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# FOCUS

**The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies**

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*The Black Vote and American Politics*

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# The Black Vote and American Politics

The black vote in this year's elections is being celebrated by blacks, analyzed by a surprisingly large number of pundits, and generally lamented by Republicans. And for good reason: the black vote was obviously decisive in key races that Democrats won. It is about time that the political clout of black voters was recognized.

In the aftermath of the balloting, two powerful leaders from the sixties must have smiled from their graves. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., argued that if blacks were given the right to vote, especially in the South, they would take direct political action to protect their interests. The ghost of President Lyndon B. Johnson hovered over this election as well. He risked his presidency by persuading Congress, especially some of his powerful fellow Southerners, to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This November, as black voters poured into the polls, in 10 targeted states mainly in the South, and dramatically lifted Democratic fortunes in Congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative races, one could almost hear LBJ saying, with clenched fist raised high, "Yes!"

As we celebrate and analyze this year's vote, a few preliminary thoughts are in order. Regarding the force behind motivating black voters this year, we know that a concerted nonpartisan black voter mobilization effort—headed by the Black Leadership Forum, Operation Big Vote, and individuals like Congressman Charles Rangel and civil rights activists Joe Lowery and Dorothy Height—made a huge difference. So did media advertisements by Bob Johnson's BET empire and appeals by the Democratic party and labor unions.

We also know that local issues, idiosyncracies, and turf wars also influenced how voters responded to their civic responsibilities. In several states, including Georgia, Republican candidates had made derogatory comments about black voters. In some places voters saw the election as a referendum on the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. And in some cases, black voters looked beyond the local races to see what would happen if Democrats retook the House of Representatives: at a minimum, Harlem's Charles Rangel would become chair of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee and Detroit's John Conyers would become chair of the House Judiciary Committee, which is now seeking to impeach the President.

What these early findings suggest is that there is an urgent need to learn more about all of the factors that motivated black turnout on November 3 and that might be effectively replicated in other states in future elections. The Joint Center will be in the vanguard of those assessing what really happened and why.

A final question—perhaps the most intriguing one—is whether the 1998 election results are a prelude to what is to come in the 2000 general election. Clearly a question on everybody's mind is whether an aroused black electorate

can be a factor in putting another Democrat in the White House and, at least, restoring Democratic control of the U.S. House of Representatives.

This is a tantalizing question for blacks as well as the Democratic and Republican parties. It also is an issue of major concern to partisans at the state and local levels. Obviously, a lot will depend on how the two political parties respond to the black electorate over the next two years and how blacks respond to their temporary role as the macho vote of 1998. ■



PRESIDENT



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# Black Voters Assert Their Power

## *Black Turnout in Key Races Scores Victories for Democrats and Changes the Power Equation in Congress and State Houses*

by David C. Ruffin

**E**ven before all the votes were tallied, stunning Democratic victories in the November election sent political shock waves through the Republican party. For the first time in 64 years, the party of a sitting president gained seats in Congress in a midterm election. House Democrats added five members to their ranks, bringing them to within six seats of a majority, while Democratic victories in the Senate prevented the GOP from expanding its majority there which remains at 55 to 45.

Some of the Democratic success can be attributed to the turnout of a mobilized black electorate, in coalition with other minorities, women, organized labor, and progressive voters. African Americans provided critical votes that brought about Democratic wins in U.S. Senate and gubernatorial contests in Alabama, California, Georgia, Maryland, New York, and North and South Carolina, as well as in several races for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Black elected officials made important gains as a record number won such statewide posts as lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and attorney general in states scattered across the country (see TrendLetter, Political Report). All black House members won reelection, but Carol Moseley-Braun failed in her bid for a second term to represent Illinois in the Senate. Braun's defeat reduces the number of black members of Congress to 39.

