

# THE Nation.

## Wanted: New Voters

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The Atlanta Car and Bike Show lasts for one day only, and on a recent hot summer afternoon, the line to get in snaked for hundreds of yards through the carpeted interior of the Georgia World Congress Center in downtown Atlanta. Inside the cavernous hall, live hip-hop thundered from a stage as thousands of black Atlantans meandered through the displays, scoping tricked-out cars, motorcycles and one another.

But before attendees got to the cars and music, volunteers from the Obama campaign were doing their best to make sure they spent a moment on civics. Serena Bland and her husband, Adrian, paced up and down the entrance to the hall with Register to Vote signs, urging people toward the voter-registration booth a dozen feet away. There, Anderia Bishop chatted and joked and generally poured every ounce of her considerable enthusiasm into persuading even the skeptical or indifferent that registering would be the best five minutes they ever spent. "We're chasing people through the park," Bishop said of her local volunteer group's activities. "We're going out onto the corner. This is huge. *Huge.*"

A young man approached the table and was pleasantly surprised to learn that felons in Georgia who've completed probation can vote. "If I'd a-known it was this easy," he said in disbelief, "I would have been done!" After completing the form, Bishop folded it and deposited it in an ersatz ballot box. The sign beside it read, Voting Is a Sacred Right and a Moral Obligation.

A middle-aged woman with her daughter in tow took an application and began to fill it out. Not content with just one, Bishop asked the daughter if she was registered to vote. Clad in a velour turquoise jumpsuit (with short-shorts), wearing hoop earrings and snapping her gum in near caricature of insouciant youth, she shook her head. Bishop then proffered a clipboard, but the daughter pouted, "It's too much to write."

"It's not too much to write," Bishop replied sweetly but firmly, the clipboard still extended. "It takes a minute. You're gonna be here while your mother's filling it out anyway."

With that, the young woman dropped her shoulders and, with the air of a suffering martyr, took hold of the clipboard and began to fill it out.

Bishop nodded her head in quiet triumph: add another to the tally.

As the daughter sauntered off to the bar after handing Bishop the completed form, I wasn't sure whether I'd just witnessed the birth of a new voter or an exercise in futility. For the Obama campaign, which is undertaking the largest voter-registration drive in the history of presidential campaigns, victory may very well hinge on the answer.

In 2004 George W. Bush carried Georgia by eighteen points. Though it has been sixteen years since a Democrat last won the state, this year, to the surprise of many, the Obama campaign has announced that Georgia is one of the twenty-three states it is targeting. By the time of the convention, it will be home to 160 field organizers in twenty offices. In June, when Obama campaign manager David Plouffe came to Washington to give a PowerPoint presentation to the press corps laying out the campaign's strategic vision for the election, he stressed that Georgia was home to 600,000 unregistered African-American voters, all of whom the campaign was going to work hard to register and turn out. "Our volume," he said of the nationwide voter-registration program, "is going to be enormous." (Obama will also likely be aided by the candidacy of Georgia native Bob Barr, running on the Libertarian ticket.)

The website Progress Illinois commissioned statistician Nate Silver to use his sophisticated electoral prediction model to estimate by just how much Obama would have to increase turnout among African-Americans in order to be competitive in some of the red states he has targeted. Silver concluded that, nationwide, each increase of 10 percent in African-American turnout from the 2004 baseline



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would result in about thirteen electoral votes. In Georgia, he predicted it would take a 50 percent increase in African-American turnout to put Obama at even odds to win.

Fifty percent is a massive increase: when you control for socioeconomics, African-Americans in the South vote at slightly higher levels than whites, and historically, increases in black turnout in the region have tended to provoke equal and opposite increases in white turnout for the opposing candidate. But then again, this is all uncharted territory. We've never had a black man one election away from the presidency. And there's never been a registration effort like Vote for Change, the name the Obama campaign has given to its fifty-state registration push.

At a panel at Netroots Nation in July, Obama deputy campaign manager Steve Hildebrand described the philosophy behind the undertaking. "The way to change the political process," he said, "is to change the face of the electorate. Because it's not about getting Barack Obama elected, it's about whether we're gonna have a progressive majority."

