Dr. Boone has aptly been called the “Dean of Atlanta City Politics” due to his significant contributions in researching, analyzing and providing informative commentary on the major political events that have taken place in Atlanta over the last 40 years. He has often been called upon by media outlets to give analyses of current issues. He has also been a respected consultant and advisor to a number of federal, state and local officials. Dr. Boone has served in numerous administrative capacities in the academy including as Assistant Provost, the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Chair of the Department of Political Science all at Clark Atlanta University. He is also a past president of the National Conference of Black Political Science.

Dr. Boone is well respected by his students and colleagues as source of prescient insight about developments in local and national politics. He is known for encouraging his students to consider different perspectives with a critical eye in order to discern the underlying reasons for how and why they differ. With the query, “Is that political science?” he constantly reminds his students of what it means to pursue serious and thoughtful scholarship; they must strive to insure that their inquiries are thoroughly conducted in accordance with the highest standards of political science as the systematic study of political behavior. Furthermore, he has always placed a special emphasis on the in-depth study of the political activities and concerns of African Americans. The interview with Dr. Boone was conducted in order to get his views on the outcome of recent 2018 midterm elections, the implications for further developments, and the current state of Black politics.
What are the three most significant outcomes of the 2018 midterm elections? What major policy initiatives might the divided 116th U.S. Congress be able to enact the next two years?

Those are very good questions because the outcomes are very interesting. At the national level there is the seeming repudiation, to some extent, of the results of the 2016 presidential election. And I make that statement based on the fact that Trump did not win, as most folks know, the popular vote. So, here we come back in 2018 for off-year elections, and what we get is the popular vote now really having some say in how governance goes. In the House of Representatives the Republicans lose control. What you have now is Democrats in control. At the Congressional level you really see the popular vote having some influence, some impact, to the extent that they were able to change the composition. One of the things coming out of the midterms is that the country is still very much divided as it relates to the politics of the country in terms of ideology, and the division rests on a good many things. It rests certainly on the values that some think are important in the country. Also, it rests on more tangible things from my point of view because these things generate public policy. Race, xenophobia and to some extent sexism – all of these things were present in the 2016 election, and they have continued to play themselves out in the last two years in terms of public policy.

We also see that for the Republicans, in terms of the midterm elections, they need to regroup. I think that one of the things that more conscious Republicans are looking at is that their base is very, very narrow. They placed their bet on helping Trump get in, and for the last two years, and using their control in the Congress, especially McConnell and the Republicans in the Senate, they were able to get through many appointments at the judiciary level. Certainly one thing that one can count on them to do is to change the American judiciary. Of course, it was not on Congress alone because there were groups outside who were backing them. They worked in the last years of the Obama administration to thwart efforts to get judicial appointments through
and this has now borne fruit for them. They bet on Trump and they won, Trump won. The American federal judiciary now to some extent has changed from a moderate liberal [outlook] to a more conservative outlook particularly on the American Supreme Court. But, more importantly the change has taken place at the circuit and district levels as well. Still the Republicans are now beginning to understand that their base is so narrow, they really cannot maintain this level of control and power in the country unless they broaden that base. The idea that the party is dominated by White males who are aged 50 – 60 if not older is a problem for them given that the country’s demographics generally are changing. The country has seen an increase in the non-white populations – more Brown, more Asians, Blacks have leveled off, but they are still there. There is also more vocal participation by American women.

The Democrats, on the other hand, come away with the idea that maybe if they begin to lean a little more to the left as opposed to being rigidly in the middle and moderate they may do better with certain constituent groups. The Bernie Sanders [message] may not be ringing hollow with working people. There are political constituencies out there that are ready to deal with aspects of Sanders platform. The question for the Democrats is how far to the left will they go, and how fast do they want to go.

