

U.S. Senator Barack Obama



ON Black Student Politics

BY STEWART IKEDA, EDITOR, THE BLACK COLLEGIAN MAGAZINE, AND ALEXIA ROBINSON, BLACK COLLEGE WIRE

With the midterm elections coming up, Barack Obama may just be the U.S.A.'s hardest-working politician not up for re-election – traveling throughout his state, the country and the world this summer and fall. In a joint feature, Black College Wire and THE BLACK COLLEGIAN caught up with the Illinois senator right after his visit to Africa and meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus, to discuss the topic of raising the political power of African-American students.

African-American voting stands to be a considerable force

this year, and a growing one. In 2004, Black turnout jumped to its highest level in three decades – 47 percent, more than 11 percentage points over 2000, and just 2.5 percentage points fewer than whites – the greatest increase of any racial or ethnic minority group in recent cycles. U.S. youth turnout also rose substantially, largely driven by greater voting among African-American youth. Midterms always attract lower turnout than Presidential elections. However, African Americans were the only group to buck the trend of declining participation in recent midterm elections; Black youth were

more likely to vote in 2002 than those of any other race.

But the picture isn't all rosy. According to a 2002 national youth survey by the Council for Excellence in Government, Black youths report having little confidence that they can "make a difference," in their community or the ballot box, which seems to impact upon turnout. And in light of several incidents of African-American and student voter suppression, we wanted to ask the Senator about strategies for building student clout and making a difference.

TBC/BCW: Senator, welcome and thank you for granting us this interview. To begin: We saw and felt the pain of powerless people in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. What can African Americans, students in particular, do to gain more political power?

Sen. Obama: Well, the first thing is getting informed. When I think about my own career...I wasn't somebody who was active in politics or public issues when I was in high school. But, when I was a freshman in college, a group of African National Congress representatives came to visit my campus. I recall for the first time thinking what were my responsibilities to help shape the larger world. I became active in the anti-Apartheid movement.

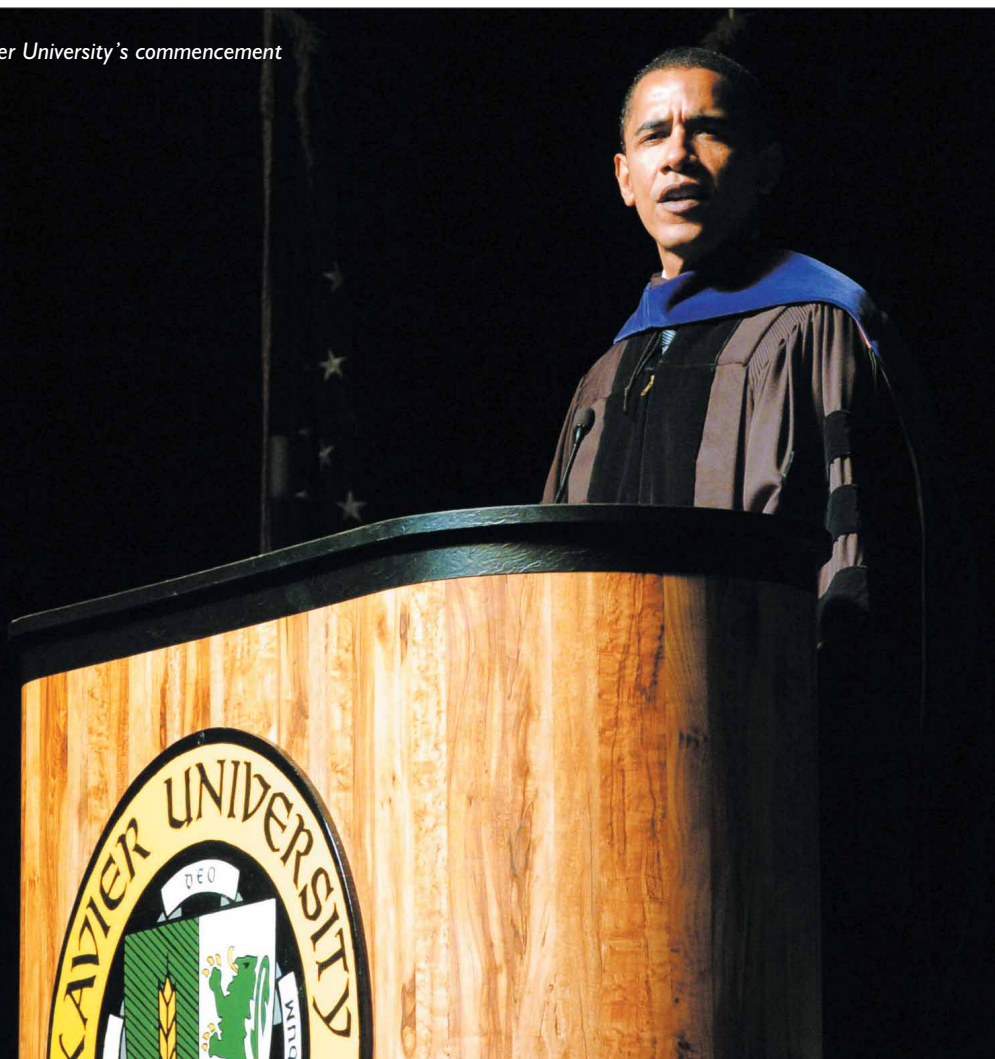
I think every student has the opportunity to get involved in some issue and get informed. It doesn't have to be the same issue. There are times in our history when one particular issue like the civil rights movement or the Vietnam War focuses everybody's attention, but there are times when people just make a determination that they're interested in issues of hunger or education. Whatever

