

**Chideya, F. (2000, May). Shaping the Black Agenda. *Essence*, 31(1), pp. 196 ff.**

## OVERVIEW

It was only in 1992 that the first black woman was elected to the Senate and she was only the second black to gain a Senate seat since Reconstruction. And do you know that even with 30 million African-Americans in this country, there is now not even one African-American in the Senate? For most white people, this statistic is shocking, but it doesn't surprise black people who are all too familiar with institutional racism. " 'I wake up as if I'm going into combat because that's what we're doing,' " remarks California Congresswoman Barbara Lee.

African-American writer Farai Chideya interviewed five black women—all politically prominent—about issues critical to the future of African-Americans. All were Democrat, since Chideya was not able to find any black women who are major Republican leaders. In a roundtable discussion, these women highlighted what they believe to be the central issues of political concern for black women and for black people as a whole. This discussion is incredibly important in a nation such as ours that has done little to combat its gross discrepancy in political representation. Though the United States is comprised of 30 million African-Americans—13% of the nation—they still hold little political weight and often feel ignored completely. As already mentioned, an African-American individual—man or woman—now holds no Senate seat. Of the 535 seats in the U.S. Congress, women of color hold only 18. Chideya surmises, "White leaders have more to do with the political decisions that govern black lives than black leaders."

The following include the major issues addressed in the article:

- **Voting.** "I don't think any of these candidates [for president] need to pay any attention to African-Americans. And if we continue to be unregistered, if the young people don't get into the political mix ...they're going to go to voter-rich suburbs."
- **The Census.** Viewed as the "singular most defining activity we can engage in," the most undercounted populations in 1990 were minorities, the elderly, and children.

- **Coalition building.** African-American people need to be willing to work with other minority populations, since they are concerned about similar issues.
- **Schools, vouchers, charter schools.** "Nearly 90% of the children in this country go to public schools. Why not improve the system that we have now?" These women also call for greater parental input, higher competence among and better training for teachers, and new technology in urban schools.
- **Affirmative Action.** " 'I'm proud to say that I'm a product of Affirmative Action,' " says Congresswoman Lee. From Congresswoman Waters, " 'at the University of California, Berkeley, freshman enrollment of African-Americans declined 56.6% from 1997 to 1998 [following the 1997 ban of Affirmative Action], and the numbers of black freshmen dropped from 7% to just 2% of the class over the corresponding years.' "
- **Prisons.** One of the primary items on the black agenda: "average sentences for blacks convicted of drug and weapons offenses in this country are 50% longer than those for whites convicted of the same crimes...black men are 5% of the population and more than 50% of the people in prison." In Florida, 1/3 of black men cannot vote because they have felony convictions.
- **Marriage.** "We've got to talk about marriage again...make it fashionable. Every black elected official has to use the word family, has to use the word marriage."

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What are your reactions to this article? Do you agree or disagree with any of these women's interpretations of the issues?
- Why do you think we still have political injustice along racial lines in the U.S.?
- What are some ways we can facilitate equal political opportunities within the United States today?

## IMPLICATIONS

Youth, in particular, need to know the extent of racial inequality in politics. Youth workers should create forums for their youth to address their own racist thoughts and assumptions. Encourage relationships with youth of

minority backgrounds. Be comfortable and prepared to address racism constructively and openly. Educate youth about the racial injustice in our nation and encourage them to fight against it. Kids also need to understand that prison will erase their right to vote in the future. There is much to be done.

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