

Black Girl Magic: The Power of Black Women in Elections

“What have you got to lose?”

Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump addressing black voters at an August 22 rally in Ohio.

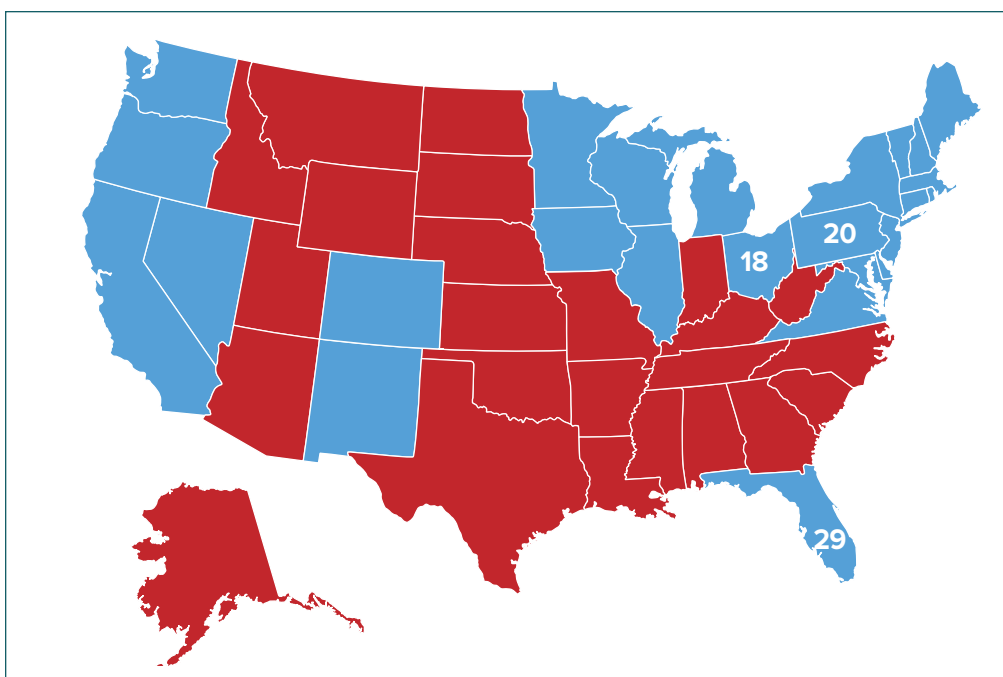
Before a predominantly white audience, Donald Trump made a plea to black voters, arguing that decades of support for Democratic candidates has led to dire economic circumstances for the black community. Thus, rational black voters should vote for him over the Democratic stalwart Hillary Clinton. Whether or not this reasoning is persuasive to black voters, this brief seeks to answer his question directly.

Black women drive turnout for the black community and are one of the most progressive voting blocs in the country. They demonstrate high levels of support for progressive issues such as police reform, raising the minimum wage and protecting Social Security. Moreover, the majority of black women have an economically liberal view of government. Sixty-six percent of black women

polled believe that the government should implement policies to shrink the gap between rich and poor compared with 50% of all voters.

Without black women, Obama would not have won the White House in 2012. Black women voters delivered the key battleground states of Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida for Obama, where he picked up 67 additional electoral votes. Without those states, Obama would have been five electoral votes shy of winning the presidency, and the black community would have lost the progressive policies ushered in by his leadership.

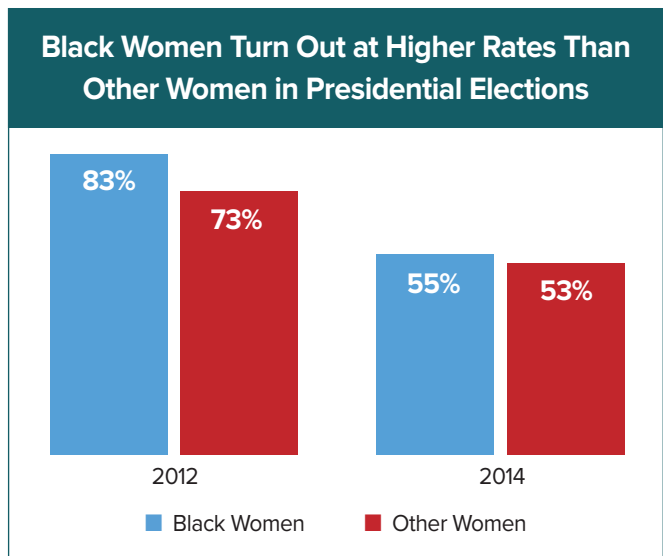
In a low-enthusiasm election year, the stakes are too high for black women to stay home. *So, what does the black community have to lose? Power.*