### **The GOP Crisis**

In the wake of their House losses, the Republicans indulged in morning-after recriminations and finger pointing. The first casualty of what became an internecine feeding frenzy was House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) who, before the election, anticipated double-digit GOP gains in House seats. Gingrich, the acknowledged architect of the House Republican majority, resigned from Congress just days after the balloting when it became clear that he would receive more support from his colleagues for the position of scapegoat than as speaker were he to seek reelection to that post. Ironically, Gingrich had recruited many of the conservatives who abandoned him in the post-election crisis.

In an effort to ascertain the causes of their poor showing at the polls, some GOP leaders conceded that they had spent too much of the year passively waiting for President Clinton to be undone by his admitted affair with Monica Lewinsky. Clearly, the House Republican leadership had calculated that by releasing Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's salacious report on the matter to the public, a

scandalized electorate would express its outrage at the polls and punish Democrats.

In the meantime, the GOP-controlled Congress has suffered from low approval ratings. Republicans have offered very little in the way of a program as an alternative to the President's proposals in the areas of education, health care, and other social concerns. Many voters blame them for presiding over a "do-nothing" Congress that failed to enact a patients' bill of rights, address the future financial viability of the social security system, or pass legislation to build more classrooms. In sum, their inability to grasp the depth of the public's Monica fatigue, coupled with the perception that they weren't taking care of business in Congress, go a long way toward explaining why voters gave Republicans so little support on November 3.

### **Black Election Gains**

Several African Americans were swept into statewide office on the wave of this Democratic electoral success, including Thurbert Baker, who was elected to a full term as Georgia's attorney general. Democratic Governor Zell Miller appointed Baker to the post when his predecessor resigned in midterm. In New York state, H. Carl McCall was elected to his second term as comptroller, retaining his position as the state's fiscal watchdog who controls a \$100 billion pension fund and manages the state's retirement system. In Illinois, Cook County Recorder of Deeds Jesse White became the secretary of state.

Black statewide victories were not restricted to Democratic campaigns, however. Black Republicans also captured major posts at the state level, including a double victory in Colorado, where attorney Joe Rogers was elected lieutenant governor and Vikki Buckley was reelected secretary of state. In Ohio, State Treasurer J. Kenneth Blackwell moved up to become secretary of state.

The common preelection prediction that as many as three seats might be lost by black House members turned out to be groundless. Democratic representatives Mel Watt of North Carolina, Julia Carson of Indiana, and Corrine Brown of Florida fought off well-financed challengers and won reelection with strong margins. The newest black member to join the Democratic ranks of the House is Stephanie Tubbs Jones, who won an easy victory over Republican James Hereford to replace retiring black Ohio Congressman Louis Stokes of Cleveland (see "Louis Stokes—A Reluctant Hero" in this issue of *FOCUS*). Jones brings the number of black women members of the House to a historic high of 14.

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## *Black Voters*

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### **Energized Black Voters**

Although voter turnout was low overall, the rate of turnout among African Americans was high in elections where there was a strong perception that the election of one of the candidates, usually the Republican, would seriously threaten their interests. Black voters provided the margin of victory in four key gubernatorial and two senatorial races below the Mason-Dixon line. In coalition with other minority voters, they also contributed to the comfortable margins of victory enjoyed by Congressman Charles Schumer in his election to the U.S. Senate from New York, displacing long-time Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato.

Black voters were a critical component of minority coalitions that made the difference in the California elections of Democrats Gray Davis as governor and Barbara Boxer in her reelection to the Senate. Many political observers view the California results as a repudiation of the policies of outgoing Republican Governor Pete Wilson, who pushed measures to eliminate affirmative action, deny social services to immigrants, and discontinue bilingual education. The GOP gubernatorial candidate, Dan Lungren, who traces his political lineage to Ronald Reagan, ran on an anti-crime platform and made it clear that he would adopt Wilson's policies in his administration if he were elected.

