

Which leaders speak for black America?

by David A. Love | March 27, 2013 at 8:53 AM



Is there a leadership crisis in black America? A new poll suggests African-Americans think so.

The poll was commissioned by BET founder Robert L. Johnson, also the chairman of The RLJ Companies, and was released by Zogby Analytics. And the results are shocking.

According to the online survey of 1,002 African Americans, when asked the question “Which of the following speaks for you most often?”, 40 percent said

that no one speaks for them, while 24% said the Reverend Al Sharpton of the National Action Network and MSNBC speaks for black people, and 11% said the Reverend Jesse Jackson of Rainbow PUSH.

Meanwhile, 9 percent of black respondents named Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA), 8% said NAACP President and CEO Ben Jealous speaks for them, and 5 percent of mentioned Assistant Democratic Leader, Congressman James E. Clyburn (D-SC). Marc H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League, and former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele each received 2 percent.

Why this survey and why now?

Johnson said that given the historic reelection of President Obama, he wanted to know how African Americans feel about his presidency and whether they feel better off after his first term in office. African Americans were hardest hit by the hardest economic slump since the Great Depression, and yet they give extraordinary high favorable ratings to Obama, who is a source of racial pride. 91 percent of blacks in the poll gave the president a thumb up, while 72 percent thought his election helped them and a mere 4 percent said it hurt them.

“My primary concern is why, after enacting and enforcing needed civil and equal rights laws, spending more money on education for African-American students at all levels than at any other time in the history of this Nation, and having twice elected an African-American president, black American families are still experiencing a growing disparity in employment, access to capital, wealth accumulation, and as a direct consequence, stagnation in economic opportunity and quality of life,” Johnson said of the poll.

If Obama can't lead black America, who can?

The survey raises an important question. Although black voters overwhelmingly support President Obama, there is a tacit understanding that he is the president of all people and therefore cannot speak for the interests of black America exclusively. And yet, his detractors are threatened by a black man who is presides over an entire nation.

In the age of Obama, a black president is not enough for the black community. It still needs leaders who will pressure the president and others to do the right thing, such as the role played by Martin Luther King in the Johnson administration. Well, if that's the case, then who are the real “leaders” of black America?

Perhaps black America is looking for leadership in all the wrong places. Do we need a messiah who is all things to all people and will take us to the promised land? Or should we identify and cultivate leaders using more realistic criteria?

After all, despite the canonization of Martin Luther King today, we should remember that his popularity declined, and not all African-Americans believed he spoke for them. Some condemned him for speaking out against the Vietnam War and veering away from civil rights and into the realm of international human rights. And critics railed against his call for economic justice and a radical redistribution of wealth in America.

Who are the black leaders today?

Where are the black leaders today? For example, seemingly ubiquitous leaders such as Rev. Sharpton always stood up for the families of slain police brutality victims. People knew that in New York you always called Rev. Al in an emergency, but is it realistic to expect one person to be everywhere at all times?

Ben Jealous of the NAACP represents a new generation of activist leaders, speaking up for Troy Davis and Trayvon Martin, struggling against voter ID laws and helping to secure repeal of the death penalty in Maryland.

At the same time, we find black leadership in unlikely places, including those who do not bear fancy titles, but are in the trenches nevertheless. Consider people such as Shujaa Graham, Nathson Fields and Delbert Tibbs of the organization Witness to Innocence—wrongfully convicted, exonerated death row survivors who are now fighting against a racially unjust death penalty that nearly killed them.

Certainly first lady Michelle Obama, a high-powered lawyer and nonprofit executive, steps up the leadership game, if she doesn't redefine it. There is black leadership in the business world, including entrepreneurs such as Oprah Winfrey, the first African-American woman billionaire. And black celebrities such as Harry Belafonte and Danny Glover are powerful leaders who use their fame to exert a sense of social responsibility.

A time of crisis and opportunity

Yet, if African American leadership is in a terrible state as the Johnson poll suggests, then there is opportunity in times of crisis. If black America lacks the leadership that represents its best interests, then it must identify and groom new effective leaders. This means black messiahs may not fit the bill anymore.

We must allow black leaders to grow where they live, in their local communities. Sometimes identifying them requires little more than looking in the mirror.

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