

US - Who Voted and Why? A Roundtable Discussion on the Ethnic, Religious and Social Makeup of Voters in the Elections (by Kathleen Barr, Lydia Camarillo, Kirk Clay, Tom Perriello, Amy Goodman & Juan Gonzalez)

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Friday, November 10th, 2006 - [Democracy Now! News Program](#) - Today, we take a look at who voted and why. Voter turnout for Tuesday's election was one of the highest for a mid-term election in recent years. It is estimated that over 40 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in an election that gave Democrats control of both houses of Congress for the first time in twelve years. Democrats also gained six governorships and three-hundred state legislative seats around the country.

Exit polls are showing significant shifts in voting patterns among the electorate. Democrats succeeded in winning back some religious voters who had voted solidly Republican in the last few elections. And - for the first time since 1996 - a majority of Florida Latinos voted Democrat. Young voters had a huge increase in turn-out - with two million more young people voting on Tuesday than in the 2002. And African American voter turn-out made the difference in tight races like Missouri and Virginia.

AMY GOODMAN: Today, a roundtable discussion on the ethnic, religious and social makeup of voters in the 2006 mid-term elections. Tom Perriello is with us, senior advisor and co-founder of the Catholic Alliance for the Common Good, joining us in our firehouse studio here in New York. And in Washington, D.C., at Reuters, we're joined by Kathleen Barr and Kirk Clay. Kathleen Barr is the media coordinator for Young Voter Strategies. Her group was involved in registering half a million new young voters. And Kirk Clay is director of the Electoral College Reform Project at Common Cause. Prior to that, he was deputy director of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. Common Cause is a member of that group. On the line from San Antonio, Texas, we're joined by Lydia Camarillo. She is the vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. We welcome you all to Democracy Now!

Kirk Clay, director of the Electoral College Reform Project at Common Cause, give us your assessment of the elections. And in terms of the African American vote, how key was it this week?

KIRK CLAY: Oh, the African American vote was huge this week. In terms of turnout, without the African American vote, the Democrats would not have won three of the Senate seats. When we look at the actual numbers — and I'm going to go through my stats here to make sure that I get them correct for you — in terms of the Senate, the most critical numbers: in Virginia, African Americans were 16% of the vote share, and 85% of the African Americans voted for the Democrat. The Democrat, though, had only won 51% of the vote, and on the other hand, Webb only received 42% of the white vote. So that's almost 55% of the white vote went for Allen. And so, without the African Americans turning out in huge numbers and voting for the Democratic candidate, that race would have gone the other way. And, remember, we're talking about red states here. I mean, you know, so this is absolutely huge.

In Missouri, the Democrat won with 51% of the vote, and white voters supported the Republican candidate by 55%. So African Americans were 13% of the vote share there, and they voted 91% for McCaskill. And then, the shocker of the evening: in Rhode Island, Democrat Whitehouse won with 53% of the total vote. He only received 50% of the white vote. He received 85% of the African American vote, and

they made up 5% of the vote share. So, just with those numbers, you can tell that African American turnout not only was large, but also it made the difference in a couple of those races.

And later on, I can talk a little bit about House races. There is actually five other House races, including Tom DeLay's old district, where African Americans made up 22% of the district, and they helped to push some of these numbers over the top.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, Kirk Clay, a couple of years ago in the presidential election, there was some indication that a larger percentage of African Americans had voted for President Bush than many had expected. What is your sense of how the African American vote throughout the country fared in terms of shifting back to the Democratic Party, and was the possibility of the whole situation with the handling of Katrina, did that have any kind of impact on the vote?

KIRK CLAY: You know what? you hit the nail on the head. I would not say that African Americans went to the polls with Katrina at the forefront of their mind, but what Katrina did was it caused, not just African Americans, but I believe independents and the rest of the electorate to really start to focus on political issues and whether or not the administration, and not just the President's administration, but also Congress as a whole, was handling things competently. And as people started to focus and listen and pay attention to what was coming out of Washington, that sort of, you know, caused them to think a little more about the issues that were coming out.

So they really focused a lot sooner than what they usually would. I mean, we all know that usually in an election, people don't really pick up the paper and start to focus until maybe two weeks out, you know? Sometimes it's the weekend before. But this year, I believe right after Katrina, people started to look and see, "Well, wait a second, you know, something's wrong here."