Consistent with their interests, black voters were not as vigorous in their opposition to "kinder, gentler" Republican candidates. George W. Bush, who won a second term as governor of Texas, garnered 27 percent of the black vote. Missouri Republican Senator Christopher "Kit" Bond, who actively courted black support, received 33 percent of the black vote. Many blacks voted to punish Bond's Democratic opponent, Attorney General Jay Nixon, who had refused to support a major civil rights measure earlier this year.

A big turnout was not left to chance this year. Black voters were mobilized by a major campaign organized by the Black Leadership Forum, which includes some of the nation's oldest and largest black civil rights and service organizations. This get-out-the-vote effort targeted 10 states and employed methods ranging from door-to-door canvassing to radio public service spots by celebrities Bill Cosby, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. Jesse Jackson, Congressman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus crisscrossed the South, holding rallies and filling meeting halls. Grassroots organizers wore teeshirts emblazoned with such slogans as "LIFT EVERY VOICE AND VOTE" and "ALL SOULS TO THE POLLS." And a full-page ad in *USA Today*, sponsored by the Black Leadership Forum and Robert Johnson, CEO of Black Entertainment Television, urged African Americans to vote "for the political party whom you believe will deliver results on: improved education, quality health care, jobs, affirmative action, sentencing parity for drug convictions, equal justice for all, and fair urban and rural policies."

### **Deep Impact in the South**

Energized black voters had their greatest impact in the South. They helped dislodge Alabama's incumbent conservative governor, Republican Fob James, who was beaten by Democratic Lieutenant Governor Donald Siegelman. In similar fashion, South Carolina's Republican governor David Beasley was unseated by Democrat Jim Hodges. Significant black turnouts in Maryland and Georgia enabled Democrats to hold on to the governor's mansions in those states as well.

Maryland's Democratic governor Parris Glendening defeated Republican challenger Ellen Sauerbrey in a rematch of their first face-off four years ago. This year, black voters, many of whom were concerned about Sauerbrey's civil rights record, provided Glendening with the margin of victory in his reelection. The black vote was also critical in Democrat Roy Barnes' gubernatorial victory over Republican Guy Millner in Georgia.

The Democratic victors in each of these governor's races lost the white vote, but African Americans voted overwhelmingly Democratic and pushed each of the winners over the top. Black voters comprised from 19 to 29 percent of those who turned out at the polls in these states, turnout numbers that were about double or triple the national average of 10 percent. For example, in Georgia's governor's race, according to Voter News Service exit polls, Democrat Roy Barnes garnered only 37 percent of the white vote compared with Guy Millner's 58 percent. But 90 percent of black voters supported Barnes, and blacks made up 29 percent of the turnout at the polls (while they are 27 percent of the population). It was a similar story in South Carolina, where Jim Hodges defeated incumbent governor David Beasley with 40 percent of the white vote and 92 percent of the black vote. African Americans made up 25 percent of the turnout in that election.

In the U.S. Senate, black voters proved an irresistible force in elections in North and South Carolina. They were essential to incumbent Democrat Ernest Hollings' successful bid to win a sixth term in the Senate. And Democrat John Edwards would have failed to unseat North Carolina's Republican Senator Lauch Faircloth without the support he received from nine out of ten black voters. Faircloth had called for the replacement of the elected government of the District of Columbia, which has a majority-black population with an appointed city manager. He also advocated abolishing the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Black votes also contributed to the House victory of Democrat Ronnie Shows, who fills the vacancy left by Democrat-turned-Republican Representative Mike Parker in Mississippi's 4th congressional district. The district, which includes the city of Jackson, has a black voting-age population of 37 percent.

### **Shaping the Future**

Black voters flexed their political muscles this election day. Voting 88 percent Democratic nationwide, they contributed to narrowing the GOP's majority in the U.S. House of Representatives and to keeping the Republicans

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# Louis Stokes—A Reluctant Hero

## *After 30 Years, Ohio's First Black Congressman Retires Leaving a Legacy of Distinguished Service*

*by David C. Ruffin*

**T**his December, thousands of Cleveland residents from all walks of life will attend Congressman Louis Stokes' annual Christmas party for needy children and families at the city's convention center. Stokes got the business community to support the party, where poor families receive clothes, food, and toys. But while the Congressman will be there as in other years, laughing, shaking hands, and listening to problems, this year's affair may just as well be a farewell party.

