

Former Black Panther Party Officials Urge Voting

Written by Westside ID72

Monday, 27 September 2004 07:02 -

OAKLAND -- More than 26,000 people have registered to vote in Alameda County since the March elections, and Jermaine Jackson thinks he knows why.

"Gotta get Bush outta there," said the 31-year-old West Oakland resident.

Not since the 1970s have so many Oakland residents seemingly felt compelled to vote in the November presidential election -- and to get their friends, relatives and even total strangers to do the same, say organizers with East Bay Votes, a nonpartisan coalition of about 30 groups working to boost voter participation in the flatlands.

As a result, multiple get-out-the-vote efforts are blanketing Oakland's lower-income communities. Churches are calling on their congregants to register and make sure their neighbors do the same. Community groups are recruiting precinct captains to go door to door. Young adults are pushing their peers to take control of their future by voting.

Even former Black Panther Party Chairman and co-founder Bobby Seale and former chief of staff David Hilliard have stepped up, urging black residents to "take back the power" and recapture the energy and motivation that sent record numbers of voters to the polls in 1973, when Seale ran for mayor of Oakland.

Since then, however, some West Oakland voter precincts drew a mere 23 percent turnout for the March 2000 presidential primaries, and others fared little better.

Seale and Hilliard have formed a voter outreach organization called Community Electoral Empowerment Project, or CEEP. They are working with East Bay Votes to stimulate West Oakland residents and reverse decades of voter apathy by convincing them their vote makes a difference.

The pair stood outside the Wiley Manuel Superior Courthouse in downtown Oakland on Wednesday morning with East Bay Votes vol-

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unteers. They talked up the folks filing in to pay parking tickets, asking whether they were registered to vote or aware that former felons can vote in any election once their parole is finished.

People convicted of misdemeanors can vote while on probation.

"This is terrific, it's allowing the people to be aware that they are citizens. Even if they were on parole or on probation, they can still vote," said Jerome Bowie, 49, of North Oakland, who is registered to vote.

"I have two cousins who are (ex-convicts), and they said "We're not even citizens, we're on parole, we can't vote," and I believed them. ... I'm going to tell my cousins and everyone else it's not true. A lot of people have misconceptions."

Hilliard said many people told him they were disgusted and discouraged with what happened in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, where complaints surfaced that minorities with criminal records were turned away at some polls when they tried to vote.

"People are enthusiastic and excited (when they learn) that their rights are restored (when they get off parole)," Hilliard said. "They didn't know it was legal for ex-cons to vote in California."

East Bay Votes registered 25 people to vote outside the courthouse Monday, said Judy Grether, a volunteer who is coordinating that effort and got the OK from the courts to be out there on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Of those, 14 were first-time voters. Organizers were elated when the two Panther veterans joined the effort.

"We've never seen this much energy in an election before," said Janet Cox, another volunteer with East Bay Votes. "It's high time, if you are going to (get involved), might as well do it this

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time."

In the old days, Seale said, the Panther party generated voter interest by handing out sacks of groceries -- with a "3 1/2- to 4-pound chicken" in every bag, or by giving away free shoes. This time they are trying to inspire "youthful activists," to believe in the power of the vote.

He does not have to convince Deundrae Perteete, 25, of Oakland. Perteete is mobilizing a youthful get-out-the-vote campaign with the Every Vote Counts camp at 21st and Broadway.

"We're calling people and making sure they're registered and they'll go out to vote," said Perteete, who will be voting in his first election in November.

"I've been sitting back and watching, and I decided to do something," he said.

"Bush is not addressing (issues like health care)."

Korey Johnson, 28, of West Oakland voted in 2000, although the outcome made him feel as though his vote was wasted.

Nevertheless, he will be back again in November, and he figures a lot of his neighbors will be there, too.

"The (Twin) Towers and the war, that woke people up," he said.

"We've got to be more responsible. Your vote does count. I guarantee more people of low income will vote this year."

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Oct. 18 is the last day to register to vote. The Alameda County Registrar has received 26,746 new applications since Feb. 17. So many are coming in every day that staff are working nights and weekends to process them all, said lead clerk Lolita Francisco.

"It's a big jump," she said.

Voter registration forms are available at all post offices and DMV offices, as well as the Registrar of Voters, 1225 Fallon St., Oakland.

CEEP is conducting a training session for voter outreach workers Friday, 6:30 p.m. at Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, 1188 12th St. The organization is launching a voter outreach and education drive Saturday, with a breakfast at 9 a.m. at deFremery Park Recreation Center, 1651 Adeline St., followed by a voter precinct walk. Following the walk, former Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale will prepare a free barbecue lunch

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