of future GOTV projects seemed to dry up. Nonetheless, the events of 1978 led to a decade of profound change in local politics—a shift in the balance of power. For the first time in the city's history, the school board became a body of members from minority communities. The city council gained substantial minority representation. The first African-American member of the Jefferson County Commissioners Court was elected. During this same time, I ran for my first and only elected office and won: precinct captain for Jefferson County Precinct 18.

The current state of politics in the United States only energizes me because of my personal experience with the one-person-one-vote rule that we cherish in this nation. The idea that one person cannot make a difference is disproved every day in small and great ways by average people fully expressing their God-given free will. We, the people, are the government, and it is time for us to remind those we can hire and fire each Election Day of this fact. I love being an American, and to me that means thinking and acting independently based on my principles and beliefs.

MoveOn Tips

- Contact the county office that manages elections (usually part of the county government or the state secretary of state's office) to learn the rules for registering voters in your county. Be sure to ask the following questions: Can registered voters be deputized to register people living in the county or anywhere in the state? Can family members register each other—for example, can spouses register each other and their children, and can children register their siblings and their parents?

- Write a brief description of your plan to register voters and send it to organizations with a history of funding voter registration projects (such as labor unions, the NAACP, local Democratic organizations, the National Political Party, and individual campaigns). Tell them how many new voters you expect to register, in which county you'll be working, and your deadline for completion.
- Recruit family and friends to help in the registration drive. Consider asking for help from sororities, fraternities, churches, local clubs, professional groups, and the like.
- When your drive is over, bring the voter registration cards to the campaign office or compile a list of all newly registered voters. On the list include each new voter's name, address, phone number, and if possible email address. Some campaigns pay a bounty for newly registered voters, but to collect the reward you need to verify that a voter is not already registered. In many jurisdictions the voter registration lists are public information and provide the name, address, and registration ID of all registered voters. Usually no fee is charged to look at the list, but a small reproduction fee may be charged if you want a copy of the list.

Lillie Coney worked for two African-American women members of Congress prior to becoming the public policy coordinator for the Association for Computing Machinery. She is passionate about our democracy and believes in fighting to preserve it for future generations.