Thirty years ago, Louis Stokes made history when he became the first African American to represent Ohio in Congress. He was to make history in other ways as well helping to found the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and becoming the first black member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Now he is retiring. He will be remembered for his unimpeachable integrity and for his tireless advocacy on behalf of the interests of the poor and unempowered.

But Stokes was a reluctant politician. As a youth, he dreamed of being a crusading lawyer like his hero, Clarence Darrow. Indeed, by the early 1960s he was one of Ohio's most respected trial attorneys. That Stokes could have a career as an attorney or congressman would not have been guessed at during his early childhood in the late 1920s.

Just four years after he was born in 1925, his father, Charles, a laundry worker, died of acute peritonitis. Young Louis's mother, Louise, was left to raise him and his two-year-old brother, Carl. Life was hard for this single mother, who had only an eighth grade education. She worked as a domestic to support her children, scrubbing the floors, washing the clothes, and caring for the children of wealthy white families in Cleveland's distant suburbs.

Through her example of hard work and perseverance, Louise Stokes served as her sons' most important role model. Stokes was raised on the idea that anyone with a good education who was willing to work hard would succeed. But Louis Stokes' experiences with discrimination as a young soldier during World War II taught him that for blacks, the playing field was not always level.

While serving in a racially segregated army unit in Mississippi, he was humiliated at having to use segregated facilities even on the army base. At one point, he and other black soldiers were sentenced to the guard house for refusing an order to pick up papers around the white soldiers' barracks. Such insults, however, did not distract him from pursuing his ambitions.

With financial support from the GI Bill, he earned a law degree in 1953 from Cleveland State University's Cleveland Marshall Law School, and with his brother Carl opened a law firm. Over the next 14 years, they built up a successful practice. But Louis Stokes never forgot his earlier bouts with racism, and as head the Legal Redress Committee of the Ohio NAACP, he combatted discrimination against black people who were less fortunate than he.

While Louis continued to concentrate on cases, Carl pursued a career in politics, winning a seat in the Ohio General Assembly. When he was elected mayor of Cleveland in 1967, Carl Stokes became the first black mayor of a major U.S. city. Meanwhile, Louis's success in a case he argued before the U.S. Supreme Court would precipitate his following his brother into elected politics. In a lawsuit involving the racially gerrymandered legislative districts on the East Side of Cleveland, Stokes convinced the High Court to strike down the district lines drawn by Ohio's legislature. Most of the city's black citizens lived then, as now, on the East Side. A new majority-black congressional district was created, and Cleveland's black leaders tapped Louis Stokes, a man who had never wanted to be a politician, to run for the seat. Although it was his first campaign, Stokes won the November 1968 election by a landslide. It was a time of activism as strident voices dominated black politics. While he was a man of his times, Stokes was not the loudest voice on the scene. But he was certainly an activist in his own thoughtful style.

As one of the founders of the Congressional Black Caucus, he was instrumental in organizing the 13 black members of the U.S. House of Representatives into a body that could advocate for the interests of African Americans across the nation. He helped push for black appointments to powerful House committees with jurisdiction over raising and spending federal revenues, including the Ways and Means, Budget, and Appropriations committees.

In his second term in office, Stokes was appointed the first black member ever to sit on the Appropriations Committee, which writes spending bills for everything from child immunization programs to communications satellites. He quietly gained a reputation as an honest legislator of impeccable integrity. He was chosen to chair the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and took a turn on the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, also known as the Ethics Committee.