It makes sense. The electorate is older, whiter and richer than the nation as a whole. As of 2004, there were 55 million unregistered eligible voters, among whom traditional Democratic constituencies are overrepresented. Eighty-two percent of those with bachelor's degrees are registered, while only 53 percent of those without a high school diploma are. Blacks trail whites by about ten percentage points in registration, and Latinos trail whites by almost 20 percent. Single women, who are reliably progressive, lag behind married women by thirteen points. A full eight out of ten voters over 55 are registered, but among 18- to 24-year-olds, the only age demographic Kerry won in 2004, that number is only six in ten.

Given all this, one would think that a new voter approach would be a no-brainer for Democrats. But it turns out that transmuted nonvoters into voters requires a tremendous amount of painstaking labor and a massive volunteer mobilization that few campaigns have the financial or organizational resources to pull off. Indeed, before Iowa, old hands were scoffing at Obama's plan to rely on new voters, particularly the young. But youth turnout in the caucus doubled, and young voters turned out (perhaps for the first time in American history) at the same rate as senior citizens did. Clearly, the Obama campaign had figured something out that others hadn't.

Vote for Change officially kicked off May 10, with 1,000 events around the country. At a rally in Chicago, several hundred supporters showed up at Plumbers Union Hall just west of the Loop, where Chicago Congressman Danny Davis warmly congratulated them on their presence: "You look so beautiful on a Saturday morning!"

Emil Jones, president of the State Senate and a mentor of Obama's, followed Davis on stage and homed in on the campaign's historical significance: "I'm 72 years old, and I certainly hope I live long enough," he said to soft amens of agreement. "This young man is going to be President, and I wanna be around to vote for him." Mayor Richard Daley, who had been billed as a headliner, entered the room in Saturday casual and received a standing ovation from the mostly black crowd. He offered appreciation right back. "Give yourself a round of applause!" he urged the crowd, and they happily obliged.

Voter-registration drives have a particular resonance for black Chicago. Indeed, for students of Chicago politics, Daley's rapturous reception contained a dissonant note of irony; twenty-five years earlier, Daley's first campaign for mayor ran up against an unprecedented registration drive that managed to elect his rival, Harold Washington, as the city's first black mayor.

After the death of Daley's father, Richard J. Daley, in 1976, Chicago's South Side Irish machine limped along weakly, and by 1983 a small coalition of the city's black activists and businessmen were confident enough to try to put one of their own in the mayor's office. They began to organize a voter-registration drive, but when they tried to persuade the talented and savvy Congressman Washington to run, he was skeptical of his chances. He told the activists that if they registered 50,000 new black voters, he'd run. Organizing through churches, community groups and local businesses, they added more than 100,000, and Washington triumphed over Daley and incumbent Jane Byrne in the three-way Democratic primary with an unprecedented 79 percent turnout of registered black voters. That fall he beat a white Republican to become mayor.

One of the black Chicagoans who played a role in Washington's victory was the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who launched his first campaign for President the next year. In both 1984 and 1988, Jackson made voter registration a central part of his campaign strategy. His grassroots volunteers, ACORN, several unions and a coalition of civil rights groups would follow up after his events, signing up new voters and filling the rolls in state after state, especially in the South, where white Democratic politicians would later attribute their victories to what they euphemistically called the "new voter." All told, they registered between 2 million and 3 million voters in '84 and '88 combined.

Four years after Jackson's second run, a voter-registration organization called Project Vote recruited Barack Obama, just out of Harvard Law School, to spearhead another massive registration drive in Illinois. Founded in 1982 by liberal attorney Sandy Newman, Project Vote was conceived as a way to fight back against Reagan-era policies by registering the victims of those policies to vote as they stood in line at social service agencies. The project quickly grew in scale, registering poor and minority voters wherever they could be found. When Newman called Obama in 1992, Obama had just signed a contract for his first book and was hesitant about missing the deadline for his manuscript. "I didn't make any bones about the fact that this was sixty-hour-a-week work and we paid a pittance," recalls Newman. But Obama was sold.

When Obama arrived, black voter registration and turnout in Chicago were at their lowest points since record-keeping began. Over

the course of a few months, Obama recruited staff and volunteers from black churches and community groups and helped train 700 deputy registrars. He put together a fundraising committee chaired by white politicians and black business leaders, and saturated black radio with ads declaring, "It's a power thing." Project Vote flied black neighborhoods and sent volunteers door-to-door in high-rise housing projects; minority franchise owners of McDonald's restaurants allowed people to register voters on-site and donated paid radio time to the campaign. Other businesses, labor unions and foundations also kicked in funding.

