

Historical 'twin pillars' of US Black communities partner to boost vote

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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Linda Chapman of Waterbury, Connecticut, left, a member of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc., talks with US Rep. Jahana Hayes, D-Conn., at a Souls to the Polls voting rally at Grace Baptist Church, October 26 in Waterbury. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

Soon after Vice President Kamala Harris shifted from vice presidential candidate to presidential nominee, 44,000 of her supporters dialed into a call dubbed Win With Black Women that quickly became something of a sorority rally.

“Folks were shouting out their Greek letter organizations,” recalled Tamura Lomax, associate professor of religious studies at Michigan State University and a member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

The call also opened and ended with prayer.

Like no other previous campaign, the 2024 election season has illuminated the convening power of the more-than-a-century-old relationship between twin pillars of the Black community: Black churches and the “Divine Nine” fraternities and sororities that Black people in the US have turned to for solidarity on campuses and beyond them for generations.

Though just a nickname, the organizations dubbed the Divine Nine have multiple overlaps with the Black church. Nonetheless, said Candice Marie Benbow, a Black theologian and member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, to which Harris also belongs, “This is the first time that we’ve actually had a candidate for a major political party that is a product of both.”

Benbow added: “There’s a certain level of ownership and understanding of, like, we know her.”

Clergy across the country are capitalizing on the connection, whether they participate in Greek life or not. Bishop Edgar Vann II, senior pastor of the nondenominational Second Ebenezer Church in Detroit, doesn’t belong to a fraternity, but he enlisted Greek brothers and sisters to boost his efforts to ensure his congregants were prepared to vote.

“Each one of the fraternities or sororities had a Sunday, and for those nine Sundays, they registered people to vote, and a lot of them were young people,” he said. Divine Nine members registered dozens of voters, including many under 35.

Mike McBride, co-founder of Black Church PAC, which has sponsored [virtual events](#) called Win With the Black Church and First Ladies United for Kamala Harris, the latter attended mostly by wives of pastors leading Black churches, said at least a third of Black Church PAC’s founding board members belong to Black Greek organizations.

Harris, who is [a member of a Black Baptist church in San Francisco](#) and graduated from Howard University, a historically Black school in Washington, has appeared at the national gatherings of all four Divine Nine sororities in the past 18 months.

In July, in a speech to Alpha Kappa Alpha, she enlisted the organization’s political power. “In this moment, once again, our nation is counting on the leaders in this

room to guide us forward; to energize, organize and mobilize; to register folks to vote; and to get them to the polls in November,” Harris said. “Let us fight for freedom, opportunity and equality. Let us, as always, fight with optimism, with faith and hope.”

Cynthia Hale, senior pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia, heard Harris give that address and said she was motivated by the words of her famous soror, as sorority sisters call each other.

“As a pastor and activist and an AKA,” said Hale, using the acronym for the sorority, “everywhere I go to speak I share the message of how critical this election is because it will determine the future of our nation for years to come.”

Last month in Dallas, Frederick D. Haynes III, senior pastor of the city’s Friendship-West Baptist Church and an Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brother, helped lead a Souls to the Polls event at his megachurch, which has a voting center in a large lobby area where people could vote ahead of Election Day.

“In Texas and North Carolina, because of the partnerships between Black Greek letter organizations and the Black church, we’re doing all we can to make it easier to vote in states where they’re trying to suppress the vote,” he said on October 21, the first day of early voting in Texas, where a long line had formed at the voting location at his church by the 8 a.m. start time.

“That’s the other thing that a number of churches and a number of fraternities and sororities are pushing this time more than ever before, and that is that every person in our community has a voting plan and that we bank the vote as early as possible,” said Haynes.

Rhonda Briggins, president of Delta4 Women in Action, a lobbying organization created by the Delta Sigma Theta sorority in 2020, said Greek letter organizations and churchgoers collaborated to keep a new voting precinct open at Atlanta’s Flipper Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is close to Morehouse College, Spelman College, and the Interdenominational Theological Center—all historically Black institutions.

“The community fought to get a precinct there,” said Briggins, who attends a Baptist church in Atlanta, noting that a “Party at the Polls” event near the church on Sunday was supported by the Divine Nine organizations and other congregations. “We want

to make sure we have high voter turnout so that we can keep that precinct open and alive, and it becomes a community precinct after this election cycle.”

Briggins said her organization also is working with churches in “Stroll to the Polls” events in Texas, a play on the “Souls to the Polls” tradition that features the dance movements for which sororities are known.

The connections between Greek letter societies and Black faith are long-standing and deep. When people gather for a funeral of a Divine Nine member at a Black church, prior to the hymns and the eulogy, as Haynes put it, “there is a ceremony that helps to celebrate the life and usher the spirit into the afterlife.”

Though religious Divine Nine members voiced their personal support for Harris in interviews, they said that some sororities’ and fraternities’ members are among the increasing number of Black voters who, pollsters have found, plan to stay home or vote for former President Donald Trump.

Benbow, a consultant for Black Church PAC who led a “Millennials for Harris” webinar for the group, said she’s heard the hesitancy to back Harris while canvassing, especially among fellow millennials.

“In addition to the angst that people have around what’s happening in Palestine and the economy, we’re also having to just confront the really blatant in-your-face overt sexism and ‘misogynoir’ that is (about) a Black woman running for the highest office in the country,” she said, using a common portmanteau of “misogyny” and the French word for “black.”

Lomax, the Michigan State professor, said doubts about Harris, including among members of Black churches, sororities, and fraternities, have mostly to do with her gender.

“I would say the majority will likely be voting for Harris in the election because the majority of Black people vote Democratically,” Lomax said. “Even in that majority, maybe they always vote Democratically, and they’re like, ‘I’m just not voting for a woman.’”

US Sen. Raphael Warnock, the senior pastor at Martin Luther King Jr.’s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, urged Black women to encourage Black men to vote at a recent appearance with Harris at Divine Faith

Ministries in Jonesboro, Georgia.

“Brothers, show up. We need your voice. Real men vote,” he said, according to the *Washington Post*.

Hale said sorority sisters will be applying pressure in the coming days to the men in their lives.

“I’m a female pastor of this church who started this church and so the men know that I’m quite strong on what I believe and I challenge them on many occasions,” said Hale, who invited members of her AKA chapter to attend her church to pray for the election.

“We are definitely speaking to our husbands and boyfriends and sons and uncles and cousins and nephews to get them to the polls and I think it’s being effective.”  
—Religion News Service