Black women voters delivered the key battleground states of Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida for Obama in 2012

BLACK WOMEN ARE THE MOST RELIABLE VOTERS

Black women voted at higher rates than all other voters. In 2012, 83% of registered black women turned out, compared to 73% for all other women, a ten-point difference. Black women turned out at a higher rate than other women in 2014 as well. Fifty-five percent of registered black women turned out in 2014, compared to 53% for all other women.



BLACK WOMEN SUPPORT LABOR UNIONS

Black women do more than vote; they are active in their unions, acting as an engine of organizing and mobilization. A recent survey done by Lake Research Partners (LRP) illustrates that regardless of union affiliation, black people, regardless of gender, are very supportive of unions and collective bargaining.

Given the black community’s commitment to unions, it’s no surprise that black women take on leadership roles in their unions. While black women are 7% of all union

members, 8% of them are stewards and local leaders. Furthermore, black women are generally more active in unions compared with Latino and white union members. Twenty-four percent are “very active” in their unions, and the difference is even more significant when looking at members who report being “fairly active.” Black women’s leadership supports union mobilization and organizing. As labor scholars Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian Warren found in their oft-cited study “Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism,” unions won 89% of elections where black women were the lead organizers compared with 53% for female organizers overall and 42% for male organizers.¹

Table 1: Survey of Employed Americans, Union Members and Nonunion Members²

Category/View	Favorability/Agreement of Black Respondents	Favorability/Agreement of All Respondents
Labor unions	77%	50%
Best way for people to get ahead is to work hard and join together to improve their benefits, hours and wages	60%	40%
Feel commitment to union you are a part of	84%	79%
Having people join unions is more important than ever	79%	51%

OBAMA SURGE VOTERS AT RISK IN 2016

Surge voters are those who voted in the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 but not during the non-presidential year of 2014, and therefore likely turned out to vote for Obama. Unsurprisingly, this group proved incredibly important to Obama's wins in both 2008 and 2012. *There were more than a million black female surge voters in 2012*, 550,000 of which were in battleground states necessary for Obama's win.

Despite black women's exceptional electoral performance in 2012, without Obama at the top of the ticket, there is

a risk that they will not turn out with the same force in 2016. In low-enthusiasm elections such as 2014, black women performed lower than white female voters. The importance of black women as voters goes beyond electing Democrats at the top of the ticket. In all election years, black women are more likely than any other group to skip at least one race on the ballot. By skipping down-ballot races, black women lose the potential to be a political force in local races, which arguably have a more direct impact on the day-to-day lives of black people. This presents the progressive movement with a dual challenge: to both increase black women's turnout and, through voter education, ensure that they vote down ballot.

INVEST IN BLACK WOMEN

This election year is one signpost along the road to building sustainable political power for black communities. Black women can be the engine driving this movement, so long as they continue being a force to be reckoned with at the polls. Evidence shows that when black women turn out to vote, they bring their families with them. Knowing this, civic engagement groups such as Black Women's Roundtable, Higher Heights and Make It Work seek to spur activism among black women and expand their leadership potential.

The largest densities of black people and black women union members are in the South, but this is not where the labor movement's infrastructure is the strongest. As the labor movement grows and deepens its roots in new regions of the country, it should look to black communities and black women organizers as a potential base for power. This requires incorporating black communities into long-term strategic thinking and lifting up the most progressive voice of the Democratic base. For organized labor and other parts of the political left, black women are a smart investment, in 2016 and beyond.

Endnotes

1 Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian T. Warren, "Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism," Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, June 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/p8q2ykf>.

2 Lake Research Partners (2016). "Survey of Employed Americans" April 20–May 11, 2016. LRP surveyed both union members and employed Americans (nonunion members) on their opinions of unions and union activities. Union members represented 54% of those surveyed, while employed nonunion members were 46% of those surveyed. Though the survey doesn't focus solely on black women, 58% of black respondents were female. In this sample, black working people were consistently more supportive of various aspects of union membership connected to core values of collective action and solidarity.