Overall, the drive added an estimated 150,000 voters and, though nonpartisan, helped elect Carol Moseley Braun as the first black woman ever to serve in the US Senate. By the time the campaign was over, voter registrations in the nineteen predominantly black wards outnumbered those in the nineteen that were predominantly white, a first in Chicago history. Statewide, black registration went up 11 percent. It was, says Newman, "the most successful voter-registration effort in Chicago history."

Back at Plumbers Hall, the pep-rally feel gave way to the mundane logistics upon which voter registration thrives or fails. In Cook County, anyone who wants to collect registration forms must first be certified as a deputy registrar, and attaining that certification was really what the event was all about. A representative from the Cook County Clerk's office took the stage to administer the training. "You can't register people where alcohol is being served," she admonished the assembled cheerfully. "Now, turn to your manual."

Registering people to vote is harder than it might seem. That's by design. "The registration and the balloting system is constructed," says Frances Fox Piven, who has spent a career as an activist and academic advocating for opening up access to the ballot. "Somebody had to put it in place." In the wake of the Civil War, as Southern blacks and Northern immigrants suddenly flooded the voting booths, voter-registration requirements began cropping up, devised by established interests to make sure too many of the wrong types of people weren't voting. What was once a one-step process (people just showed up and voted) became a two-step process, and not surprisingly voting participation fell among the poor, immigrants and African-Americans--precisely the demographics those in power were attempting to keep out.

While the 1965 Voting Rights Act banned the most obviously racist uses of registration laws, many states have implemented policies, like voter-ID laws and felon disenfranchisement, that have the effect of suppressing turnout most acutely among poor, marginalized and nonwhite voters. The racial subtext of these policies is often crystal clear: opening the Alabama Constitutional Convention in 1901, which would include a provision disenfranchising anyone convicted of a crime of "moral turpitude," a legislator announced the convention's intent to "establish white supremacy in this State."

More recently, conservative state legislators have also sought to tie up would-be voter-registration drives in spools of red tape. In New Mexico, to cite just one example, a law pushed through by Republicans imposes draconian restrictions on any person or organization registering voters and entails a series of penalties for anyone who, intentionally or not, fails to comply. (The Brennan Center for Justice has filed suit, claiming the law is unconstitutional.) "What we've learned is, you have to develop a whole system to understand what the laws are," says Michael Slater, executive director of Project Vote. "Then you manage people to those laws. It becomes a very difficult process."

Slater would know. No group has quite as much experience navigating this treacherous terrain as Project Vote. Over the past two decades Project Vote, along with its frequent partner ACORN, has added several million people to the rolls. (Because of this work, ACORN has become something of a right-wing bogeyman, and its voter-registration efforts are frequently targeted for investigation, even prosecution, by zealous Republican AGs.) Precisely because registration has grown so difficult and complicated, Slater thinks the Obama campaign is going to have a "challenging time" achieving its ambitious registration goals.

Given the amount of effort the GOP has put into making it hard for marginalized people to vote, one would imagine that Democrats would put equal force behind making it easy: as a moral imperative and a political opportunity. But as a general rule, they haven't. Many reforms that Democratic politicians have pushed, like Oregon's vote-by-mail regime, succeed chiefly in making it more convenient for middle-class people to vote and do little to increase participation among poor and minority voters. Indeed, one 2005 MIT study concluded that vote-by-mail laws actually increase socioeconomic biases in the electorate.

"If all that was going on was the game of party competition, then the Democrats should want to resist obstacles put in the way of black or low-income voters," says Piven. But, she notes, "there's a great deal of uncertainty and unease about these potential voter groups. They will push for policies that the party as a whole doesn't want.... Democrats don't really want this constituency except in emergencies."

That might be true. But politicians' disinclination to pursue enfranchisement as a strategy is probably also due to the considerable obstacles to mass registration that so many states have erected, and a campaign industry allergic to innovation. Says Newman, "I think in general most progressive politicians would like to see more poor and minority voters registered. They just don't know how to do it."

