



November 7, 2008

To: Progressive Allies and Journalists
Fr: Kathryn Kolbert, President, People For the American Way Foundation
Re: Blaming Black Voters for Prop 8 Loss is Wrong and Destructive

The past 72 hours have brought an extraordinary range of emotions – great joy at the election of Barack Obama and defeat of John McCain, and sadness and anger at the passage of anti-gay initiatives in Florida, Arizona, Arkansas, and California. That sadness has turned to outrage at the speed with which some white gay activists began blaming African Americans – sometimes in appallingly racist ways – for the defeat of Proposition 8. This is inexcusable.

As a mother who has raised two children in a 30-year relationship with another woman, I fully understand the depth of hurt and anger at voters' rejection of our families' equality. But responding to that hurt by lashing out at African Americans is deeply wrong and offensive – not to mention destructive to the goal of advancing equality.

Before we give Religious Right leaders more reasons to rejoice by deepening the divisions they have worked so hard to create between African Americans and the broader progressive community, let's be clear about who is responsible for gay couples in California losing the right to get married, and let's think strategically about a way forward that broadens and strengthens support for equality.

Others have taken on the challenge of looking at the basic numbers and [concluded](#) that it is simply false to suggest that Prop 8 would have been defeated if African Americans had been more supportive. The amendment seems to have passed by more than half a million votes, and the number of black voters, even with turnout boosted by the presidential race, couldn't have made up that difference. That's an important fact, but when African American supporters of equality are being called racist epithets at protests about Prop 8, the numbers almost seem beside the point.

Republicans and white churchgoers, among many other groups, voted for Prop. 8 at higher rates than African Americans. There are few African Americans in the inland counties that all voted overwhelmingly to strip marriage equality out of the California constitution. So why single out African Americans? Who's really to blame? The Religious Right. Let's start here:

- Conservative evangelical leaders who are unremittingly hostile to the rights of gay people and who put Prop. 8 on the ballot and bombarded pastors, churchgoers, and the public with lies about gay people wanting to destroy their religious liberty and come for their children – even suggesting that Christians would be thrown in jail if Prop 8 passed.
- Mormon Church leaders who turned Prop. 8 into a national religious crusade against gay couples, badgered Mormons nationwide to give heavily to the campaign, and recruited thousands of footsoldiers for door-to-door canvassing (special kudos to the courageous Mormons who challenged the Church leadership)
- Conservative Catholic leaders who betrayed Catholic teaching about human dignity by enthusiastically joining forces with campaign organizers who portrayed supporters of gay equality as evil and satanic

- “Yes on Prop 8” leaders whose view of the campaign as a battle between good and evil led to an “ends justifies the means” campaign that included grossly distorted ads, mailings, and robocalls directed at African Americans and falsely portrayed Barack Obama as a Prop 8 supporter.

There will be plenty of post-game analysis of the No on 8 campaign’s choices and strategies, and that’s not the purpose of this memo. But it is clear that the Yes on 8 campaign had a far more aggressive and systematic outreach to African American religious leaders and voters. If we either take black voters for granted because they are “supposed to” be liberal, or we write them out of our campaign strategies because we label them inherently homophobic, we cannot turn around and make them the scapegoat for our failings.

Here’s a fact that creates some perspective. On November 4 there was an anti-gay initiative on the ballot in Arkansas to prohibit unmarried couples from adopting or being foster parents. White voters supported that anti-gay initiative by a 16 percentage point margin, twice the margin for African Americans in the state. So it’s clearly not the case that African Americans are inherently more prone to supporting discrimination than white Americans.

We need a broad and ongoing strategy to create and sustain constructive dialogue at the intersections of race, religion, sexuality, and politics. And it should go without saying that partnership is a two-way street. How many white LGBT leaders and activists have been at the forefront of battles to preserve affirmative action, or raise the minimum wage?

The Right’s Big Investments Pay Big Dividends

The Religious Right has invested in systematic outreach to the most conservative elements of the Black Church, creating and promoting national spokespeople like Bishop Harry Jackson, and spreading the big lie that gays are out to destroy religious freedom and prevent pastors from preaching about homosexuality from the pulpit.

In addition, Religious Right leaders have exploited the discomfort among many African Americans with white gays who seem more ready to embrace the language and symbols of the civil rights movement than to be strong allies in the continuing battle for equal opportunity. At a series of Religious Right events, demagogic African American pastors have accused the gay rights movement of “hijacking” and “raping” the civil rights movement.

The effort to stir anti-gay emotions among African Americans by suggesting that gays are trying to “hijack” the civil rights movement is not new. During a Cincinnati referendum in 1993, anti-gay groups produced a videotape targeted to African American audiences; the tape featured Trent Lott, Ed Meese and other right-wing luminaries warning that protecting the civil rights of lesbians and gay men would come at the expense of civil rights gains made by the African American community. It was an astonishing act of hypocrisy for Lott and Meese to show concern for those civil rights gains, given their career-long hostility to civil rights principles and enforcement, but the strategy worked that year. Eleven years later, however, African American religious leaders and voters helped pass an initiative striking the anti-gay provision from the city charter. (The story of that successful fairness campaign is told in an award-winning mini-documentary – *A Blinding Flash of the Obvious* – that is part of a Focus on Fairness toolkit produced by People For the American Way Foundation.)