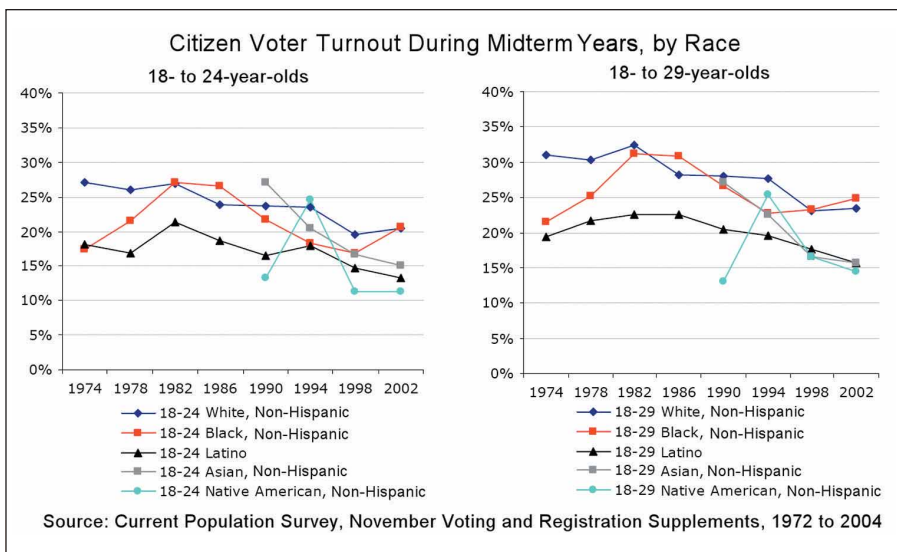
it is, I think people getting engaged and involved in some fashion would not only be good for the issue but would be good for them. It'll give them the opportunity to start seeing how, with a little bit of sweat and effort, they can actually have a surprising impact on the world out there.

TBC/BCW: What can African-American politicians do to aid in the effort to get more students involved in the political process?