All the while, Louis Stokes built up seniority on the Appropriations Committee. When he became chair of its panel on the Veterans Administration, Housing and Urban

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## Black Voters

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from making gains in the Senate. Many political activists see the 1998 election as a warm-up for 2000, when the race for the White House will be open, and 19 of the 33 Senate seats now in Republican hands will be up for election, as will all House seats.

Perhaps just as important is the impact this year's gubernatorial results are likely to have on the post-2000 Census redistricting process, especially in the South where the boundaries of House districts represented by African Americans have been in contention throughout the 1990s. The candidates who won the governor's races in Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, and South Carolina will preside over the process of redrawing legislative district boundaries that will remain in effect for the first decade of the next century.

African Americans make up at least 25 percent of the population in each of those four states, which currently have seven black members in the House of Representatives. (Alabama and South Carolina have one black representative each, Maryland has two, and Georgia three). Since the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its 1993 *Shaw v Reno* decision challenging the constitutionality of using race as a major factor in drawing district lines, several of the majority-black congressional districts created in the South after the 1990 Census have been struck down and redrawn with black populations in the minority. In the next round of redistricting, which must follow the 2000 Census, governors, working with state legislatures, will help determine the racial makeup of Congress in the next millennium.

### VOTING & ELECTIONS



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## Louis Stokes

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Development, and Independent Agencies in 1993, he joined the select group of 13 Appropriations subcommittee chairs known as the "College of Cardinals." As a child, Stokes and his family had lived in Cleveland's first public housing projects. He didn't forget that when, as chair of the subcommittee, he fought for public housing and for welfare recipients.

He was just as influential in his capacity as chair of the CBC Health Brain Trust, the Caucus's chief advocate for strengthening health care for minorities. Stokes was one of the first black public officials to raise the alarm on the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s as a threat to all Americans. He was also the author of the Disadvantaged Minority Health Improvement Act of 1990, which established the Office of Minority Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and provides scholarships for minority education in the health professions.

Louis Stokes' contributions to the nation and its poor and minority citizens are without measure. He was a man who never sought the spotlight, but was universally respected by lawmakers of every stripe on Capitol Hill. He rose to a position of power, but never forgot where he came from. Statesmen like Louis Stokes are rare in this era of empty rhetoric and predatory politics. He will be missed.

### GOVERNMENT & POLITICS



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# TRENDLETTER

## POLITICAL REPORT

### Federal Judgeships Left Hanging

As the 105th Congress adjourned, unfinished business in the U.S. Senate included 21 federal judicial nominees that were sent back to the White House after the Senate failed to confirm them by the end of the session. More than half of these nominees were minorities and women—including four African Americans, two Latinos, and one Asian American. In all, 55 Article Three seats in the federal judiciary remain vacant, including district and appellate judgeships. Article Three refers to the area of the federal Constitution with jurisdiction over the judicial branch of the government. Currently there are 846 Article Three federal judgeships in the country.

The Republican-controlled Senate has been particularly uncooperative with President Clinton over judicial nominees. The situation is not as bad as it was a year ago, however, when 85 federal judgeships—one out of every 10—were vacant. At the end of 1997, the Senate had only confirmed 36 of the president's Article Three nominees, leaving 51 (including eight African Americans) to be sent over to the second session of this Congress. Last January, conservative Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist

chastised the Senate for its inaction. He charged that the high number of vacancies threatened to erode “the quality of justice that traditionally has been associated with the federal judiciary.” In 1998, the Senate confirmed 63 Article Three judges.

One of the unconfirmed black nominees, James A. Beaty, was selected by Clinton to serve on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. A 1974 graduate of the University of North Carolina Law School, Beaty practiced law in Winston-Salem, N.C. In 1981 he was appointed Special Superior Court Judge and, in 1989, Resident Superior Court Judge, for Forsyth County. In 1994, Clinton appointed Beaty as U.S. district judge for the Middle District of North Carolina.

The other three black nominees were up for confirmation as judges in the federal district court system. Their resumes follow.