For African Americans I think this past election showed that once again if indeed African Americans have some sort of commonality with some of their “enemies”… But, I think much more important for African Americans is that African American women are at the forefront in terms of electoral participation. But, if that continues that may be a problem down the road. It may be a problem in that although elections may become a bit closer, but if you don’t have a broader participation by African American males then it may not be enough. Now, the question for African American women is are they are going to try to leverage their participation inside the
Republican Party, or more likely inside the Democratic Party, or a more progressive group, how do they leverage that? Now, this shows itself at the state level in the state of Georgia – in Georgia’s off year election for governor. It was historic in many ways. One a major political party nominated an African America woman, Stacey Abrams. She continued a trend for this particular state that had begun in 2008 with Obama. Obama won about 43% of the state’s electorate, then Clinton moved to about 46 – 47%, and then Stacey Abrams comes even closer. So there’s a continuing trend. But, even more importantly the gubernatorial race was a marquee race. I think sometimes people forget that in the election of the State Superintendent of Education, [the Democratic candidate] pulled about 48% of the popular vote in the state – that’s significant. And then of course there was the key vote where Lucy McBath was able to carry the 6th Congressional District, a district that was gerrymandered in 1978 by the state legislature controlled by the Republicans to maintain Republican control. That district has been represented by people like Newt Gingrich, Bob Barr, Thom Price, ultra-right wing conservative fellows. Now, here you have McBath coming in and taking a significant win. She beat out Handel who was the last [Republican] representative. And when one looks at the voting returns we see that she got these votes in counties like Cobb, Gwinnett, DeKalb, and north Fulton County. See those counties are the counties that are demographically changing. The percentage in Cobb County has changed in the last seven years eight or nine percent – very significant.

In the book Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Postracist Era edited by the political scientist Fredrick C. Harris several different scholars argue that there are marketing practices, tax policies, insurance practices, and criminal justice polices that seem to be race-neutral, but that actually operate to reinforce historically based racial disparities despite laws against racial discrimination. What would you say are the major causes of persisting racial inequalities in the U.S.?
One of the things that people who consider themselves to be liberal or progressive on racial issues argue is that we need race-neutral or color-blind policies. There have been arguments by Harris and others, and I do join in those arguments, that there are no color-blind policies. It’s not possible if one continues to accept the overarching structure of the American public policy system. What I’m trying to get at there is that you are moving from an historical system that is based upon racial dispensations, and those racial dispensations have become engrained in the system itself, so much so that you get many scholars who write on the question of race [to] observe that folk do not realize that they can practice racism in an unconscious fashion (even when attempting to be race neutral). If we say look, we are going to proceed in a fashion where race is not a question at all you come and present your credentials or whatever, and we look at your credentials, and we disregard race, and we move. But, in the real world of the United States, certain populations, the White population in particular, will still have the advantage because what undergirds such policies is the assumption that we all have equal chances of succeeding and reaching a certain level of education, experience and skills acquisition. Yet, the policies that were in place have already discriminated against some.

Stepping outside of the governmental structure into a private structure – let’s take labor unions – where Blacks and people of color were denied the right to apprentice as brick masons or electricians. So when you come to a point where you say all is color blind, but then some people don’t have the skills to apply. So, if a company says we have openings for ten plumbers, and all you’ve got to do is have your license, and we welcome everybody, but you’ve got to have the credentials, you’ve got to have the apprenticeship to become licensed. The labor unions are now just beginning to recruit people of color. I would argue, in a more nuanced way, that the American constitution itself helps to undergird a great deal of this. When one looks at one of the
more recent Supreme Court decisions, Shelby County vs. Holder, the chief justice of the Supreme Court and four of his colleagues argued that the election of Barack Obama meant that the need for [the] Voting Rights Act was unnecessary. In other words the need for federal intervention in making certain that the voting process remained on an even scale was no longer necessary. As evidence to support their view the Court’s majority pointed to the electoral victories of Obama winning the presidency twice, and you have had Black elected officials. They used the U.S. Constitution to do that. Just as an aside, one of the justices who was on the losing side, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, in her decent made an interesting comment. She said something like, “If you’re standing in a rainstorm and you open an umbrella so now you’re dry, but you cannot then argue that the rain has stopped just because you are standing under the umbrella.” But, then you had others like Scalia before his death argued that we did not need affirmative action programs. Let me give you another example. When we talk about unemployment in this country, and we say that the unemployment rate of 5%. That is the percentage at which economists say we have full employment. That is the acceptable level of unemployment for the society. But, that translates for the African American community into 10% and for Latin American people into 10% or 11%. Even those metrics demonstrate the pervasiveness of race [disparities] in the country. The current president, Trump, has argued that Black unemployment is lower that it has ever been at any time in history at 6% but that’s double everybody else. And of course that claim is disingenuous because the rate was already going down in the previous administration. All of these things are misleading. They are designed to give the impression that indeed progress is being made, but actually the very foundations upon which we base these policies maintain the racial consciousness of public policy. Even African
Americans sometimes unwittingly go along with these arguments as well, the folks who advocate for Black folks can also go along with that.

