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“What Can the CBC Do?”

When circumstances, conditions, or events go awry for US Afrodescendants at the national or regional level that warrant a Federal response, we often look to Washington, DC. Much has already been written concerning President Obama’s limited effectiveness in responding to issues in general given a partisan and gridlocked Congress. On the other hand, the President has also shown a limited willingness to use his executive powers to respond to “Black” issues. The only other source for a potential response from Washington to our issues is the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). But, realistically, what can the CBC do?

We asked that question some time back in the context of reparations. We found that Rep. John Conyers, Jr. has been recycling a reparations bill (H.R.40) in the Congress for 25 years. The bill calls for a mere \$8 million to conduct a study on reparations. Yet, Congress has failed to vote affirmatively on the bill for all these years. This outcome indicates the limited powers of the CBC to transform legislation into actionable laws.

To confirm the state of affairs, we sought data on the effectiveness of the CBC and its 43 members to obtain Congressional approval for legislation during the current 113th Congress (all of 2013 and up to August 8, 2014). Below, we provide the results of our analysis:

- Although a couple of CBC members were completely silent in introducing (sponsoring) Congressional legislation, in general, the 42 House of Representatives’ CBC members introduced more legislation on average (18.9 pieces of legislation) than the average member of the House (14.6 pieces of legislation). The lone CBC Senate member introduced 15 pieces of legislation compared with 33.9 pieces for the average senator. However, the Senate’s CBC member (Sen. Cory Booker) has experienced an abbreviated term.
- Eight of the 123 laws passed by the House of Representatives were sponsored by CBC members. While these eight laws comprised only 6.5% of the total (9.7% would be a proportionate share), they comprised 27% of the laws that were sponsored by democrats (30). Notably, democrats sponsored only 24% of the laws passed by the House, while House republicans (who possess a large member majority) sponsored 76% of the laws.
- The eight laws sponsored by CBC members were of no account. That is, none of the eight laws involved appropriation of funds. They mainly involved changing the names on Federal buildings, creating a gold coin to honor Mr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., and managing a personnel matter for the District of Columbia.
- For completeness, the Senate passed 40 laws: 26 were sponsored by democrats; one was sponsored by an independent; and 13 were sponsored by republicans. The democrats

possess a small member majority in the Senate. The lone CBC member did not sponsor a law passed by the Senate.

These results tell us that the CBC and its members are actively and aggressively engaged in introducing legislation, but that they are unable to obtain approval for legislation that requires the appropriation of funds. We all know that money is not the answer to all problems, but it can certainly serve as a driving force for improving many outcomes.

If a Black president and the CBC are unable to move mountains or small hills in order to resolve US Afrodescendants' problems, then why should we place such great credence in Washington, DC politics?

There may be some consolation in knowing that a disproportionate share of the laws passed by democrats in the House of Representatives were sponsored by CBC members. Theoretically, this could indicate that US Afrodescendants could benefit more from a democratically controlled House. On the other hand, it could turn out that future democratically controlled House of Representatives could continue approving "no account" legislation sponsored by CBC members—not legislation that calls for appropriation of funds to help resolve Afrodescendant issues. Note that Rep. Conyers' H.R.40 did not become law under democratically controlled House of Representatives.

If there is one fact known to Afrodescendants it is that, in America, there are no guarantees—except for death and taxes. Therefore, if we cannot be certain that Washington, DC can provide appropriate solutions to our problems, then we need to expend effort to identify other sources of solutions.

We should leave no stone unturned in this effort, including considering "nation formation" as a potential solution. At least in a nation of our own, we can design a political system that is guaranteed to respond to our problems.

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08/19/2014
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