William James Hibbler received his law degree from DePaul University and began his legal career in public service in 1974, working as assistant state's attorney for Cook County (Chicago). In 1977 he left to go into private practice. In 1986 Hibbler became associate judge in the Cook County Circuit Court, where he still serves. For the last nine years, Hibbler has also taught at the Chicago/Kent College of Law.

Ronnie L. White earned his law degree from Kansas City School of Law in 1983, and upon graduating went to work as a trial attorney for the Office of the Public Defender in St. Louis. After several years he left the public defender's office to join a private law firm, but shortly thereafter he ran for and won election to the Missouri House of Representatives, where he served from 1989 to 1993. After leaving the legislature he served as city counselor for the City of St. Louis and later as judge on the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District. He currently sits on the bench of the Missouri Supreme Court.

Legrome Derek Davis received his law degree from the Rutgers-Camden School of Law. Davis served for three years as an assistant district attorney in Philadelphia, and in 1987 joined a Philadelphia law firm. He currently teaches at the Temple University School of Law's Trial Advocacy Program and serves on the board of several community based organizations in Philadelphia.

Since the 21 nominations were not acted upon in either session of the 105th Congress, they have been returned to the White House. It is now up to the President to decide whether he will forward their names again in the 106th Congress. Conservative judges appointed by Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush have tipped not only the Supreme Court but many appeals and district

courts across the country to conservative majorities. Between them, Reagan and Bush appointed 580 federal judges, most of them white males; their appointments include five of the nine sitting Supreme Court justices. Only about three percent (20 individuals) of their judicial appointees were African Americans. Minorities have good cause to be concerned by the ideological and racial imbalances in the judiciary that are the legacy of the Reagan-Bush appointments: decisions by these new majorities have already undermined many vital precedents in the areas of affirmative action, voting rights (legislative redistricting), minority business set-asides, equity in criminal justice, and environmental law.

## **Other Unfinished Business**

When the Congress reconvenes, a major item on its agenda will be addressing the future solvency of the Social Security system. Another important issue, which we looked at in the June issue of *FOCUS*, but was largely unreported elsewhere, is the unresolved problem of 15 years of discrimination against thousands of black farmers.

## **Fixing Social Security**

By all accounts, the Social Security system is projected to experience serious funding shortfalls by the early decades of the 21st century. If Congress takes no action soon to head off the insolvency of the system, millions of Americans who will rely on Social Security for their retirement will be hurt. This is of particular concern to African Americans, who during their retirement years are generally more dependent on Social Security payments than

whites because they are less likely to have private pensions and private savings to complement these payments. According to Wilhelmina Leigh, a senior research associate at the Joint Center, the projected shortfall in Social Security funds is likely to be met by either reducing benefits or increasing revenues—or a combination of the two.

Fix # 1: Proposals to reduce Benefits include: increasing taxes paid on benefits; raising the age of eligibility for benefits sooner than is currently scheduled; reducing benefits for disabled workers and for women who have never worked outside the home; reducing the growth of benefits by freezing annual cost-of-living adjustments; altering the benefit formula to reduce benefits for all future beneficiaries; and making Social Security means-tested.

Fix # 2: Proposals to increase revenues include: increasing payroll taxes on both employers and employees above the 6.2 percent each currently pays; expanding coverage to include all workers, especially state and local government employees, one fourth of whom currently are not covered; and privatization, allowing government or private individuals to begin investing a portion of their assets in the stock market. There is concern, however, that full privatization would eliminate much of the safety net provided by Social Security and could put low-wage workers and less-sophisticated investors at risk.

## **Fairness for Black Farmers**

Last summer, the Congressional Black Caucus successfully pushed Congress to pass an initiative that would permit the government to address a backlog of 18,000 discrimination complaints filed by black farmers against the U.S. Department

of Agriculture (USDA). The complaints stemmed from the unfair treatment they received from local, white-dominated units of USDA that administer farm loans for land, equipment, seed, and fertilizer. The black farmers properly filled out the paperwork for the loans, but were discriminated against on the basis of their race and were disproportionately denied loans.