The author Linda Burnham has argued that there are five fallacies maintained by the “post-racial, end-of-black-politics crowd.” They include: 1) the absence of overtly racist laws means the absence of racial injustices, 2) Black politics is essentially electoral politics, 3) the most legitimate Black leaders are elected representatives and those recognized by the larger society, 4) voting based on ethnic loyalties will soon become a thing of the past and 5) progress for successful Blacks in the middle class means progress for all Blacks. Do these fallacies give a fair description of how many if not most people in the Black political class (elected and appointed officials, media figures, scholars and activists) approach involvement by Blacks in the American political process today? Did Burnham overlook something?

Linda Burnham may have overlooked some things – I read that piece. But, I think that Burnham has her finger on the question here. As we have just discussed because racial discrimination is not overt, it does not mean that it is not still being practiced. One of the things I think needs a bit more exploration is the difference between Black politics and electoral politics. We tend to define politics in this country as simply voting or electoral politics, and certainly politics means much more than that. In the White community or the controlling community – wealthy Whites – their views are different. And there are a good many publications about where they want to go. Like the Koch brothers for instance – these folks have a plan and an agenda that certainly goes beyond electoral politics. It is their objective to change the way America looks and the values of Americans. As a matter of fact there are those within that group – with the same views as the Koch brothers and which stretches all the way back to the 1940s – their view is that democracy is a very dangerous form of government. What they have attempted to do in some of their exercises and activities is to sort of redefine democracy in appealing to various groups of people. If you go to the Koch brothers or one the right-leaning groups they will say to you, “Look, you want liberty don’t you? You don’t want the government meddling in your
affairs. So we don’t need the government doing this or the government doing that. If you are a person of modest or low income or no income you don’t need some outside support from some governmental entity because they will subvert your liberty.” This is the argument they are putting forward. As a matter of fact I was just reading a book by Nancy MacClean entitled *Democracy in Chains*… She talks about this, how you can redefine democracy and liberty. Take what has happened inside of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the change in regulations that would allow for the exploitation of federal lands without much check on activities by public officials. So, for African Americans our politics must encompass all of this. The Department of Housing and Urban Affairs at the moment is talking about [changing] those rules that have to do with outcomes, which means that we are not going to look at racial disparities in housing. This of course undercuts all of the civil rights initiatives.

Now the question of legitimate Black leaders is an interesting question. I can remember when some Blacks took just the opposite position. Their position was that Black leaders who were elected were the most legitimate because they were elected, mostly by Black folks, and that you had too many self-appointed leaders – folks who would get ten people following them and then label themselves a leader. But, those arguments surfaced at a time when there was push back against people like Jesse Jackson, and now Al Sharpton. But, I think that we do ourselves a disservice when we discount those folks automatically. There is a degree of legitimacy given to folks who offer themselves up within the Black community to represent the Black community. I also think there is legitimacy to a person of the stature of Martin Luther King, Jr. who never held elective office, but certainly people rallied around him, offered up their lives, to support him. But, this is not to argue that everybody who thinks he or she has a following falls into that category. Yet, I don’t not want to discount that kind of leadership. Electoral leadership has
come through an electoral process, but [it] may not truly represent Black people, and there are far too many examples of that which we can talk about.

