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TRUTH IN LOVE

Life Without Voice: The Role of Voting in America's Democracy

By Parris J. Baker

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First in a Series

Think about the following metaphor and reflect on its meaning: Voting is to democracy as voice is to life. When posed with the question, "What would your life be like without voice," many people stated that life without voice would be unimaginable and cruel, incredibly difficult, and empty, and that it would be like living imprisoned, utterly dependent, and hopeless. One person^[1] offered the following observation:

If I did not have a voice, first I would not be able answer your question. I believe the longer I lived without a voice the less human I would become. Though I might have feelings, opinions, and a desire to articulate my preferences, because I could not share them people would begin to ignore me and marginalize me, until unfortunately, I would no longer exist for them. Ultimately, I might not exist to myself.

The U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States declares in Article 1^[2] of the Inter-American Democratic Charter: "The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it." Moreover, it also asserts that: "Democracy is essential for the social, political, and economic development of the peoples of the Americas."

Voice is our ability to communicate or transmit our thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, and personal choices to others, using sounds and symbols, and it is paramount and essential to being human. Language inculcates, incubates, and births in humans, culturally constructed meanings, both verbal and nonverbal (signs, symbols, gestures) of objects and other human beings. Language is how we define ourselves as human beings.

According to Chauvet^[3] (1997), language is mediation, that is, language has precedence (in priority of importance) to human beings and reality. Humans are associated with the ability to communicate or to use language (and thus culture). It is through the mediation of language that we understand what it means to be human and by extension, how we perceive and interpret our surrounding ecological environments. To constrict, control, or completely deny one's capacity to communicate is to limit or eliminate that person or group's humanity.

If voting is the voice of a democratic society and essential for the social, political, and economic development of its people, then it becomes less difficult to understand why marginalized groups, those racial and ethnic groups who experienced long histories of voter prohibition and suppression, do not have faith in the voting process. Bernard Lonergan,^[4] a Canadian Jesuit theologian and philosopher suggests that we move from the traditional classic paradigm of people *living in history* to a historical consciousness, that is, that people are responsible for *making the history we live in*. Moreover, Lonergan asserts that discretely, each person is responsible for his or her own life and as a human community, we are responsible for creating the world ecology in which will live and develop.

Applying Chauvet's discourse on language as mediation and Lonergan's concept of historical consciousness makes it clear that a group of vicious and cold-blooded guardians of freedom, liberty, and justice for all established and maintained the culture of citizenship, and personal choice. These sentinels of America's republic, election vigilantes, created a culture of fear and death that was symbolically associated with voting. Posted on Black church in Taylor County, Georgia, was a clear message that read, "The first Negro to vote will never vote again."^[5] In 1946, Maceo Snipes, a World War II veteran, cast his vote in the Georgia primary. Days after the primary, four white men repeatedly shot Mr. Snipes. He died two days later. For enslaved and oppressed Black people, the idea of speaking or voting as an exercise or expression of one's personal freedom would have been laughable if it were not so ill-fated. If you were a Black person, you were born without a voice, to live a life without a vote.

Life Without a Voice – Life Without a Vote

For almost one hundred years (1776 – 1865), legislators in antebellum America enacted state and federal laws that determined that Black people were neither human (considered property) nor citizens of the United States. White

policymakers and many American citizens perceived Black people as nonhumans and inferior and believed Black people did not need a voice or a vote. In 1787, the Constitutional Convention reflected this perspective when it defined how to count enslaved Black people, as part of a state's total population to determine its number of members in the House of Representatives. Southern slaveholding states were allowed to count three of every five slaves in their state's census. The Three-Fifths Compromise decided favorably for Southern slaveholding states. This Three-Fifths Compromise also created a very skewed group of Southern state representatives and an immensely powerful gang of thugs in the U.S. House. One person, no voice; three-fifths representation, no vote.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, Black people wasted little time seeking the benefits of emancipation. Whether it was heard in direct demands or faint whispered requests, freed Black people wanted to become Americans who possessed the rights of citizenship, which included the right to vote. Though the war over and slavery abolished, the embedded stain of racism and white supremacy remained. Black people felt it was necessary to petition for enfranchisement and legal protections.

It was called the Petition of Colored Citizens of South Carolina for Equal Rights Before the Law, and the Elective Franchise, 1865. This petition, presented to Congress, had 3,740 signatures of Black South Carolinians. Each of the 3,740 individuals signed their name on pages that were glued together, end to end, producing a document approximately 54 feet in length. Below is a picture and the text of the petition:



Petition of Colored Citizens of South Carolina for Equal Rights Before the Law and the Elective Franchise, 1865

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled:
We the undersigned colored citizens of South Carolina, do respectfully ask your Honorable Body, in consideration of our unquestioned loyalty, exhibited by us alike as bond or free; — as soldier or laborer — in the Union lines under the protection of the government; or within the rebel lines under the domination of

the rebellion; that in the exercise of your high authority, over the re-establishment of civil government in South Carolina, our equal rights before the law may be respected — that in the formation and adoption of the fundamental law of the state, we may have an equal voice with all loyal citizens; and that your Honorable Body will not sanction any state Constitution, which does not secure the exercise of the right of the elective franchise to all loyal citizens, otherwise qualified in common course of American law, without distinction of Color.

Without this political privilege we will have no security for our personal rights and no means to secure the blessings of education for our children. The state needs our vote, to make the state loyal to the Union, and to bring its laws and administration into harmony with the present dearly bought policy of the country, and we respectfully suggest that had the Constitution of South Carolina been heretofore, as we now ask that it shall be hereafter, this state would never have led one-third of the United States into treason against the nation.



Voter suppression and the use of violence and other acts of intimidation also occurred in northern cities. On Oct. 10, 1871, in Philadelphia, Frank Kelly murdered Octavius Valentine Catto for voting in the mayoral election. Mr. Catto

was a teacher in the Philadelphia school system, a Union Army veteran, and an activist for desegregation and voting rights. Kelly was acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury.

References

- [1] Audience participant who attended the JES Fairview Satellite Site program, Life Without Voice: The Role of Voting in America's Democracy. Presented by Parris J. Baker, JES Scholar-in-Residence on April 1, 2024.
- [2] U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, General Assembly, Inter-American Democratic Charter, Article 1.
https://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democratic_Charter.htm
- [3] Louis-Marie Chauvet (1997). The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press. A Pueblo Book.
- [4] Lonergan, B. (1988a). Existenz and aggiornamento. In F. C. Crowe & R. M. Doran (Eds.), The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (Vol. 4, pp. 222-231). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- [5] Carol Anderson, One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy. (2018). New York: Bloomsbury Publishing
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