I know, for example, African Americans did not see closure in what happened with Katrina. And I think many of the other independents just did not see closure. I mean, you know, we all saw a couple of really good photo ops, but in terms of answering the question, you know, "how did this happen, and how do we keep this from happening again?" we never saw that, so...

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break and then come back to this discussion. Kirk Clay is with Common Cause. We'll also speak with Lydia Camarillo, vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. We'll look at the religious vote, as well, with a new organization that deals with Catholics and other religions. And we'll be talking about the youth vote.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: As we talk about the vote, we turn to Tom Perriello, senior advisor and co-founder of Catholic Alliance for the Common Good. Juan?

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, Tom, I'd like to ask you, as a former longtime altar boy, I was most surprised by the apparent shift in the Catholic vote, which had been for several decades now increasingly Republican. But there was a major shift. Could you talk about that?

TOM PERRIELLO: Sure. It was quite a dramatic shift. The Democrats did win the Catholic vote after a 12-year or a 25-year decline, depending on which way you look at it. And what was even more interesting was in the key battleground states like Ohio, you saw a 20-point swing in the Catholic vote in some key races.

And I think there were a number of factors contributing to this. One was a shift of what people considered the most urgent moral issues. When we were looking at exit polls, corruption was really the leading issue among Catholic voters this year, and they saw it as a choice between corruption and the common good. You saw 75% of voters saying that corruption was very important to them as an issue; poverty, in six of the key states, you had minimum wage ballot initiatives that passed by an average margin of 31 points in these states; I think Katrina, that you were talking about a moment ago, put these issues on the forefront as moral questions; and the Iraq war.

I think besides the shift in the issue priorities, another thing happened, which was a group of mainstream Catholics have risen up to try to challenge some on the extreme right over what constitutes the fullness of Catholic teaching. Catholic social teaching has a strong tradition on issues of poverty and peace and healthcare, talking about a community of the common good. And I think those groups were organized. They got into the media. They got into parishes in the communities and were able to reach people and have a more constructive and robust moral dialogue.

JUAN GONZALEZ: The exit polls also seem to indicate that the evangelical Christian vote, which was expected by some to decline because of demoralization, actually did not, that there was actually — about a same percentage of the electorate was evangelical Christian as in the past, but that in the case of Catholics and Jewish voters and others and mainline Protestants, that there was apparently a much bigger shift.

TOM PERRIELLO: Well, first of all, I think there is a myth that the religious right is trying to put out there right now, which is that their voters didn't show up and that's why this shift occurred. But the statistics don't back that up. As you mentioned, the number of evangelicals — the percentage of evangelicals actually went up. The problem is, they simply didn't listen to the religious right leaders about what the moral issues were in this election. So, evangelicals showed up and gave a 12-point swing towards the Democrats or away from the Republicans, depending on how one looks at it.

And you see issues within the evangelical community, again, of poverty, of climate change, and very much of clean government resonating with people. I think the era of the 1980s, 1990s, where the moral discussion was about no government, has changed into a discussion about good government and clean government in the wake of Katrina, in the wake of 9/11 and Enron. People are interested in holding their government accountable and having a government that guarantees the basic human dignity of all people. So, yes, with the evangelical vote, you did see people show up, you saw them switching, not a massive wave, but a substantial one that I think is interesting to look at going forward.

AMY GOODMAN: Big shift of Jewish voters, from Republican to Democrat?

TOM PERRIELLO: Not a big shift. For the last two election cycles, in 2000 and 2004, there's been a perception — there's been a major investment among Republicans in trying to break away a significant chunk of the Jewish vote. That has not been successful so far. You have not seen a substantial shift. It's remained relatively steady nationwide.

AMY GOODMAN: We turn now to our guest in studio in Washington, D.C., talking about the youth vote. Kathleen Barr is media coordinator for Young Voter Strategies. What about this massive increase in the number of young voters?

KATHLEEN BARR: Yes, Tuesday was a banner election for young voters. For the second major election in a row, 18- to 29-year-olds increased their voter turnout. In 2002, 8 million 18- to 29-year-olds cast ballots, and on Tuesday we saw 10 million 18- to 29-year-olds go to the polls, so there was a two million vote increase. That, with the 2004 election, where we saw a significant uptick in the young voter turnout, as well, shows that this is a trend of increasing voter participation among young adults and that it's a very important part of the electorate for politicians to pay attention to and begin to really reach out to and turn out on Election Day.

