

HUFFPOST LOS ANGELES **If Black Lives**

Matter, Then Black Votes Count

- Sebastian Ridley-Thomas Twin, Morehouse Alum, Millennial, Policy Maker

The California Community Foundation and Public Policy Institute of California hosted an annual Speakership Series on California's Future last week in Los Angeles. Attendees heard about California Secretary of State Alex Padilla's vigorous administration in the modernization of voting systems, removal of barriers to voting, and promotion of innovation in the civic engagement space.

The attention of the gathering then turned to one of the more vexing problems of the 21st Century, declining civic engagement as measured by voter participation. A decade ago PPIC began scrutinizing this phenomenon with a report on the *Exclusive Electorate* <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=705>. The primary concern of the report is that policy decisions are decided by elected representatives who engage with a limited and dwindling electorate.

As a panel member discussing civic malaise I focused on the need to research messaging with constituencies that were not members of the Exclusive Electorate. I noted the dearth of good public opinion research of Black Californians in particular.

Thankfully, the African American Voter Registration, Education, and Participation Project <http://africanamericanvoterrep.org> in conjunction with the African American Civic Engagement Project an initiative of Community Partners <http://www.supportacep.org> have made the research of African American voter attitudes and preferences a priority. These groups are set to release their findings in roughly a week.

A poll of African American voters in 2016 from across California has the potential to be groundbreaking. This group, seven to ten percent of the overall electorate depending on the election, is often considered unworthy of public polling and research activity. There are organizations of substantial reputation that consistently ignore African American voters and their public policy preferences. This arrogant posture is best combated with self-determination and action.

With data, researchers, academics, policy makers, opinion leaders and campaigns will be better equipped to appreciate the impact of this vital part of California's cultural tapestry. The experiences, perspectives, and opinions of African Americans are of consequence and provide great value in the furtherance of coalition politics and responsive governance.

To dismiss or overlook African American voter perspectives is to invite misunderstanding. Any well-informed policy maker stands to benefit significantly from learning about the information on public priorities from various groups of the electorate.

Additionally, another reason for the missing information on African American polling data is the less-than-appreciated abilities of African Americans to build coalitions in tandem with their own racial groups to represent highly diverse jurisdictions. The people of California appear to be ahead of polling activity.

A dozen members of the state legislature, three members of congress, dozens of elected officials across the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento Valley, Central Valley, and Southern California at various levels of service seem to affirm the wisdom of the governed to elevate African American leaders they deem worthy of being their representatives.

It is not because of their race alone. It is because these elected persons are effective advocates for their highly diverse constituencies. Polling African American voters will help further expand knowledge of the core electoral bases of these unique figures. Also, for African Americans who are not represented by members of their own racial group, it is important that they be better understood. The greater the understanding of Black voters, the more effective they can be communicated with and encouraged to reduce the under vote by exercising the hard-won constitutionally-protected franchise: access to the ballot.

All of this has great potential to sustain the reawakened civic engagement and promote the Black Lives Matter generation of African Americans in California to expand their online activism and protest politics to the ballot box.

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