

Race Based Politics

❑ Last week, Rep. Artur Davis (D) lost his primary bid for governor of Alabama in a crushing defeat. His opponent, Ron Sparks, won by 25 points in a contest which some believe shows that the race-based politics of the south have not changed. This conclusion has been postulated because traditional, non-elected black political stakeholders seem to have temporarily derailed the career of one of the Democratic Party's fastest rising black stars.

Before the emergence of President Barack Obama on the national presidential scene, lots of Democrats felt that Davis would eventually become the nation's first black president – especially members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). His credentials were incredible. In fact he was a classmate of President Obama at Harvard Law. He was incredibly articulate and what he lacked in charismatic speeches, he made up for in strategic thinking and networking ability.

Davis won his congressional seat in 2002 defeating incumbent Earl Hilliard in a strongly Republican state. In those early days, he quickly became the darling of the CBC. In 2008, Davis successfully ran President Obama's primary campaign against Hillary Clinton. He was the architect of the statewide strategy, which avoided discussing race, but built a multi-racial coalition, which went around the traditional black power brokers (who all supported Clinton). Naturally, he presented his friend and schoolmate as a centrist candidate who would be less polarizing than Hillary Clinton. The message that Davis echoed in Alabama was that the days of race-based identity politics were over and a new era of politics had dawned.

As a result of this brilliant messaging, Obama won over 80 percent of the black primary vote, although the state went for McCain with over 60 percent of the vote in the actual

presidential election. After the Obama victory, Davis felt encouraged to run for the governor's seat in Alabama. He wanted to break an Alabama glass ceiling. This would have made him the first black governor in the state, which was the home of the original capital of the confederacy -Montgomery, Ala. Alabama is the same state in which Martin Luther King spearheaded the civil rights movement in 1955 and where George Wallace, a former governor, became famous for the statement, "segregation now and segregation for ever" in 1963.

For all the reasons cited above, Davis believed that this was his time to change the course of Alabama history. He used the strategy he had created for Obama and his state connections to run as a centrist candidate for governor. Further, while back in D.C., he also followed through with becoming a centrist voice, working across the political aisles with Republicans on several issues and ultimately becoming the only member of the CBC to vote against the administration's healthcare plan.

Unfortunately for Davis, while he was heading towards the center, the administration was tacking hard left. Davis' political senses told him that only a "moderate" or blue dog Democrat with a proven record of bridge building could win the highest post in his Republican-controlled, home state. Therefore, he essentially used the same methodology in his race for governor as he did in the 2008 primary presidential contest for Obama.

For months the polls seemed to be saying that Davis' strategy was working and that a great number of Alabama's Democrats seemed to be on board with him. All was going well until late last year. In November, Jesse Jackson made the statement, "You can't vote against healthcare and call yourself a black man." Although Jackson refused to name the person he was referring to, the direction of the dig was obvious.

Davis' response was measured, politically correct but not persuasive. "One of the reasons that I like and admire Rev.

Jesse Jackson is that 21 years ago he inspired the idea that a black politician would not be judged simply as a black leader," Davis wrote. In an almost tongue-in-cheek way he wrote, "The best way to honor Rev. Jackson's legacy is to decline to engage in an argument with him that begins and ends with race."

Unfortunately after being ignored in 2010 just like they were in 2008, black Democratic leaders in Alabama did the unthinkable. They endorsed Ron Sparks, a white liberal, who supported the administration's healthcare plan. One group rationalized their support for Sparks by saying, "Artur Davis voted against President Obama's healthcare package to further his ambitions when the president needed him most."

The turnout for this primary was down by over 31 percent, which meant that Davis failed the excitement test in this campaign. The state did not buy the "historic" dimension of his race. Therefore, he experienced an across-the-board defeat statewide. In some counties, he lost by 30 and 40 points. Davis joins the list (along with Georgia's Andrew Young, North Carolina's Harvey Gantt, and Tennessee's Harold Ford) of southern black candidates who couldn't get enough black and white votes to win.

After Obama's victory in the Iowa Caucuses in January 2008, syndicated columnist George Will declared that the senator's impressive campaign for the White House signaled the end of purely race-based politics in America. Perhaps the defeat of Artur Davis shows us that extraordinary skill is needed to capitalize on this new environment.

We certainly don't need loud, angry race-hustlers playing the race card when it is inappropriate. America needs leaders with level heads. It is obvious that Democrats are experimenting with new models of leadership and they are breaking through previous race boundaries. There have only been three black governors since reconstruction – all have been Democrats.

Unfortunately for Davis, he will not be the fourth.

I am hopeful that out of the field of 28 black Republican candidates for Congress this year, that there will be at least one or two who will climb the political ladder of success. These folks may give the nation's voters new choices, new options and a way to escape the politics of race.