JUAN GONZALEZ: One of the things that struck me by some of the exit polls I saw was the enormous percentage of young voters that were voting Democratic. I think some polls even showed it at 60% or higher, the largest pro-Democratic vote of any age group.

KATHLEEN BARR: That's correct. We saw from the national exit poll that 60% of 18- to 29-year-olds cast their ballots in the congressional races for the Democratic candidate and 38% for the Republican candidate, which is a shift from 2004, when the Democrats had a ten-point advantage. Now they've got, according to the exit poll, about a 22-point advantage.

And we see from polling that Young Voter Strategies did with a bipartisan team of pollsters that the number one thing young voters were looking for in the Tuesday elections was change. 43% of 18- to 29-year-olds said that Iraq was the most important issue when deciding for whom to vote on Tuesday. And then, in addition to that, the cost of college and education, as well as jobs and the economy, were crucial issues for young voters, and that primarily they were looking for change on Tuesday.

AMY GOODMAN: Kathleen, your group alone registered many, many new young voters. What are the strategies you used to do that?

KATHLEEN BARR: In 2006, Young Voter Strategies, we funded and coordinated fifteen nonpartisan organizations across the country to register just over half a million 18- to 29-year-olds. We used a variety of different strategies, as well as targeting different subsets of the youth vote. So, for example, we worked with Women's Voices. Women Vote, who registered just over 33,000 single young women; worked with Black Youth Vote, that focused on registering young African American voters, primarily in the South and also in Michigan.

AMY GOODMAN: And did you take different strategies for each? I mean, where did you go to find people, and how did you register them?

KATHLEEN BARR: About half of the groups focused on college campuses, registering college students across the country. Other organizations, like the Center for Civic Participation in Michigan, did community-based organizing, went to urban churches in the Detroit area, also went door-to-door in communities focused on African American communities, as well as Arab American, finding really that personal outreach to young voters is a great way to get them involved in the political process.

And then we also worked with organizations that used innovative new technologies, like online social networks and text messaging, to reach out to young voters that are essentially constantly connected either through the internet or their cell phones, and really was the kind of forefront of using those technologies for voter mobilization.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I'd like to turn now to Lydia Camarillo, who is joining us by telephone from San Antonio, vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. Welcome to Democracy Now!, Lydia.

LYDIA CAMARILLO: Good morning.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Lydia, I'd like to ask you, two years ago in the presidential elections, again, a lot was made of the inroads that Republicans made into the Latino vote, some estimates of 40-45% support for President Bush among Latinos. What happened this time?

LYDIA CAMARILLO: Well, let me just first tell you that since I'm going to be citing the William C. Velazquez Institute exit poll numbers for this year's election turnout, I want to also qualify that in '04, Latinos voted at 35% for Bush, unlike what the other polling organizations were citing. In fact, NBC had to indicate that it was less than — it was 40%, not 44%, which is what they had originally said.

Basically what we're seeing is that Latinos, like the rest of the country, were upset, dissatisfied. In fact, nationally, on that poll question, about 66% said they were very much dissatisfied, 20% said they were satisfied. And the interesting one that looked — because what William C. Velazquez did, our sister organization, in its polling, is that in addition to doing a national exit poll, it also looked at California, Florida, and Texas independently. And Florida seemed to be at a little higher number, at 68% dissatisfied, of which those numbers, when asked about whether the troops should be brought home, nationally Latinos said, 61%, should be bring them home next year. Florida and Texas — Texas and California stated 59%, and Florida at 57%.

And when you asked the question about how did they vote Democratic for the congressional districts, nationally they voted at 68.9% with California, and Florida at 64%, and Texas at 63%.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And in terms of voter participation, the turnout rates, how did it look this time?

LYDIA CAMARILLO: Well, more than a million Latinos voted this year compared to '02. And if we look at state by state, similar to what the African American community was able to do in the East and in the South, I can tell you that in places like Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and, of course, Texas and some of the other key states where the Democrats gained their seats, Latinos were a significant population.

In Texas, you would think that it's such a red state, and you didn't see the shift. Certainly Latinos were voting for Perry at a significant rate. But when you look at Texas, you saw not only that the DeLay seat was lost and Latinos played a major role in that, but you also saw that Dallas, which is considered a stronghold, Republican, there were Latinos overwhelmingly voted, and it became a Democratic state. In fact, the headline, the Democratic county, you saw the same thing with the state gaining five state red seats.