In California this year, national and local white anti-gay religious leaders worked hard to create alliances with African American clergy; Harry Jackson was busy in both California and Florida stirring opposition to marriage equality. None of the Right’s outreach to African Americans on gay rights issues in recent years has been a secret. Neither has polling that showed some deterioration in African American support for full equality. But there hasn’t been the same investment in systematic outreach from the gay rights community.

Support Champions, Not Undermine Them

In the face of the Right's efforts to stir anti-gay sentiment among African Americans, many civil rights leaders have been powerful advocates for LGBT equality, among them Julian Bond, John Lewis, and the late Coretta Scott King. These leaders are deeply committed to the value of fairness and the constitutional principle of equality under the law, and they understand that strengthening the hand of far right leaders is not in any way in the interest of the African American community.

Angrily blaming African Americans for the passage of Prop 8 is not going to help open doors for the kind of long-term conversations we need to have about homophobia and discrimination. It will, instead, further isolate and undermine courageous African American leaders who have taken a firm stand for equality. Alice Huffman, president of the state NAACP, has been an outspoken champion on equality and on Prop 8, and right-wing leaders are fomenting attacks on her from within the organization. People like Alice Huffman need our support and strategic thinking, not complaints or condemnation.

Broad-brush denunciation of African Americans by white gay leaders also fosters the incredibly damaging perception that the LGBT and African American communities are two separate, rather than overlapping entities, and undermines the work of African American LGBT leaders.

Religion, Homophobia and Marriage Equality

The far right has aggressively sought to use traditional religious beliefs about homosexuality as a wedge to separate African Americans from progressive allies and particularly from the LGBT rights movement. In response, People For the American Way Foundation's African American Ministers Leadership Council has created an Equal Justice Task Force and made a commitment to a multi-year effort to take on homophobia in the black church and broader African American community.

As part of that long-term campaign, People For the American Way Foundation conducted focus groups among African American churchgoers in California in September. Among men and women, and among younger and older groups, we found strong opposition to discrimination against LGBT people in employment and housing. And we found widespread support for legal protections for committed couples. Among all groups there was generally a live-and-let-live attitude toward gay people in their communities and congregations, and a recognition that couples deserve some basic legal protections. People For the American Way Foundation produced and ran three radio ads designed to tap that instinct for fairness and encouraging African Americans to oppose anti-gay discrimination.

But our focus groups also showed us that marriage equality faces a higher hurdle. Many people in our focus groups had difficulty sorting out the difference between civil marriage and marriage as a religious institution. Even some of the most eloquent opponents of discrimination argued that marriage was somehow different because they saw it as an inherently religious act that God had designed to be between a man and a woman. Rev. Kenneth Samuel, chair of the AAMLC's Equal Justice Task Force, says we need to be in "tough and loving" conversation to get people to think differently about that question, and to grapple with separating religious belief from commitment to constitutional principles of equality under the law. That's a hard conversation to have in the midst of a heated political campaign.

Samuel was among the leaders of workshops at the California NAACP convention in October on homophobia in the black church. The overflow sessions went on for hours, demonstrating that there is a real hunger for the kind of honest, rousing conversation about homophobia, discrimination, love, equality, scripture, and politics. People's hearts were changed, even if everyone didn't end the session ready to fully embrace marriage equality.

As an outgrowth of those workshops, Rev. Gerald Johnson, the Individual Rights and Advocacy Vice Chair of the state NAACP, asked for volunteers to develop and submit a resolution that resolved to: "develop partnerships with African American civic and religious leaders to educate, train, and advocate for cultural competency and

sensitivity in the greater African American community as it relates to gay and lesbian concerns.” That resolution passed overwhelmingly.

In preparation for those workshops and other clergy roundtables and training sessions, People For the American Way Foundation created a video documenting right-wing efforts to co-opt the black church by embracing and lifting up the voices of anti-gay conservative black clergy. In that video, Rev. Samuel describes Religious Right leaders who believe welfare is satanic and the minimum wage and other worker protections are ungodly, and he asks, “what are the consequences of lending our voices, our moral and spiritual authority, to those who seek our support to deny the dignity, humanity, and equality of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters?”

Rev. Samuel speaks movingly about the religious journey that led him to begin preaching a gospel of inclusion – and his commitment to stick with it even when a thousand members left his church. He understands how deeply questions of homophobia and marriage are rooted in understandings of scripture and the traditions of the black church. Here’s how Rev. Samuel concludes that video:

I know that within the Black Church we have different theological views about sexuality. But I believe we can find common ground against mistreating our brothers and sisters in the words of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we can find common ground in opposing discrimination in the constitutional principle of equal justice under the law that we fought so hard to make a reality.

I believe the Black Church loses a bit of its soul every time we sacrifice the well-being of our gay brothers and sisters – every time we make political alliances at their expense. I believe it is our calling to be a consistent voice for justice. And I do believe that “A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The LGBT-equality movement needs to recognize that its real enemies are the Religious Right organizations and leaders who oppose gay and lesbian equality and who devise and fund strategies like Prop 8. And we must commit now to building long-term partnerships with equality-affirming African American clergy and community leaders that will allow us to advance the progressive values that we share