New Battleground States: Georgia and Arizona

By Kirk Clay

The 2010 Census clearly documents a profound population shift in the U.S., which could be a game-changer for the progressive community. However, given the regressive rhetoric and policies of conservatives toward voters of color (VOC) and progressive whites, states like Arizona and Georgia are rapidly turning into key battlegrounds. The populations of both states have increased significantly since 2000 and each has gained a new congressional seat and an extra Electoral College vote.

In Arizona, VOCs now make up 24 percent of the voting population. In 2008, an impressive 74 percent of registered voters went to the polls. In Phoenix, long a Republican stronghold, the population grew by 9.4 percent to nearly 1.5 million with significant numbers of them being people of color. The city recently elected a Latino city councilman and a Democrat for mayor.

A similar dynamic exists in Georgia. The current political landscape resembles that of 1998 when hyper-partisan rhetoric motivated communities of color to get out and vote. With a 30 percent VOC share of the electorate, candidates of color made significant gains then and progressive candidates won the governorship and Democrats retained control of both houses of the legislature.

Today, people of color in Georgia make up close to 35 percent of the voting age population. If every eligible VOC votes in 2012, the potential impact would be significant, especially in cities like Atlanta and Athens-Clark County, which together have over 230,000 “key” VOCs.

Electoral Impact of Reactionary Policies

From the rhetoric on immigration in states like Arizona and Georgia and the threats to veto the DREAM Act, to the voter suppression and “stand your ground” laws, progressives and communities of color have had their rights, their families, their dreams, and their lives trampled upon. Now they have had enough and are starting to take a stand and fight back.

The Supreme Court hearings over Arizona’s SB 1070 law caught the attention of people of color everywhere and now we are seeing signs of an energized electorate. With enough resources, this energy could be transformed into a victory for candidates, such as Arizona’s Richard Carmona for U.S. Senate and Kyrsten Sinema for U.S. Congress, and Georgia’s Stacey Abrams for State General Assembly. In fact, if enough determined voters go to the polls, regressive policies can be replaced by progressive laws in states like Arizona and Georgia.

History has shown that VOCs can make a difference in the outcome of elections. A case in point is Illinois, where the total vote increased from 10 percent in 2006 to 19 percent in 2010. The strong turnout from VOCs brought a candidate (Pat Quinn) who embraced progressive views to the governorship—with just one-third of the white vote.

By closing the gap between eligible and likely voters, we will have a better chance of regaining our voice and enacting progressive policies. A progressive candidate could win Georgia with just 41 percent and Arizona with just 37 percent of the white vote.

African Americans and progressive whites have often come together before and can continue to do so to develop transformational relationships that dramatically impact politics, culture, and economics. But we must also remember that the local political machines have never just been about whites and African Americans but also Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. So, rather than creating anxiety in political circles, the expanding share of the electorate of these communities should reinforce our commitment to an all-inclusive brand of politics.

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