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*"Classic Elegance at an Affordable Price"*

by **Ralph B. Everett**,  
President and CEO, Joint  
Center for Political and  
Economic Studies

Elections are about opportunity. And with so many critical issues hanging in the balance at present, 2012 will be an especially important time for Americans themselves to influence the direction of our country.

With the recovery just beginning to pick up the pace, 2011 was a challenging year for most everyone, regardless of their race, across nearly all economic indicators – jobs, net worth, home values. And while it is true that black unemployment runs almost twice that of the general population – at more than 16 percent – some studies now show that as a direct result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, some 6.9 million Americans were kept above the poverty line, including 1.3 million African Americans.

It is also true that President Obama inherited an economy that was in almost unprecedented free-fall and acted quickly to stop the hemorrhaging and began to rebuild. He has been working to help create the economic conditions for employment growth through efforts to rebuild critical infrastructure and our public education system.

And while current economic conditions point to job creation and economic recovery as the premier issue for the 2012 campaign, the past year has not been devoid of hope and the outlook is not without considerable promise for the African American community.

For example, at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies we have been encouraged by our progress in directing greater focus under the new health care law toward addressing longstanding racial disparities in health outcomes and access to health services.

On other fronts, despite all the problems afflicting areas of concentrated poverty, the numbers of young, educated African American adults are growing. A recent Washington Post poll showed that their optimism is on the upswing, with most of them saying they are better off than their parents, and that their children will be better off than they themselves are now.

Further, young African Americans are adopting broadband



Ralph Everett/Photo by Victor Holt

and mobile Internet technologies at among the highest rates of any group. As the new online technologies continue to revolutionize how people receive information, interact with each other and take part in civic and political dialogue, we are seeing exceptional potential for enabling more people of color to participate and to engage in our civic and political life.

But we need to be mindful that political trends sometimes work at cross-purposes. A report the Joint Center issued recently pointed to a precipitous drop in the number of African American state legislators in the South who serve in the majority party – from more than half to fewer than five percent in just past few years. The result is that black voters and black elected officials in that region have less influence now than at any time since the civil rights era. On top of this, there is a strong move in these and other states to make it more difficult for people to register and vote, either through tougher identification requirements at the polls, shortening of the early voting periods or through restrictions on voter registration drives and other such measures.

Accordingly, 2012 will be a critical year for voting rights and political participation, which should be at the core of our efforts to put America back on track toward ever-expanding op-

portunity and a better quality of life for all. African Americans in particular need to engage and participate and take full advantage of this precious right that our parents and grandparents fought so vigorously for a half-century ago. Whether you vote Democrat or Republican is not the issue. What matters is that you get to the polls and cast your ballot.

Accordingly, we need a more concerted effort to address the apathy that many of our fellow citizens feel, and to find ways to expand political participation, which is so vital to the successful functioning of our democracy. To help accomplish this, the Joint Center this year established our Civic Engagement and Governance Institute, which will work to improve the quality and quantity of the interaction between citizens and their government, and to provide space for analysis, ideas and dialogue aimed at bringing more people into the process – and ultimately driving the solutions that will improve lives and build futures.

Elections matter. Fully participating in elections and exercising the right to vote matter even more. Nothing less than the American Dream will hang in the balance in 2012. **WI**