What some scholars talk about in terms of politics is “tribal loyalties” or ethnic loyalties. Ethnic voting has gone on in this country since the very beginning. There’s no way to get around the fact that the Irish went with the Irish, the Poles went with the Polish, and even moving beyond ethnicities, the Catholics went with the Catholics. So the whole idea of Black folks wanting to rally around Black folks is nothing new. In this country you have had class based voting too. You get in the literature sometimes the idea that this is a classless society. That’s never been true at all. I think Linda is right. It’s not going away. The only thing about voting without [any] allegiance to some particular group or tribe, if you want to call it that, is that it would work for only a small group of folk. If you are a poor White person living in Appalachia or a poor Black person living in Alabama, you know you’ve got specific needs that draw upon public resources. But, if you live in Trump Tower then you don’t want people to use your resources to help those people with minimal resources. If the poor folk don’t vote as a tribal group on their issues then their issues will never reach the negotiating table. Those who argue that America is breaking up into tribes move from the assumption that America was tribe-less early on. It has never been a tribe-less society, even within the White tribe. And certainly Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans and so forth, they too have had their variations. I’m not quite sure that I agree with the argument that that’s a bad thing. It is certainly being put to the test now. Folks from different tribes have come together in the past to compromise to move certain kinds of issues. They have come together. I mean the Jewish tribe came together with the African America tribe, but now they are split, but they did come together
in certain instances. I do not think that this kind of tribalism will go away because you cannot push effective public policy without some element of collective support. You cannot do that.

I think that progress for the middle class has not always translated into progress for Blacks as a whole. You can document that statistically. Coming out the 1960s and later civil rights era where certain things were done in terms of legislation and public policies enacted and put into place, we still found that those policies tilted toward those of us who had certain skills already so that we could take advantage of those opportunities that came about. If you had a college education then some job program could help you. Something as mundane as being able to go into a restaurant would help you. But, it left behind a large block of Black folks, and that continues until today. Think of the city of Atlanta. For the last forty plus years Black leadership has held the mayoral post, and has for the most part been leading the city council and the school board. Yet, the poverty rate in the city has remained at double digits, as high as 24%. My point is that you have these laws in effect and you have Black leadership, and you have the public policy that you talked about, but you still have persistent poverty. You are talking about a quarter of your population in poverty – that is a serious problem. It’s not just Atlanta. You can replicate this in Dallas…New York and across the country in terms of who benefits from public policies. Even within a tribe you can see [differences in] who benefits from certain policies. It is interesting that the city of Atlanta prides itself on the amount of development that has occurred in the city over the last four decades. Undeniably there is a certain form of development, but at the same time that development has not aided underdevelopment here in the city proper, within the boundaries of the city of Atlanta. There are those who think in terms of metropolitan Atlanta, but we are talking about the city of Atlanta. The metropolitan median income may be at $50k or $60k but for the city of Atlanta it’s not there. If you have a public policy in a city that recognizes
the need for affordable housing, the question becomes how you define affordable housing. If your definition is that affordable housing is based upon the [metropolitan] area median income then you’re in trouble. Because in most of these areas they include income from those outside the central city which means the income of those in Cobb County, Gwinnett County are counted in the incomes to make up the median. If that’s your base at say $45K or $50K, yet inside the city where there is a need for affordable housing the people will not be able to afford affordable housing. It ties into the earlier discussion about public policies that seem to be color blind. But, in fact the actual operation of these the metrics used is rooted in the former policy.

The last midterms were in some ways quite historic for Black electoral politics. We now have 55 members of the Congressional Black Caucus – that’s a record – we have five committee chairs – we’ve got two of the top four leaders in the majority now. We also had the historic runs made by Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum. It seems that they counted on taking advantage of demographic shifts across the South, and driving up turnout due to the symbolic nature of their campaigns, which focused on telling their own personal life stories while offering vague statements about “a new day” and “it’s our time.” However neither chose to speak directly to or about African Americans as a specific group with distinct political interests. Is this just smart, shrewd politics? Is it no longer possible for candidates to be successful by making direct, specific and substantive appeals to African American voters? If candidates decline to explicitly address issues of racial disparities and injustices in their campaigns should we really expect them to do anything about these issues they once get into office?

