

# During Black History Month, voting takes on special significance

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ATLANTIC CITY – Leaders at the city's NAACP chapter do not care how you vote, they just want to see you at the polls.

They say the right to vote was hard won, constantly endangered – through gerrymandering or other suppression tactics – and therefore should be used. It represents a buying-in to the community's future. And ongoing projects to educate and register residents, they say, take on new significance during Black History Month.

“Voting rights, and black history ... they go hand in hand. They’re in tandem with one another,” said Yolanda Melville, a local attorney and the legal redress chair for the chapter.

Charles Goodman lives by that credo. He has been involved with the Atlantic City chapter of the NAACP, which has around 200 members, since he was in junior high, when he joined their youth council.

Now 69-years-old and the chapter’s political action chair, he’s bringing the importance of voting to the city’s young people.

His “Our Vote, Our Voice” registration drives have been held at local high schools for the last few years. They include mock voting on borrowed machines, and a reminder that — should they be 18 when the election happens — they can even vote for their school board, and have a say in the policies they live under. And this year, for the primary and the general, he’ll accompany some students to their polling place.

“It’s obviously different when you go to the actual polls, see other people voting, adults voting,” Goodman said. “You have the same power that other person has who might be 60 years old. You have that power.”

The chapter organizes reminder calls to eligible voters, door knocking campaigns, election forums and debates, and registration drives — all in an effort to emphasize to residents that voting gives you a say in the type of community you live in and whether your representatives reflect your beliefs.

“You just have to ... encourage people to see the connection between electing people, and their daily life,” said Councilman Kaleem Shabazz, the chapter’s president. “Obviously, the data (shows) cynicism with government, people turned off, people disillusioned ... The question is will you participate and help the system better reflect what you’re doing”

There are factors that make it tough for some to participate, they acknowledge. Atlantic City and New Jersey residents are lucky, they say, in comparison to voters in states like North Carolina, where disenfranchisement of black communities is particularly stark. But tight registration deadlines and midweek elections are fixable roadblocks that keep many from voting, they say. They’re in favor of proposed changes like allowing former inmates to vote and allowing same-day registration.

But for now, they make do with what they have. Among their efforts are old-fashioned, shoe leather door knocking campaigns. The chapter gathers eligible voter data from wards in the resort, Goodman said, and uses it to approach residents in an attempt to get them on the voter rolls.

“You might see a household (with) five people, and only one person is registered,” Goodman said. “You might just see a household with three or four people, and nobody’s registered.”

That has implications beyond two or three wasted votes, Goodman said.

“Until we get people out to vote, we’re not going to be taken serious,” he said. “But when we do, and when we affect the change – we have the percentages to affect the change – then we’re taken serious.”

The chapter is partnering with the League of Women Voters and Stockton University’s NAACP chapter to put on a voter education forum at the school’s Atlantic City campus later this month. Melville and Shabazz are among those who will speak in the Fannie Lou Hamer event room, named for the civil rights icon who, at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, uttered her most famous words: “We are sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Melville feels much the same way. Many of the battles that civil rights leaders of the 1960s fought are still underway today, she said. The Stockton forum will have a focus on redistricting. With the 2020 census not far off, how that data is often used to draw district lines that isolate or wash out minority voting blocs will again come to the forefront, she said.

In all of their voting projects, it seems the chapter’s chief nemesis is apathy.

“That’s basically our message: that the system of government works whether you participate or not,” Shabazz said. “And it affects you whether you participate or not.”