There is no magic to large-scale voter-registration drives; just numbers, technique and brute force. As Project Vote has learned, turning out the newly registered *is* possible--if you capture their data and contact them, by phone and mail and in person. (Even without follow-up contact, Newman estimates, as many as 70 percent of new registrants turn out.)

But finding the unregistered is a challenge, and with no definitive list, campaigns are left to fish in promising waters: sometimes they

get nibbles; sometimes they don't. Since the process is so inherently inefficient, it's simply cost-prohibitive to pay people to register voters, when those dollars can be spent on advertising, mail or door-to-door outreach to registered voters. The only way a campaign can implement a registration drive on a sufficient scale is to make sure that volunteers do the lion's share of the work.

That's the reason the Obama campaign can take on Vote for Change: throughout the primary, it built a nationwide organization that not only draws in volunteers by the thousands but trains and empowers them to become de facto organizers.

The vision is laid out in a 368-page manual that the campaign assembled during the waning months of the primaries and has distributed to each office. It steps through running a grassroots operation from day one to election day. "Respect. Empower. Include." guides everything we do," the manual stresses, noting the field organization's internal motto. "Empowerment requires creating structure that allows all members of the team to make this campaign his or her own. We must go beyond simply assigning volunteers tasks, to allowing well-trained and supported volunteers to have real ownership within the campaign."

In the abstract this can sound like anodyne management-speak, but on the ground it's real. "We didn't run a primary campaign where we said, Come and volunteer but we want you to stay as a volunteer with a tangential connection to the campaign," says Jason Green, who runs Vote for Change. "It was very much the inclusion piece that allowed us to get to this point. We have volunteer leaders that are managing other volunteers."

On a Saturday morning in a bucolic park in Roswell, Georgia, north of Atlanta, I see this in action. Tamara Stevens and Sherryl Harvey are staffing a table underneath a concrete gazebo festooned with flags, Obama swag and a sign that says Register to Vote. They're the volunteer leaders of the GA-400 for Obama group (the name comes from the highway that runs through the northern Fulton County suburbs), which boasts 350 members. And they're a microcosm of the Obama coalition: Stevens, the volunteer coordinator, is a white upper-middle-class small-business woman and lifelong Republican; Harvey, the team liaison, is a therapist who moved to Atlanta from Trinidad with her parents when she was a child.

When I arrive, Stevens is arguing with a libertarian neighbor about Obama's tax policy, about which she displays an impressive command. I ask her what prompted her conversion to Obama: "I'm not gonna lie," she says with a laugh. "It was Oprah."

She and Harvey run the operation with a combination of good cheer and businesslike efficiency: they've purchased Obama bumper stickers and pins in bulk, which they resell at retail prices, using the profit to fund the group's incidental costs. The table is spread with pens and clipboards (with an emergency cellphone number affixed to the back), all neatly aligned with reams of voter-registration cards, bottles of water and snack bars. Every Saturday and Sunday, they set up this table (what they called, in a revealing bit of organizer lingo, their "staging area") just across from a local farmers' market.

Throughout the morning, members of the GA-400, who've been alerted through e-mail, MyBarackObama.com and phone calls about the registration activities, shuffle through. When one of the regulars shows up, having failed to RSVP online, Stevens chastises her good-naturedly. "You never RSVP, and I never get you on my sheet. I'm like an anal teacher: you need to be on my attendance sheet."

Those who've already been trained sign in, grab clipboards and are directed by Stephanie Hester, the locations coordinator, to one of about a dozen high-visibility registration areas around the metro region. (Hester calls local businesses ahead of time to ask if they'll permit a table in front of their storefronts.) Those new to voter registration, like three gangly white teenagers and an elegant black woman, are assembled around the table, where Harvey gives a ten-minute training session, explaining what information is required on the forms and the stipulations of Georgia law.

There isn't a single paid staff member overseeing any aspect of the operation.

Roswell is affluent and Republican, so many of the volunteers are sent to the far reaches of the metro area to find the unregistered. Midway through the morning, I hop in the car with Hester and a few other volunteers and drive to Five Points, a neighborhood in the heart of downtown Atlanta. On a hot Saturday afternoon, it's bustling with shoppers, preachers, panhandlers and hustlers, a scene reminiscent of Times Square in the 1980s: vibrant and seedy at the same time.

