



## *The State of Opportunity One Year After Hurricane Katrina*

# Voice: Voting and Political Expression in the Gulf

Democracy depends on the ability of all people to participate in the public dialogue. Without the ability to express viewpoints and have them represented in government, individuals cannot exercise political power to help shape their community and country.

Many displaced residents of the Gulf Coast region are finding it difficult in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to express their viewpoints and participate in the political process. Early evidence finds that many groups—including racial and ethnic minorities and low-income families—have struggled to vote in post-hurricane elections and to have a say in the region's reconstruction plans. These problems mirror national trends, but also suggest that another unfortunate legacy of the hurricanes of 2005 could be an erosion of voice among those communities whose political expression was most endangered prior to the storms. Without their diverse viewpoints, the region's reconstruction risks suffering from insularity and a failure to reap the benefits of pluralism. Voice is therefore an important element of opportunity for those most victimized by Katrina.

This fact sheet summarizes research on the political participation of vulnerable Gulf Coast communities after Katrina, as well as national trends in electoral participation. It draws on this research to identify obstacles to political participation, and offers recommendations for means to expand voice for all.

### **Political Participation in New Orleans After Katrina**

Municipal elections in damaged Gulf Coast cities have key implications for voice and political power in the rebuilding process. In New Orleans, municipal elections were conducted under the extraordinary circumstances of mass voter displacement. Voting data from the April 2006 primary and the subsequent mayoral race reveal the following:

- As many predicted, voter turnout was low, and turnout in the mayoral runoff election was 40% lower than the potential voter turnout, as exemplified by the voter turnout witnessed in November 2004 national election.<sup>1</sup>
- The numbers of absentee votes (almost 25,000 votes in the runoff) represented less than one-fifth of the estimated 200,000 registered voters living outside New Orleans due to the mass displacement.<sup>2</sup>
- Because African American residents represented a disproportionately high number of the displaced population, their share of the electorate declined from 63% in 2004 to 57% in 2006.<sup>3</sup>
- In comparison to the most recent pre-Katrina mayoral election in 2002, voter turnout by neighborhood also showed a decline. In the New Orleans East neighborhood, which is predominantly black and middle class, turnout for the May elections

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fell by 23%. And in the predominantly low-income African American Lower Ninth Ward, turnout fell by nearly 40%.<sup>4</sup>

- The municipal elections reflected a shift toward a more affluent, white, and home-owning population in the New Orleans constituency. The results also reflected how the limited opportunity to return minimized the political voice of those that were hardest hit by the hurricane.<sup>5</sup>

The 2006 New Orleans municipal elections were especially important for New Orleans residents, as the officials elected in those races will play a key role in the city's rebuilding efforts. A variety of avoidable problems plagued the 2006 New Orleans elections:

- The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released evacuee information only to the Louisiana Secretary of State, but not to candidates or the public, thereby limiting displaced voters' access to comprehensive election information.<sup>6</sup>
- Among problems that were documented by polling monitors in predominantly African American Orleans Parish were voters having been incorrectly purged from the state's registration rolls, unwarranted police presence at various polling stations, poorly marked polling sites, and early closure of polling locations.<sup>7</sup>
- Although thousands of voters were residing outside Louisiana at the time of the elections, satellite polling stations were confined to the state. Importantly, three-quarters of African American evacuees who were not able to return to their homes were out of state, compared to the two-thirds of whites who were able to return to Louisiana, if not New Orleans.<sup>8</sup>

### **Other Indicators of Voice in the Gulf Coast Region**

In addition to voting problems, displaced and historically marginalized communities also experienced barriers to expressing their concerns and suggestions for the reconstruction process. Their political expression was weakened by dis-

persion and a history of political marginalization. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the hardest hit communities saw their voices stifled in the media through skewed representation. Among the documented reports of biased coverage of Katrina evacuees in the mainstream media are these examples:

