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Will Obama's Support of Marriage Equality Keep Some Blacks Home on Election Day?

Inclusion

**By The Reverend Irene Monroe
BC Editorial Board**

Before the opening of the Democratic National Convention, the Democratic National Party released its 2012 platform. Its theme – “Moving America Forward.” One of the major party planks in the platform is its full-throated support of marriage equality.

“We support the right of all families to have equal respect, responsibilities, and protections under the law. We support marriage equality and support the movement to secure equal treatment under law for same-sex couples.”

Many Obama supporters embrace the platform's theme of “Moving America Forward” but feel that the party's support of same-sex marriage is risky if not outright political suicide in such a tight and contentious race for the White House.

“We also support the freedom of churches and religious entities to decide how to administer marriage as a religious sacrament without government interference,” the platform states.

With one of Obama's largest and most loyal voting blocks being African Americans who are also largely Democratic and conservative Christians, the big worry is not that African Americans would overwhelmingly cast a ballot for Mitt Romney; it's that they might not come out to the polls in large numbers this November.

In 2008, according to the Pew Research Center, approximately 95 percent of the African American populace cast their ballot for Obama, and only 26 percent were in favor of same-sex marriage.

Before Obama publicly announced his support for marriage equality in May, according to Pew results in April, 49 percent of African Americans were not in favor of same-sex marriage while only 39 percent were. And since Obama's announcement the numbers of those in opposition to same-sex marriage have not declined among the black churched populace. As a matter of fact, some African American ministers have come out more forcefully against Obama.

The Rev. William Owens, president and founder of the Memphis-based Coalition of African Americans Pastors, is one of them. Given his influence and clout among black clerics in the area, Owens feels that the president has gone too far in extending his civil rights hand toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) Americans. Owens told the *Associated Press* in late July that he "would lead a national effort to rally black Americans to rethink their overwhelming support of the president over the same-sex issue and 'save the family.'"

Owens is outraged and feels the president is taking the African American vote for granted. While I would like to dismiss Owens' rant as just another homophobic minister and an outlier in what I perceive will be a huge turnout of black voters for Obama, sadly, to date Owens has parlayed his outrage into a small but growing movement. He has over 3,742 African American ministers and their churches on board with his anti-Obama vote campaign.

"The time has come for a broad-based assault against the powers that be that want to change our culture to one of men marrying men and women marrying women," Owens told *CNN* after he launched his anti-Obama vote campaign event at the National Press Club. "I am ashamed that the first black president chose this road, a disgraceful road."

Why are African Americans, especially conservative Christians, still stuck on this issue?

One reason is that church doctrine throughout all the African American denominations hasn't changed on the topic of homosexuality, keeping the church tethered to an outdated notion of human sexuality, and a wrong-headed notion on what constitutes civil rights.

Another reason is that many African American ministers still believe the institution of marriage, at least within the black family, is under assault, and LGBTQ people further exacerbate the problem.

For these ministers, some of whom support LGBTQ civil rights but draw the line on same-sex marriage, espousing their opposition to same-sex marriage is a prophylactic measure to combat the epidemic of fatherlessness in black families. In scapegoating the LGBTQ community, these clerics are ignoring the social ills behind black fatherlessness, such as the systematic disenfranchisement of both African American men and women, high unemployment, high incarceration, and poor education, to name a few.

There are, however, African American ministers who have come out in support of Obama's stance on marriage equality.

For these African American ministers, the liability of Obama losing his 2012 reelection bid seems far greater than being publicly outed for not being in lockstep with their homophobic brethren. But their efforts to get their conservative parishioners to the ballot box must far exceed those in opposition.

If the first African-American president loses his reelection bid because of certain black pastors' homophobic views on marriage equality, that would be tragic, and history would not look kindly on their actions.

Obama is the president of the United States, not the pastor of the United States. He's the president of all the people, not some of the people.

As African Americans who have battled for centuries against racial discrimination, we have always relied on our president and his administration to fight for and uphold our civil rights, because too many pastors across the country and throughout centuries wouldn't "move America forward."

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. She is the Coordinator of the African-American Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at the Pacific School of Religion. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a

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