California, the seat — California, CD11, Pombo's seat, no one expected that seat to go. It went by 5,000 votes, with Latinos making a good section, a majority of those voting Latinos voting against Pombo.

So what you saw is the same sort of wave or earthquake, which is what I hear we're seeing, that Latinos were feeling a dissatisfaction with the way the country was going, and particularly the issues were similar. Latinos are against the war. Clearly the immigration question became an important question for them, as was poverty and environment, and corruption, I think, sort of took everything over the top. But Latinos were dissatisfied. They overwhelmingly voted Democrat, and they turned out in record numbers. And they basically were able to follow and be consistent with the call by the communities against issues that were clearly anti-Latino, anti-American, in their sense, similar to what happened with the immigration reform call and the marches.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to go back to Kirk Clay and ask about the role — for example, in Virginia, such a key state, the senator, George Allen, just admitting defeat yesterday. The whole issue of both, you know, calling this young person of color who was filming him, saying, "Welcome to America," calling him "Macaca," the former college teammate of Allen saying — named Kendall Shelton — saying that Allen had nicknamed him "The Wizard," because his name was similar to the local Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and saying that Allen and a third friend shot a deer while hunting, that Allen cut the deer's head off, asked directions to the nearest black person's home and then shoved the head into that person's oversized mailbox — what effect did that have in Virginia?

KIRK CLAY: Well, you know, oddly enough, for African Americans, this is sad to say, but, you know, we've seen these kinds of politics, especially in a red state like Virginia. I mean, you know, we do need to look at this. I mean, we're talking about the South. We're talking about a state that at one point refused to open their public schools, you know, because integration was being enforced. So, we sort of — I mean, that wasn't — it was an issue, because we understood it, but a lot of people in our community had known a lot of these things a long time ago. You know, when he was first running for office, we knew that this guy, you know, had a noose in his office at one point and that this guy used to walk around with the Confederate flag pin. So, some of these issues, we had already known.

But even more importantly, you know, the bigger story now, is people like Barack Obama — think about this. I mean, you know, here's an African American guy. You know, most people can barely say his name, and, you know, he was a rock star. I mean, he traveled to both red states and blue states. I mean, he campaigned hard in Virginia. He campaigned hard in Maryland. I mean, you know, he did a tremendous job. You know, even Harold Ford, I mean, and some of the things that happened to him, which is so disappointing for us. You know, we have to do better in places like Tennessee. I mean, campaigning like that and airing ads like that, very nasty partisan ads like that, you know, that's just not the way to go. But that is the positive things.

And then, also in terms of — this election was a historic time for African Americans. You see people like Duval Patrick in Massachusetts, right? You know, he will become the first governor of Massachusetts, and

he's only the second governor since Reconstruction, right? African Americans made up about 9% of the vote share in Massachusetts, but that shows that, you know, we're making wonderful gains in some places, but then we still have a long way to go in other places.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Kirk Clay, I'd like to ask you, in terms of the issue of voter suppression. We had an interesting race right here in the suburbs of New York in Westchester County at a State Senate seat, where a woman, Andrea Stewart-Cousins, won. In a large — a majority white district, African American woman defeated an entrenched Republican, but there was a lot of voter suppression at the polls, and thousands of voter registrations challenged by the Republican lawyers in the weeks before the election. What are you hearing in terms of still problems of voter suppression of minority voters around the country?

KIRK CLAY: Oh, it's absolutely huge. It's not just for African Americans, it's also for Latinos. I mean, we saw in California, you know, with those letters going out in that congressional district. And really, it's voter suppression through misdirection, which is very interesting. You know, it's an interesting sort of a turn. You know, we've seen that in the 2004 election, but specifically what I saw this year was the night before the election, you know, there were fliers being mailed to African Americans in Maryland, right?

And this is not just a black or white thing. I mean, this has to do with — I don't want to say party, but, you know, maybe it is people with a certain political bent, because Michael Steele, right, and Ehrlich were a part of, or alleged to be — I cannot say that, you know, the investigation is going to find out that they were at the bottom of this — but their faces was on a voter's guide that, at the top of the voter's guide, it said something like "Support our Democrat candidates," and then on the voter's guide it lists Kweisi Mfume as being a supporter of Michael Steele and Ehrlich and also a couple of other African American prominent leaders in Prince George's County. And when they looked at the actual mail codes, they saw that, you know, that letter did have to do — did come from someone from one of their campaigns. So, the investigation is still going on.

