



BlackEconomics.org®

“Executing Existing Power”

The 2021 Infrastructure Bill should serve as a tutorial for the people (especially Black people) to know what can and should be done for the people by the people. To elucidate the foregoing statement, I build on two very recent **BlackEconomics.org** commentaries: [“A Preliminary Look at the Infrastructure Bill”](#) and [“CBC Not Positioned to Optimize Black America’s Well Being.”](#)

Let us begin by considering the 59 Black representatives in the US House of Representatives. Fifty-seven are Democrats. The latter fact is very important. In any, any, I mean any logical world, no piece of legislation can pass the House under the current scenario (220 Democrats, 212 Republicans, and 3 vacancies constitutes 435 representatives) without the near total cooperation of Black representatives. The 57 Black votes represent 26 percent of the 218 votes required to achieve a simple majority in the House.

We should recognize that those 57 representatives, who are elected to vote on behalf of their constituencies, come from districts, gerrymandered or not, that are overwhelmingly Black. This means that the representatives from these districts will generally be Black because the US Government has fostered and perpetuated segregated residential housing for decades. This confluence of events has provided this cadre of Black legislators with the power to control legislation presented to the Congress as long as they are willing to execute their vote as a bloc.

Now to the Infrastructure Bill. President Biden was not naïve about this legislation. He was careful to ensure that the bill be characterized as a bipartisan effort. Why? Because he understood that Washington, DC politics is a big money game, and he wanted both Democratic and Republican—mainly White—senators to have an opportunity to win from the game. He may need the Republican senators for other purposes during his administration.

Note that President Biden did not need Republicans to vote for the Infrastructure Bill. As long as all 50 Democratic Senators voted for the bill and Vice President Kamala Harris concurred, then the bill would have passed the Senate.¹ The reality is that we now have a so-called bipartisan bill where GOP senators were able to justify their vote for the bill by embodying their pet projects and programs in the bill.

¹ In reality, two of the “Democratic” senators are “Independents.”

What did President Biden do? He created an opportunity for 19 Republicans, who voted up on the bill, to write into the bill projects and programs specifically for their states. For example, North Carolina senators wrote into the bill a new interstate highway corridor that connects towns and cities. In addition, three senators from North and South Dakota (all GOP) wrote a provision into the bill that requires the Federal Government to perform a study to revisit a prohibition against the Keystone pipeline whose development was blocked by the Obama Administration. These North and South Dakota Senators incorporated this provision knowing that the study will be used to initiate a judicial action that will likely result in the courts overturning the Obama Administration ruling on the Keystone pipeline. A child can see that this provision could result in large economic opportunities for those involved with the pipeline.

The important question that Black Americans must ask is: Why did not Black Senators Corey Booker, Raphael Warnock, and Tim Scott write provisions into the Infrastructure Bill that would enrich significantly their Black constituencies as roads, bridges, electric school buses, AMTRAK rails, broadband, and etc. are being constructed and obtained using funding provided by the bill? For example, why does the Infrastructure Bill not include the following types of provisions?²

- Black firms are prioritized to provide the signage for highways, toll roads, bridges, tunnels, railway-highway crossings, bicycle trails, recreational trails, and pedestrian walkways.
- Black firms are prioritized to provide safety cones and barriers for all projects involving construction of, or on, the nation's highways and roads.^{3,4}
- Black firms are prioritized to perform digitization of nondigital records that are to be incorporated into digital databases that are developed under the bill.
- Black workers are prioritized to receive training, apprenticeships, and employment to provide: (i) Maintenance and repair services for AMTRAK electric engines and intercity rail transportation equipment; and (ii) leadership and labor support for projects and programs designed to increase energy efficiency and to improve drinking water.
- Black farms that include highway-adjacent land are prioritized to serve as sites for electric vehicle charging stations.
- Black Americans should be prioritized to participate in and operate universities' Transportation Centers.
- Etc.

