

“Minority vote played a major role in the 2008 Elections...”

By JULIA TORRES BARDEN

Virginia’s minority communities turned out in record numbers last November, helping to turn Virginia “blue” for the first time since presidential candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson won the state in 1964. U.S. Senator-elect, Mark Warner credited his sweeping win in part to the voter turnout generated in the African-American, Hispanic and Asian communities statewide saying “The 2008 elections will go down in history for record-high turnout rates—especially among minorities, new voters and young voters. Our campaign worked hard to build on the successful relationships we forged with diverse minority communities while I had the privilege of serving as Virginia Governor and I’m proud our campaign reflected Virginia’s broad ethnic and cultural diversity.” Warner’s campaign strategies also focused on the various affinity groups via specifically targeted outreach events and coordinated advertising in cultural or ethnic publications.



Secretary of the Commonwealth’s State Board of Elections, Nancy Rodrigues tells of precincts where voters were turning up as early as 3 o’clock in the morning to guarantee their place in line when the polls opened at 6am. Based in part on the media’s reporting of potential voting challenges including very long lines and the influx of 450,000 newly registered voters, Rodrigues said that “in the first four hours the polls were open, we estimate that 40% of Virginians had already voted.”



Minority GOTV efforts were well-organized and visible across the state; launching aggressive voter registration drives far in advance of the election and dedicating many resources to close monitoring of the polls on election day. Although the Central Virginia chapter of the NAACP filed last minute law suits regarding disproportionate voting machine availability and advocating their preference for paper ballots, election day in Virginia went smoothly.

Members of the Asian American Society of Virginia (AASOCV) spent election day monitoring a polling precinct in Midlothian—one of several communities chosen for monitoring given the higher than average Asian population—as part of their partnership with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) and the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans of Virginia in their shared Voter Protection Initiative.

Eric Lin, AASOCV’s Programs Committee Chair, arrived at his Midlothian High School precinct to set up his organization’s information table where the group intended to monitor the voting process. Several hours into the voting day an individual voter stated his objection regarding the close proximity of the AASOCV table to the voting booths and registered his complaint with the precinct chief. Lin was instructed to move his organization’s table outside where the long line of voters began. He then filled out the necessary incident report for AALDEF national headquarters. Even so, Lin said that “overall, I do think that here in Virginia, the Asian American

community’s ability to participate in the voting process was fairly good.”

Congressman Bobby Scott, representing Virginia’s 3rd district said he felt “good” upon hearing CNN’s projection at 10:58pm on election eve that Virginia was being called for Barack Obama; believing that Obama would need to carry the state in order to win the national election. A combination of aggressive registration drives and even the immigration issue played a significant role in the vote said Scott. “The voter registration drive and the immigration issue created a momentum in Northern Virginia where the vote was going to be lopsided because Fairfax County has 150 different languages spoken in their school system. So, when you adopt the mean-spirited Republican position on immigration you are not only insulting a substantial portion of the population,





you're also insulting everybody's neighbor—who are voters." Scott also mentioned that his slightly-majority Black district went 75% for Obama as compared with the 65% Kerry received in 2004. Given the concern prior to the election that there might be problems at the voting booth, Scott said that "the attitude of the voters was that people didn't care what the barriers were and they were not going to be deterred."

Jorge Figueredo, a native of Colombia, became a U.S. citizen in time to participate in his first presidential election this past November. Highlighting the political issues mattering most to him—Healthcare, Education, Transportation and comprehensive immigration reform—Figueredo reflected that both the Obama and McCain campaigns had reached out to his Hispanic community in Northern Virginia. He also expressed concern for transparency in the voting process. Commenting after his first presidential voting experience, Figueredo seemed relieved to report that "everything went fine."

Noted political pundit, Dr. Larry Sabato at the University of Virginia, reported that "African Americans comprised at least 20% of the November 4th (election) turnout in Virginia, and—within this group—close to 95% voted for Obama and other Democrats on the ballot. Hispanics comprised about 5% of the total (statewide) vote, with Asians at 3% and other races (accounting for) 2%. This collective 10% cast a heavy vote for Obama, about 2-to-1," said Sabato. While commenting on the apparent shift in Virginia politics, he added that "the increasing diversity of the Virginia electorate has had a major impact in turning the state from Red to Bluish Purple."

While reporting on the voting results for Virginia, the *Washington Times* ran an article called "GOP gets wake-up call on minority vote" two weeks after the election reporting that "Virginia Republicans say the overwhelming support by Blacks and Hispanics that led to big wins for Democrats on Election Day taught them a valuable lesson: the party must work harder to make minority voters feel included and involved or pay dearly at the polls."

Virginia native and current Chesterfield County resident, Evelyn Morris-Harris is the chairperson of the Democratic Black Caucus in the state. She was thrilled to see that history was made on No-

vember 4th and especially relieved that the election went smoothly following the primary election predicament that her county found itself embroiled in last winter. "It has been overwhelming just to realize that it has become a reality. I'm very happy because this means that my grandchildren will have a safe place to grow up in and they have a great future ahead of them," said Harris.

Governor Tim Kaine is also very pleased with the outcome of our most recent elections. With respect to the election of Obama as the country's first-ever African American president, Kaine reflected that "it was a culmination of everything I've worked for in my adult life. I was a civil rights lawyer for 17 years and then started this overlapping career in elective office 15 years ago and it was a perfect fusion of my civil rights work and my career in elected office. I had a candidate who was very simpatico to my way of thinking and it was great to be able to help him. This is more than just an election, it is one of the most historic presidential elections in American history and I love the fact that Virginia was able to play a part in it. The fact that Virginia voters pulled that lever for Obama indicates that we have made a tremendous amount of progress."

Julia Torres Barden is the proud mother of three sons and is a graduate of both the Sorenson Institute for Political Leadership at UVA and the Minority Political Leadership Institute at VCU. ▣