Sen. Obama: One of the things I think is important, not just [for] elected officials but older folks generally, [is giving] young people the opportunity to get involved. So, for example, I've set up a range of internships in my office. I do a training program for young people who are interested in politics. I think that in

Sen. Obama stirs the crowd at Xavier University's commencement





African Americans buck the national trend, raising registration and turnout

every institution, whether it's a law firm or church or what have you, making sure that young people are given entree and opportunity to exert their leadership – and to do substantive work, not just licking envelopes or fetching coffee – I think that's critical. In the African-American community in particular, I think sometimes we have a tendency for our leadership to be very protective of their turf and not invite young people in until it's way too late. The earlier we're grooming young people and giving them leadership opportunities, and pushing them up front, the better.

TBC/BCW: Some suggest that African-American students can raise our political

clout generally and, in some districts, decisively swing elections by orchestrating drives to register and vote in blocs where HBCUs are located rather than in our home district. Would you support such a strategy?

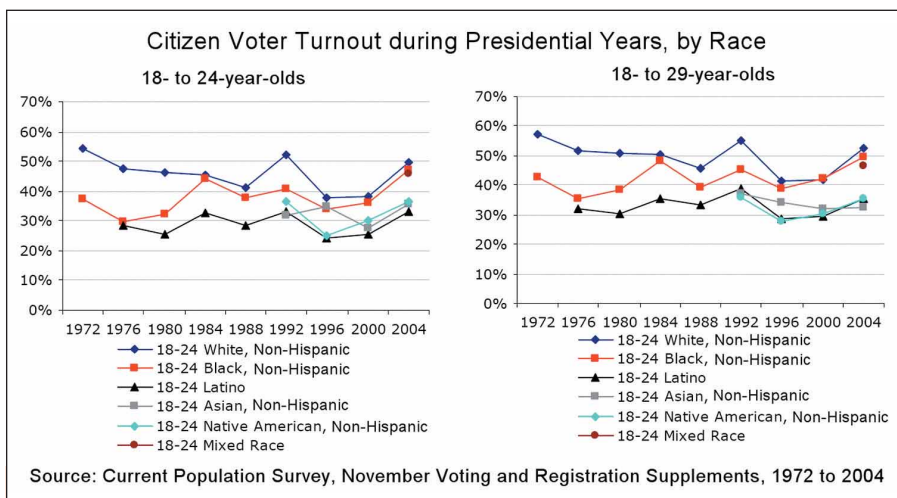
Sen. Obama: I think that there's no doubt that young people have to vote as just a starting point for involvement. That's absolutely critical. And I think that to the extent that you are active in the community where you're going to school, the idea of mobilizing voters around local politics is a terrific idea. I'd just be happy if young people voted anywhere they are. Unfortunately, young people tend to vote at much lower rates than

older folks do. So, I think it's great to take the next step and try to be strategic about where to vote, but the first step is just making sure you're voting, period.

TBC/BCW: Along the lines of bloc voting strategy, do you think the Democratic Party has been taking the African-American vote for granted?

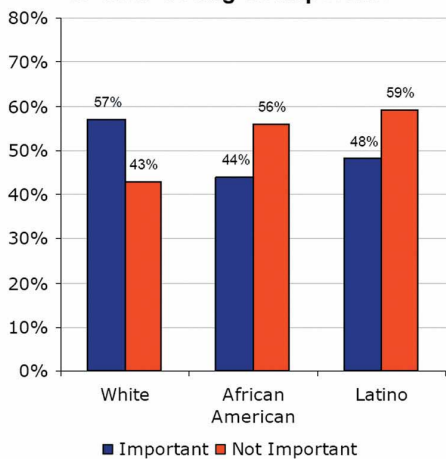
Sen. Obama: I don't think the African-American vote is being taken for granted. I think what is true is that the issues that confront portions of the African-American community, particularly around issues of poverty and improving the inner-city school systems, are very difficult issues that cost money. And I think the Democrats right now are shy about spending money. I think they have been put on the defensive by the Republicans. We haven't seen sort of a bold vision in terms of how we address issues of poverty, and as a consequence, I think a major issue that is important to the African-American community has been neglected. Now I think that it is an obligation to not just the African-American community, but the entire American community to start thinking how do we deal with folks in the Ninth Ward who were abandoned long before the hurricane struck, and who are dealing with substandard education systems, community policing strategies that don't work, a lack of job opportunities, and communities overrun by drugs and crime. Those are all issues that I think we have to tackle collectively, and the Democrats, I think, have to have an agenda around those issues, even if Republicans decide that it's not important to have them.

