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2020: The Year Black Voters Said, ‘Hold Up’

In the face of hardship and pain, Black Americans found their power and flexed. And they had fun doing it.



Election worker Fran Ison helps voters at the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage on Election Day Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2020, in Louisville, Ky

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It goes without saying that 2020 ranks as one of the all-time worsts, particularly if you come wrapped in melanin. Goodbye and good riddance to 2020's cascade of horrors: a once-in-a-century global pandemic. A pandemic disproportionately slamming people of color. Worldwide recession as a result of said pandemic. Not to mention that 400-year-old epidemic—American-style racism—laid bare for all to see.

But something else happened in 2020. It saw the gestation of a new kind of Black power, the political maturation of a people who decided collectively that a change was gonna come. And that meant voting by any means necessary, damn the pandemic.

2020 was the year that Black voters saw their ability to make change happen and flexed.

And with that flexing came Black joy—hopeful, pragmatic to the bone, and an act of defiance and power in the face of hardship.

On one Saturday in Philly, Clinton Cooper led voters in the Cha Cha Slide, sporting a “F--- 2020” T-shirt he bought after his uncle died of Covid, bopping and bouncing with determination as he waited to vote early. In Houston, there was the Texas Southern

University's Ocean of Soul marching band, drums pounding as they escorted students in a "March to the Polls." And in Atlanta, sorority sisters paid homage to their AKA soror Kamala Harris, doing their "Stroll to the Polls," as they danced to Lizzo's "Like a Girl."

*Woke up feelin' like I just might run for president
Even if there ain't no precedent, switchin' up the messaging*

The key phrase in all these viral moments: "... to the Polls." Vote, vote, vote. Organize, organize, organize. Black political power in 2020 was the culmination of four years of intense activism—and intense pain. It was the year Black voters finally felt their power—and the year the Democratic party felt it too. And that, as we face the Georgia Senate runoffs on Tuesday with record early Black voter turnout, could shape the political landscape for years to come.

"Black people are both taking and being given more agency within the Democratic Party," said Howard Franklin, a Democratic strategist with Ohio River South. "And that's a conversation that's a long time coming. The tectonics of racial politics are shifting."

Black Americans, deprived of the vote for centuries, have always taken that right seriously. They have also been stalwart Democratic voters for decades and helped put Obama into office in 2008 and again in 2012. But the horror show of 2020 was different—it brought a new intensity for Black voters, and a new intensity of focus on them, too.

In 2020, Black voters, particularly Black women, who vote at higher rates than men, were seen as the saviors of the party, of a campaign, able to pull off political upsets with a single bound. It was the year Iowa became irrelevant as a president maker. Instead, Rep. Jim Clyburn in South Carolina and Stacey Abrams in Georgia marshaled Black voters to deliver wins for Biden in the primaries and the general election.

Researchers are still compiling the most accurate data on the composition of the electorate, so it's hard to know exactly how many Black voters cast ballots in the presidential election. But we do know this: The number of African Americans eligible to vote for president hit a record 30 million in 2020, according to the Pew Research Center. More than a third of those voters live in key battleground states, and they played a big role in delivering much-needed wins for Joe Biden in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Despite Donald Trump's success in peeling off a handful of African American men, Black voters remained heavily in the Democratic camp. Network exit polls have the share of Black voters at 13 percent—roughly the same as the African American population—with 87 percent voting for Biden.

"Despite 401 years of just utter crazy B.S. and racism and all of these other narratives that have roiled within and around the Black community," said Michael Steele, former RNC chair, "Black voters 'saw an assault on democracy—and they didn't like it.'"

And that, Steele said, made a difference in states like Georgia and Michigan. "In those areas where Republicans expected the status quo ... Black voters said, 'Hold up.' And the results turned out differently."



Participants at a "Parade to the Polls" event, organized by Operation Go Vote!, a collaborative of African American civic and social organizations, in New Orleans, Saturday, Oct. 24, 2020.

"I'm ready"

One of the voters who said "Hold up" was Belinda Varnado, a middle-aged Black woman with cat-eyed glasses, whose pro-voting Tik Tok went viral.

"I got my grown folks hair on," Varnado said in the video. "I got my savage clothes on. I am ready for this damn heat. And I am ready for these people. Cause I'm going to vote. Ain't s--- gonna stop me."

Varnado had a plan.

"I'm ready. 'Cause let me show you," Varnado said as the camera panned to her voting equipment—a lawn chair, a folding fan and a cooler.