For 15 years, the USDA accepted these discrimination claims, and told the farmers that their claims were being processed. The farmers were also discouraged from calling to check on the status of the complaints. It was recently learned, however, that in 1983 the administration of President Ronald Reagan secretly dismantled the civil rights division responsible for handling these complaints. The Bush Administration also ignored the complaints, so no claims were processed for 15 years.

Even after the extent of USDA's discrimination had been made public, USDA refused to redress the claims because the two-year statute of limitations provided for in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act had expired. The government's position was that it had no obligation to pay the vast majority of black farmers for admitted discrimination.

The Black Caucus succeeded in incorporating language into the Agriculture Appropriations bill that would have waived the statute of limitations, permitting USDA to begin to address the 18,000-case backlog. But little progress has been made so far to redress the complaints. To compensate the farmers, Congress may have to appropriate more funds in the 106th Congress for that purpose. ■

# ECONOMIC REPORT

by Margaret C. Simms

## Social Security Update: What Role for Small Business?

In 1999, The new Congress is scheduled to address Social Security reform, a subject whose debate was kicked off at the White House Conference on Social Security this past December. In conjunction with the December conference and subsequent policy discussions, information covering a range of policy options has been released in documents designed to inform both policymakers and the general public. [See box.]

The hottest issue, as seen by both proponents and opponents, is the privatization of Social Security. On the day of the White House Conference, the Washington-based Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) released the findings of an EBRI survey on an issue that many have

overlooked—how the creation of individual Social Security accounts would affect small business. The survey of 500 employers, with workforces in the range of five to 100 workers, reveals that small business owners are generally in favor of these accounts but they do not want to bear a heavy administrative burden. Over one-half (57%) of the employers favored allowing individuals to use a portion of Social Security taxes to establish individual accounts. However, two-thirds of them (64%) had not thought about the fact that they may have to provide administrative support in terms of record keeping and report distribution. Nearly one-half (48%) did not want to have such a role. Even those in favor of these accounts were reluctant to pay for the administrative work required; 18 percent did not want to cover any such costs, while another 14 percent were willing to pay costs but placed a ceiling on them of \$500 per year. EBRI noted that these costs do not even address the cost burden of educating employees on investment options, which employers currently administering 401K plans do.

## Accumulating Wealth

Proponents of different schemes to privatize all or part of Social Security argued that this approach would allow individuals, especially low-income and minority households, to acquire wealth. Even with a public Social Security system, households can and do accumulate wealth out of disposable income. In order to predict people's behavior with private accounts and how their behavior would fit with their overall asset building plans, it is useful to review current asset holdings of U.S. households.

There are a variety of assets that individuals and households can choose to hold. Some, such as financial assets and rental property, generate income while they are held, whereas others, such as owner-occupied housing, do not generate income although they may appreciate in value, providing capital gains upon sale. The U.S. Bureau of the Census periodically collects information on asset ownership that permits the examination of asset ownership by race. In 1993, the last year for which data are available, the median net worth of white house-

### Asset Ownership of Households, by Race Selected Assets

Type of Asset	Percent White Households Holding Assets	Median Value of Holdings by White Households	Percent of Black Households Holding Assets	Median Value of Holdings by Black Households
Interest earning assets at financial institutions	74.6%	\$3,199	45.5%	\$799
Regular checking accounts	48.2	499	29.6	390
Stocks & mutual fund shares	23.0	7,100	6.2	3,900
Equity in business or profession	11.8	7,000	3.3	2,500
Equity in motor vehicles	88.7	5,472	64.5	3,242
Equity in own home	67.3	49,500	45.0	28,796
Rental property equity	8.9	29,300	4.3	19,000
Other real estate equity	10.2	19,415	3.7	8,000
U.S. Savings Bonds	19.8	775	10.3	450
IRA or Keogh accounts	25.5	13,999	6.3	4,700

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census., 1993.

holds was only \$45,740 while that of black households was \$4,418, one-tenth that amount.