Just like Senators John Hoeven and Kevin Cramer of North Dakota or Richard Burr and Thomas Tillis from North Carolina, Black Senators Booker, Warnock, and Scott could have included carefully crafted and legally permissible language in the bill that would have given Black Americans a clear and direct path to economic opportunity and a role in helping improve the nation's infrastructure.

Unfortunately, at this time, there are no large ticket items in the bill that are tightly constrained to provide direct benefits to Black Americans. Truth be told, it was incumbent upon Senators Booker,

² Note that the administrative and regulatory guidelines that are developed to implement the bill could embody these provisions.

³ For these first two proposed provisions, there is no requirement for Black Americans to own and operate large heavy construction firms—industries that we have been excluded from historically for a variety of reasons.

⁴ Black firms can easily source and provide these items just as well as White firms.

Warnock, and Scott to do that. Again, Black Americans must recognize that politics in Washington, DC is a big money game, and when you control three, or even two, votes in an evenly divided legislative body and you do not execute your leverage/power, then you are wrong.

Now back to the House. Whether the 57 Black Democratic House members do not understand that they are a pivot point in a deliberative body or simply purposefully deciding to stay unWOKE, I do not know.

It seems that no politicians in Washington, DC—except for Black American politicians—have any problem playing politics. What should be clear is that these Black representatives in the House have the safest districts in the country. Typically, the only way that these representatives can be unseated is for them to commit a crime and be caught or to die.

The seats of the three senators, of course, are significantly less safe because they are elected on a statewide basis. Yet it is unconscionable that the three Black senators failed to exercise their prerogative to push into the Infrastructure Bill provisions that would produce a significant economic boon for Black Americans.

The US media and educational system motivate Black Americans to vote Black legislators into office, but those sources do not inform us that we already have controlling power to shape and pass legislation that actually benefits Black people. Black intellectuals, perhaps mainly from academia and think tanks, should take up the challenge of convincing Black legislators that their role is not limited to voting for legislation, but includes creating legislation and writing each piece of legislation to the benefit of Black people. These legislators need to hire the most competent staff members with a primary prerequisite being that they know how to write legislation and how to leverage other principal writers of legislation so that bills that reach the floor for a vote include favorable provisions for Black Americans.

For Black voters back in the districts, no brownie points should be assigned to representatives for asking “probing questions” during committee hearings/investigations or for “looking and sounding good” as a subject of a television interview. Rather, Black voters should assign maximum brownie points when their Black legislators get behind the scenes and write provisions into the Infrastructure Bill, and others like it, that benefit Black workers and entrepreneurs. These Black legislators should be creative and develop the expertise required to preclude negative judicial rulings on “set asides” that are included in their legislation.

I close with the following reality check on the US political framework. Did you realize that, according to US Census Bureau 2019 estimates, 3.4 million White Americans in five states control 10 votes in the US Senate (see Table 1)?⁵ These 10 senators represent 10 percent of all possible votes and 20 percent of an evenly split senate. Those 3.4 million Whites represented just over 1.0 percent of the US population. As you have probably surmised, those Whites do not care that this is not “fair.” They do not care that this is not one man (woman), one vote. They just take care to execute their political power. On the other hand, it is expected that Black Americans can only get in where we fit in.

⁵ The data for Table 1 are from the US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census: <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-detail.html>; (Retrieved on 081621).

Table 1.—White Populations of Selected US States

| Line No. | States | White Population (Thousands) |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Alaska | 478 |
| 2 | Montana | 950 |
| 3 | North Dakota | 662 |
| 4 | South Dakota | 748 |
| 5 | Wyoming | 535 |
| 6 | Total | 3,374 |

Source: US Census Bureau; **BlackEconomics.org** presentation

Clearly, Black Americans should develop a strategy to remove this imbalance from the US political framework so that we can get out of the system something close to what we put into the system. For now, the 59 Black Representatives in the House and the three Black Senators should own their collective power and execute that power to the fullest. That includes writing bills like the Infrastructure Bill that include real and significant benefits for Black Americans.

Lindsey “Rob” Robinson
08/17/21

--