Here, the entire undertaking seems a steeply uphill battle. Somewhere near 300,000 new voters were registered in Georgia in the run-up to this year's primary, which means the low-hanging fruit has already been plucked and many of those who remain unregistered are what might be called the hard cases.

The four volunteers fan out on Peachtree Street outside the MARTA stop, hawking registration in a manner not unlike the gentlemen down the block in suits and bow ties hawking the *Final Call*. We walk through a cluster of men playing three-card monte, and when Hester, who's petite, energetic and fearless, asks one if he's registered, he cuts her off, saying emphatically, "The Klan is gonna get him!" On the corner, we approach a man in a guayabera shirt and white brimmed hat who is preaching to no one in particular. "Obama is not the hope," he tells us, declining the clipboards. "God is the hope." Two young men walk by pushing strollers. Daniel Hanley, a young white man in a Got Hope? T-shirt asks if they'd like to register. They shake their heads and tell him they're both on parole. Hester then asks the Nation of Islam emissaries sharing the block if they'd like to register. "Sister," one responds sharply, "I've got a question for you. Do you think Obama is strong enough to deal with the Illuminati?"

Occasionally, our group nabs a new registrant: Hester persuades a young man loitering outside a clothing store to register after a ten-

minute conversation, though his capitulation seems motivated more by interest in Hester than by politics. But it's a scattershot endeavor at best, nothing like the steady flow of registrants filing past the table over at the Car and Bike Show, where I later learned Bishop had managed to register 205 people in a single day.

Even with the hit-and-miss approach, the GA-400 volunteers nabbed 180 registrants. All in all it was "not bad," according to Charlie Anderson, an organizer with the campaign based in Atlanta. "That's just OK for them," he texted me later. "GA 400 has gotten 365 in a day before. Most importantly, both will be at it again tomorrow."

At one level, the voter-registration push is a campaign strategy like any other: running ads in certain states at certain times, choosing and crafting a message, deciding which issues to emphasize. Like the rest of the campaign, there is a singular, overriding focus: winning. And in many of the closest states--New Mexico, for instance, where Kerry lost by 11,620 votes, or Ohio, home to several massive universities and millions of black voters--Vote for Change could provide the margin of victory.

But the bigger question is whether it will make a difference, when it's time to govern, that electoral victory came thanks largely to millions of new young, black, Hispanic and poor voters. The academic literature on the topic gives some reason to hope that it will. In 2005 James Avery and Mark Peffley published a paper studying the effects of the composition of the electorate on welfare policy. What they found confirmed Sandy Newman's initial intuition: in places where working-class and poor people vote at similar levels to upper-middle-class voters, politicians are less likely to adopt strict welfare-eligibility requirements.

This is the signature principle that underlies Project Vote, as well as Piven's lifetime of activism: that a democratic society with an enfranchised constituency of the poor and marginalized will look very different from the status quo. But unless these new voters are somehow organized and capable of asserting themselves after the election, it'll be all too easy simply to take them for granted.

At a panel on the Obama campaign's organizing approach at Netroots Nation, Ohio general election director Jeremy Bird relayed an anecdote that gives a brief glimmer of what this new enfranchisement might mean for our politics.

After the Democratic primary in South Carolina, one of the most active Obama volunteers in the city of Florence, a 37-year-old attorney named Steve Wukela, decided to run for mayor against a thirteen-year incumbent named Frank Willis. Wukela ran at Willis from his left. With a motto of "Real Democrat for Real Change," he castigated Willis for having donated to George W. Bush and for standing by "while sales taxes were increased on the poorest among us, shifting the burden to those least able to afford it." Wukela activated the volunteers he'd met going door-to-door for Obama, implementing a voter-contact model he'd been trained in by the campaign and reaching out to new voters. "Everyone said, Steve, that's nice, the Obama campaign was nice, but you probably shouldn't try to unseat a thirteen-year incumbent," explained Bird. "You're getting a little ahead of yourself."

But there was a constituency for change, thanks in part to the voter-registration activities of the Obama campaign, which had registered 8,000 new voters in Florence during the primary. And when votes in the mayoral election were tallied, Wukela had eked out an upset. By one vote.

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#### **About Christopher Hayes**

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