As Table 1 shows, white households are more likely to hold all forms of assets than black households, although their patterns of ownership are quite similar. Those assets most closely associated with preparing for retirement—savings bonds, stocks and mutual fund shares, and IRA or Keogh accounts—are held by not more than 10% of all black households. This contrasts with ownership of the same assets by one-fifth to one-fourth of white households. For example, only one in fifteen (6.3 percent) black households had IRA or Keogh accounts in 1993, while one in four (25.5 percent) white households had these assets. Moreover, the median value of these accounts varied tremendously by race, with white households having median accounts nearly three times the median value of accounts held by African American households.

To some extent, the differences in asset ownership are related to differences in income and in the opportunity people have to take advantage of retirement plans available through employment. The ability to use Social Security taxes for individual investment accounts might give lower-income households more opportunities to save or invest for retirement on their own. However, income alone does not explain all of the differences in asset ownership, for significant differences exist even among those in higher-income households.

Since the proportion of African American households with incomes over \$50,000 has grown over the past 20 years, there has been a growing interest within the financial services industry in capturing this market. One financial services firm, Auriel Mutual Funds, based in Chicago, has surveyed households earning \$50,000 or more to find out what their investment plans

and behaviors are. Auriel's findings show racial differences which suggest that African Americans will continue to be less prepared for retirement even though they have made some gains in income. Surprisingly, given the figures on stock ownership in the black population as a whole, over one-half (57%) of African American households surveyed in the Auriel study had money invested in the stock market. However, this was significantly less than the proportion of white households (81%) with stock market investments. Large differences exist in every age bracket, but the racial differences are greater among younger households. African American households with higher incomes tend to have a larger proportion of their money in more conservative forms such as bank accounts and life insurance and less in brokerage and mutual funds.

African American households are less likely to see retirement as the primary goal of their savings effort than are comparable white households. Only 37 percent of the black households indicated that saving for retirement was their most important goal, in comparison to 58 percent of white households. Again, the differential was greatest among younger households, whose contributions would have the longest time to grow. Overall, the median savings or investment holding, not including real estate, was \$30,000 for African Americans and \$68,000 for white households.

Even though individuals indicated that they are not saving primarily for retirement, the largest percentage of their total savings is in retirement accounts (41% for African Americans and 42% for whites). The value of stocks and bonds (individual or mutual fund shares) is much lower (13-16% for African Americans). The most frequently used retirement program is the 401K. A little over one-third of households indicated they had funds

in an IRA and about one-quarter participated in other defined contributions plans. Overall, median savings for African American households were only one-half those of white households, and the median value of the retirement account was estimated at \$20,000 for blacks and \$30,000 for whites (average values \$42,000 and \$88,000, respectively).

When asked about their expected reliance on Social Security, only one-quarter of black households and one-fifth of white households said they expect to rely on Social Security for the majority of their retirement income. Over one-third of both groups indicated that they did not expect Social Security to exist when they retired, yet their investment decisions do not seem to address the need for higher personal savings to offset reductions in Social Security benefits.

### **Educating Investors**

The statistics available from both the Auriel survey and the EBRI, along with recent asset holding information, suggest that investor education is much needed. These costs can be borne in part by the individual investors, but low-income households, who are often cited as the main beneficiaries of privatization by those favoring this approach to reform, cannot afford this out of their own budget. The burden will likely fall on government and/or employers if these individuals are to invest wisely. ■

### **New Release**

The Joint Center recently released an issue brief, "Social Security Reform: What Proposed Changes Mean for African Americans." It incorporates information that appeared in the September 1998 issue of FOCUS and includes a list of other organizations that are providing information and hosting forums for the public. Copies can be obtained by contacting the Office of Communications and Marketing.