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Moving Out

The stable poverty of New Orleans has been shaken up, and that's good.

By Abigail Thernstrom

Civil-rights groups are griping (how unusual). New Orleans residents who fled the city after Katrina are being disfranchised, they say. If they want to vote in the April 22 election for mayor and other local offices, they are stuck having to ask for an absentee ballot. Alternatively, they can vote early by satellite if they hop on a specially leased bus that will take them from, say, Houston to a voting station in one of ten Louisiana cities.

Spokesmen for the organized civil-rights community are morally outraged. "Katrina's survivors are about to be brutalized once more," Jesse Jackson has charged. Forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, "African Americans once more must march to gain the right to vote." And indeed on April 1 he led a protest march across the Mississippi River Bridge. The NAACP, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, People for the American Way, the American Civil Liberties Union, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, and others are equally exercised. They had wanted the U.S. Department of Justice to postpone the election on the basis of minority disfranchisement — even though, as the DOJ pointed out in a March 16 letter to Rep. John Conyers Jr., the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus unanimously endorsed the election procedures set in place.

As the Black Caucus must have realized, no one has been disfranchised; the point is ludicrous. Blacks kept from the polls in Louisiana prior to the 1965 Voting Rights Act didn't have an absentee ballot (or bus ride) option. In addition, many of these allegedly disfranchised voters may never again live in New Orleans. The city is hardly reconstructed and thriving; bodies are still being found in the rubble more than seven months after the hurricane hit. And no one knows how many of the former residents still see the Big Easy as home. Actually, never mind — there is good reason for the incumbent mayor and the Democratic party to want every last available black vote.

Before Katrina hit, the city was roughly two-thirds black. But if a substantial number of blacks have permanently left the state, the Republican party will be considerably strengthened. Moreover, in New Orleans itself, a majority of actual residents today are white, and the election of a white mayor is possible. It's true that four years ago the incumbent, C. Ray Nagin, was the choice of the white minority, but he's lost that vote. The city should stay "chocolate," he remarked on Martin Luther King Day. God wants the city to be a majority African American, he went on. "You can't have New Orleans no other way. It wouldn't be New Orleans."

Undoubtedly many of the city's black residents and former residents find such rhetoric appealing. And some who are now living in Texas, Mississippi, and elsewhere have already been boarding the buses provided by politically Left activist groups to cast their

satellite vote in Louisiana. But surely over time those who have put down roots elsewhere may ask themselves whether that "chocolate" city was so divine, after all.

An accurate pre-Katrina picture of New Orleans is not so pretty. The homicide rate was ten times the national average. The marriage rate was much lower than the national average, and the poverty rate was almost 30 percent, compared with 12 percent nationwide. The Hispanic population was only 3 percent — astonishingly low for the region and surely an indicator of the level of economic opportunity. The city was simply not attracting immigrants.

The *New York Times* insists on romanticizing life in the old New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, where the average household earned barely more than \$20,000 annually, levels of education were low, 40 percent of adults held no jobs, and four in five children were raised in single-parent families. "Culturally, the Lower Ninth Ward was like a small town," the *Times* reports. On its most famous street, there was an "old-fashioned sense of community" with "bedrock values," churches, social clubs, and an ethos of sharing. But even the *Times* had to admit that the "entrenched cultural stability...kept people there when they could have moved up and out."

Katrina shattered the stability of intergenerational poverty, adults disconnected from work, and children without fathers. In its wake it left immense personal tragedy, but also opportunity. The racial composition of the New Orleans electorate is unimportant. Out-of-state satellite voting is not a civil right. As usual, the civil-rights groups and spokesmen are spinning their wheels in the old rhetorical rut of discrimination and disfranchisement. But it's a moment of opportunity for them as well. It's time for a different message — one that recognizes the damage that "entrenched cultural stability" does in America's poorest black communities and helps the uprooted move on.

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