"They can stand out there for 15 hours," she said. "I got my chair. They can stand out there for 24 hours. I got my snacks. ... I ain't going to play with these h---. I'm going to vote ... and I suggest that you go vote, too."

Black voters overwhelmingly focused on one goal: voting Donald Trump out office, said Jaime Harrison, who lost his November bid to unseat Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham in South Carolina. "Black voters are extremely pragmatic. It's straight to the point, bottom line. It's not always emotional," he said. "You make an assessment: 'Who's the best person to win this race?'"

And if that pragmatism means waiting in long lines, music serves a vital role in keeping voters motivated. Often, the music *is* the activism.



Johnea Barlow casts her ballot at the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage, on Election Day Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2020, in Louisville, Ky.

Joy is an essential component of protest, said Nelini Stamp, director of the Joy to the Polls, a nonpartisan, national project that organizes performances for voters at polling places. (It was a “Joy to the Polls” DJ who played the Cha Cha Slide in Philly.) “It always comes out when people are in dire situations, 2020 being a dire situation,” Stamp said. “When there’s a lot of pressure and a lot of economic hardship, music and joy always resurfaces. It’s a radical act.”

Stamp, a political activist, got the inspiration for “Joy to the Polls” after seeing a roving Bad Bunny outdoor concert. Stamp was worried about potential voter suppression tactics and overly long lines at precincts, especially in Black neighborhoods. The idea was to bring a little happiness to voters and de-escalate any tension while they waited.

“People were feeling down and out and out of luck,” Stamp said. “We wanted to use a different motivation other than anger.”

For the presidential election, Joy to the Polls set up “pop-up activations” around the country, showing up at polling stations with DJs spinning tunes and mini concerts ranging from Patti Smith to Busta Rhymes. They’re continuing the practice for the Georgia runoffs, with 80 pop-ups around the state, featuring appearances by America Ferrera, Eva Longoria, K. Michelle, as well as rappers Mulatto, Rick Ross and Moneybagg Yo.

Marrying music with a movement has long roots in the Black community, from the gospel song-turned-civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome” to “The Bigger Picture,” rapper Lil

Baby's song about Black Lives Matter protests. As the poet Toi Derricotte once wrote, Black joy is an act of resistance.

"Black joy is an essential part of Black cultural expression," said Nsenga Burton, a film and media professor at Emory University. "2020 shows that Black people continue to choose happiness and joy in the face of great adversity. And that can never be taken away from us."

"You About to Lose Yo Job"

In the days after the election, when it started looking like Biden would prevail over Trump, Black Twitter, home of the viral clapback, lit up with gifs in a joyful jeer. Even Meena Harris, niece of Kamala, joined in: "Trump you about to lose yo job."

Soon to follow was the inevitable video mashup, featuring clips of a bevy of Democrats, from Biden to Kamala Harris to Barack Obama to the late John Lewis, doing a little victory dance:

The impromptu rap song that played in the background of the video had spun out of a Black woman's February arrest in South Carolina. As Johniqua Charles was detained outside a nightclub, she taunted the white security guard handcuffing her, rapping to an internal beat: "You about to lose yo job/Get this dance!/Cause you are detaining me/For nothing."

That viral moment became the protest anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement this summer, as demonstrations and uprisings sprang up around the world in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of a white police officer. And going into the November elections, it became a rallying cry for voters.

"It was a very subversive moment that empowered her," said Burton. "It was the subversion and shifting of power in that dangerous moment that spoke to BLM activists in general and Black people in particular."

And it was joyful too. Though born in a moment of stress and anxiety, Charles' freestyle rap was an upbeat taunt, a symbol of hope and power—both for her and the Black voters it inspired in 2020. (Charles was eventually released and was not charged.)

Going forward, if they want to hold on to Black support and energy, Democratic political activists and strategists will need to find ways to harness that sense of optimism, subversion and focus in the Black community, said Antjuan Seawright, a South Carolina Democratic strategist with Blueprint Strategy. Black voters who never felt like they had a chance to "be on the field" now see that they can help shape a policy agenda, he said.

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party are clearly conscious of this, as witnessed by Kamala Harris's historic role as the first Black/South Asian vice president—and by the efforts to carve out a diverse Cabinet, strategists said.

"What all of this means: no constituency can be taken for granted. We know how to hold folks accountable, Seawright said. "Everybody realizes Joe Biden and Kamala Harris would not have won without Black voters."