TBC/BCW: Going back to the comments that you made about getting students involved early on: Our young political leaders may be positioned at an early age, but then encouraged to wait until their predecessors die or retire – even if that person isn't effective in working for their constituents. What is your advice to students who like you face opposition, and they still have a true desire to serve, but are told to wait their turn?



African-American registration and turnout inclined sharply for the 2004 Presidential election

Black Youth Ages 15-25 Least Likely to View Voting as Important



Source: CIRACLE/Council for Excellence in Government, National Youth Survey, Jan 2004



Photo: Marci Fuller/The Courtbouillon

Activist students hold a rally on the Dillard University campus on 2004 Election Day to encourage students to vote. Voting at HBCUs hit record levels in 2004.

Sen. Obama: Well, a couple of things. Number 1: I do think it's important for young people to pay their dues. I think young people like the idea of the glamour of politics, which isn't very glamorous. But, they haven't always worked hard in the community on behalf of folks. I think the most important thing to prove your leadership is to actually be on the ground doing stuff that's concrete, that's helping folks, even if it's not in politics. I'd rather see somebody spend the first three or four years of their career working as a teacher in a public school or working on a community-based development project so that they have some familiarity with the day-to-day struggle that people go through and they're not suddenly in the unreality of a political campaign. I think your general point is right. Once young people

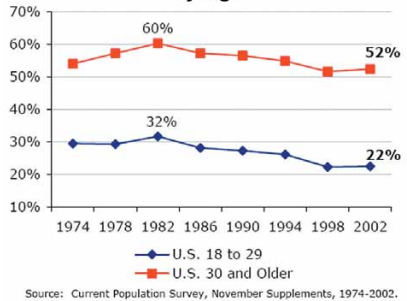
have that experience and are ready to serve, I think that older folks hang on too long and stay in the way. I think that if a young person feels they can do a better job than somebody in next generation...Sometimes it's necessary to go ahead and run, and keep in mind that usually folks don't give up power easily. It has to be wrested from them.

Sen. Obama: Keep staying involved and staying encouraged. I appreciate all of you guys.

Stewart Ikeda is Vice-President of Marketing & Community Outreach for IMDiversity, Inc., and Editor of THE BLACK COLLEGIAN. Alexia Robinson is a recent graduate of Florida A&M University, and was the first student journalist selected for the Black College Wire / IMDiversity editorial internship. Charts prepared by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at www.civicyouth.org.

TBC/BCW: Senator, thank you for your time. We know you've got a busy schedule and appreciate your joining us.

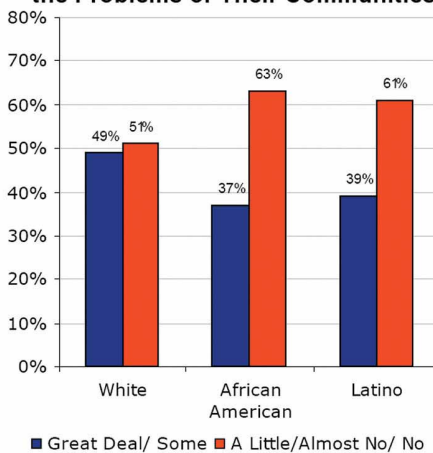
Citizen Voter Turnout in Midterm Years, by Age



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1974-2002.

Young people tend to vote at much lower rates than older citizens

A Majority of Youth Ages 15-25 Feel They Can Make Little Difference in Solving the Problems of Their Communities



Source: CIRACLE/Council for Excellence in Government, National Youth Survey, Jan 2004



Photo: Darryl D. Smith / BlackCollegeWire

Future voter Antavious Vaughn, 6, promotes the cause at a march for voting rights in August 2005.