- A number of news outlets focused on and disseminated unconfirmed reports of looting and violence among Hurricane Katrina survivors. Subsequent investigations proved many of the reported crimes and stories to be false.<sup>9</sup>
- Mainstream media reports of New Orleans evacuees often invoked negative and highly damaging racial stereotypes of African Americans. A particularly notable example was that of two photographs taken and captioned by the Associated Press. The actions of the African American survivors were identified as "looting," while the white survivors were "finding."<sup>10</sup> Although all parties were photographed doing the same thing, the African American survivors were blatantly criminalized by biased reporting.
- FEMA initially denied the press access to evacuees living in FEMA trailers, thereby restricting the voice of evacuees in the media. Only after pressure from reporters and public scrutiny did FEMA reverse its policy on entry to trailer parks.<sup>11</sup>

### **National Trends in Political Participation and Voice**

The barriers to voice observed in New Orleans are glaring in part because of the extreme circumstances of the Katrina tragedy and its aftermath. But they reflect barriers to voice for many across the nation. To be sure, the nation has made progress in expanding voice over the last four decades, through such measures as passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and enactment of many of the 1968 Kerner Commission's recommendations about the importance of protecting minority voices in the media. However, significant obstacles to full democratic participation and expression remain for many:

- A trend in state legislatures—most recently

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Missouri's—to require photo identification to vote threatens the right to vote for many across the country.<sup>12</sup> Requiring eligible voters to acquire documents at their own expense presents the potential for disenfranchisement of vulnerable communities, like the elderly, the poor, and African Americans.

- After the 2000 presidential election, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights identified barriers to electoral participation that disproportionately affect communities of color and other marginalized groups. Those barriers include state and local variations in the quality of voting equipment, voter identity verification standards, sample ballots, use of absentee ballots, lax or nonexistent

enforcement of federal voting rights laws, and inaccessible and/or overburdened polling stations.<sup>13</sup>

- Women and minorities continue to be grossly underrepresented as sources in news reporting.<sup>14</sup>
- Communities of color are rarely the subject of news stories; when they are the focus of reporting, the content of these stories remains largely negative.<sup>15</sup>
- The racial and ethnic diversity of radio news organizations declined by almost half between 1995 and 2005.<sup>16</sup>
- Minority and local ownership of radio, television, and print media has declined in the face of greater corporate consolidation of media and communications outlets.<sup>17</sup>

## Recommendations

New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region have an important chance to rebuild just communities that allow all residents to have a stake and a say in decisions that affect them. Government must protect and uplift voices in all communities, including those of evacuees who are now contributing to new neighborhoods. We recommend several measures.

- Permit hurricane evacuees to present alternative forms of identification to register and vote, such as FEMA relief applications, Red Cross documents, and other documents that indicate permanent or former address.<sup>18</sup>
- In the event of an emergency, FEMA should make available the names and contact information of displaced adult residents to candidates and organizations that would normally have access to voter-registration records.<sup>19</sup>
- Full and equal access to polling places is critical and should be afforded to all voters.
- Train poll workers, and recruit multilingual poll workers, to improve local jurisdictions' compliance with federal and state voting rights laws, particularly language assistance provisions.<sup>20</sup>
- Because the displacement of Gulf Coast residents was not indiscriminate in terms of race and income levels, government should pay special attention to the makeup of the displaced voting population to ensure that future elections do not prevent any racial or ethnic group from exercising its right to vote.<sup>21</sup>
- Establish minimum federal standards for voting procedures and equipment that include easier voter-registration requirements, federal guidelines for verifying voter identity, and uniform nationwide voting hours.
- All levels of government should vigorously enforce the Voting Rights Act in the Gulf Coast, as well as in communities of the displaced, and ensure full implementation of the Help America Vote Act.



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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> B. Thevenot, "Election Officials Trying to Cover All Contingencies," *The Times-Picayune*, April 20, 2006, [http://www.nola.com/newslogs/tpupdates/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola\\_tupdates/archives/2006\\_04\\_20.html](http://www.nola.com/newslogs/tpupdates/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_tupdates/archives/2006_04_20.html).
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- <sup>8</sup> Logan, "Population Displacement."
- <sup>9</sup> J. O. Yassin, "Demonizing the Victims of Katrina: Coverage Painted Hurricane Survivors As Looters, Snipers and Rapists," *Extra!*, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, November–December 2005, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2793>.
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- <sup>20</sup> National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, "Sound Barriers: Asian Americans and Language Access in Election 2004," 2005, [http://www.napalc.org/files/sound\\_barriers.pdf](http://www.napalc.org/files/sound_barriers.pdf).
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