But my point is, we've seen these kinds of tactics before, and it's just so nasty. At some point, we're going to have to get to a place in politics where we don't use race to either give people a positive advantage or give people a negative disadvantage. And until we do that, democracy is going to be failing some of our people.

AMY GOODMAN: Kirk and Tom, you also had a first in Keith Ellison in Minneapolis —

KIRK CLAY: Yes.

AMY GOODMAN: — both the first non-white representative being sent to Washington and the first Muslim congress member to go to Washington.

KIRK CLAY: Yes, yes. And that is a wonderful, wonderful feat. And his district was, I think, barely 7% African American, if I'm not mistaken. So we're making tremendous gains, and we're very, very proud of that. And also in terms of statewide, I mean, we've won six statewide seats. David Paterson in New York, Lieutenant Governor, Anthony Brown in Maryland, Lieutenant Governor. He had 23% of the vote share from African Americans in Maryland. Denise Napier will be the State Treasurer in Connecticut. In Illinois, Jesse White, he received 10% of the vote share in Illinois, and then he will be the next — well, he will continue to be the Secretary of State there. So, we've made tremendous gains, and I'm very, very proud of what African Americans were able to do.

And we will be rewarded. I mean, you know, there's four chairmanships up at the House. Nancy Pelosi will be the Speaker, but Rangel will be the Ways and Means chair; Conyers to chair the Judiciary; Benny Thompson, chair of Homeland Security; and Juanita Millender-McDonald, heading up Operations. So, finally, you know, we see a point at which African Americans can stick their chest out and be proud, you know, but I hasten that this democracy still needs a lot of work, and so we will go back to work and roll up our sleeves for the next election cycle just to make sure that we do some real election reform to help make sure that these problems don't hinder us.

AMY GOODMAN: Tom Perriello?

TOM PERRIELLO: Two quick points on that, in terms of the victory in Minnesota. First of all, one of the encouraging things about this new resurgent progressive faith movement is that it is interfaith. And we're finding that the issues that matter to people of faith cross denominations and cross religions. Issues like poverty, clean government, peace, are issues that we see resonating, regardless of the particular religious denomination of the people running, and I think that's one of the powers of this new movement, is that people are eager for that, not something that divides us, but brings us together on our highest values.

I think the second thing that's important to point out, we've heard a lot about how the African American and Latino vote was crucial in some of these swing states. The Catholic vote swung 15 points in Virginia and 25 points in Montana. And I mention this because I think when you put these numbers together, you get a key lesson from this election.

One of the things people are saying that I think is incorrect is that the Democrats won this election by running a bunch of conservatives and by running a bunch of moderates. If you actually look at who it was that was swinging in this vote, it was actually that there was massive turnout of a lot of people who were motivated by some of the deepest principles of progressive thinking, even in the red states.

What you had was, for example, people like Ted Strickland and Sherrod Brown essentially ran as what one person called "ethical populists." You had people who were not running to the middle, but actually running to their principles. And what we found with religious voters is that they care much more about right and wrong than about right and left, which means that you can have some centrist candidates who do well, but you can also have some very progressive candidates that, by sticking to their values, they actually gain more than they would by running to the middle. Tim Cain won as governor in Virginia last year, which is my home state, by opposing the death penalty in a pro-death penalty state, because people cared a lot more about him standing for his principles than they cared about the issue.

So, I think when you look at the groups that really helped swing this vote, we've got to be — the Democrats should be very wary of understanding who delivered this. So when they set the agenda for Congress, issues like the minimum wage, issues like healthcare and a new direction for Iraq are going to be key, if they want to lock in and sustain some of the victories they saw this year.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, we will leave it there. I want to thank everyone for being with us: Tom Perriello, senior advisor and co-founder of Catholic Alliance for the Common Good; Kathleen Barr in Washington, D.C., media coordinator for the Young Voter Strategies; and joining us from San Antonio, Texas, Lydia Camarillo, vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, as well as Kirk Clay, director of the Electoral College Reform Project at Common Cause.

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