You remember the run by [Douglass] Wilder in Virginia. We as political scientists coined the term, non-racial campaign. Wilder asked Jesse Jackson not to come to his campaign in Virginia…And Wilder would not raise any specific concerns about the African American plight in the state of Virginia. The Black population in the state at the time was less than a third. You raise a good point here, because it brings us back to the focus on Black elected leadership, and where that thing is going to go. Whether or not Abrams and Gillums ran smart campaigns in terms of being non-racial – it is quote “smart” politics. I think that Black candidates who seek these statewide offices with predominantly non-Black electorates, they need to demonstrate to
the general electorate that indeed we all have common issues that we can all relate to – issues that we can all zero in on. So what I want to do is zero in on the lack of health care. We all need health care, and the cost of health care is much too high, and folks go bankrupt on trying to deal with healthcare. We are not talking about affirmative action; we are not talking about giving somebody a job because they are of a certain hue or color. That’s the smart politics part of it. If you campaign in Georgia or Florida and you go into the most rural White-dominated areas, you cannot go down being Black, you have to go down being kind of homogenized as in we’re for everybody. If you go to south Georgia or further north in Georgia and you talk about if you are pregnant and you have an emergency and it takes you an hour and half or to get to a hospital. You stand in the middle of these White women and young people and you ask, “If you have an emergency and you need to get to a hospital, how long will it take you to get there? Is it 30 minutes, 45 minutes?” In this state they did not take Medicaid so that means that rural hospitals are closing up, they have no way of supporting themselves. So that means there is less availability of healthcare. You see you latch onto those kinds of issues and you pose it in that way. You go back to the idea of the personal stories. The personal stories are there so that you can see that I’m just like you. So, “I came from a Black family and you came from a White family. We had six children. My people were hard working people. My mother went to work, my father. We had six children and they had great expectations for their children like everybody else.” So that kind of resonates with a larger block of people. Your story is my story, my story is the American story, and your story is the American story. So that’s how we come together and connect…As a matter of fact, we have a White campaign manager. I’m serious, this is real politics. They’re trying to win. Now, the question becomes given all of that run up to the election and the election itself, does that really translate into Black issues being put in the forefront. Does
it also call for Black folks to simply say, “We understand, and we will not push the candidate to be out front because we know that the candidate cannot win if we push the Black thing.” This also speaks to the depth of racism in this country and the racialized nature of the country itself.

Now, it becomes problematic. It becomes problematic whether or not they can push [Black issues]. If you look at in terms of a case study of Georgia, if indeed Abrams had won she still would have faced a Republican dominated government. Every single other statewide office had gone Republican. She would have been the only [state-wide elected] Democrat in the state. Her party is not the dominant party in the state legislature. So, she would have had an uphill battle, and in trying to push for what are considered to be hard core Black issues, it would have been an impossibility. Now, if we are talking about a specific candidate like Abrams, she never did push for any hard core Black issues anyway. She had a good relationship with Nathan Deal. She stood behind him when they changed the rules around the Hope Scholarship, and made it more difficult for Black students and for poor students to get the scholarship. So, it gets back to the question of whether or not Black representation represents the Black condition.

This also gets back to what you have called the “inside-outside game” and what Ron Walters called “dependent leverage and independent leverage.” Yes, we want to elect Black representatives. And ok, they want to run non-racial campaigns so that they can maximize their appeal. But, we need the independent leverage – the activists, scholars, and other people – pushing them to keep them honest and to get what we need. You need both otherwise…

Good point. If Blacks folks sign on with Stacey Abrams, Andrew Gillum or Jealous in Maryland, if they sign on without any kind demands, covertly or whatever…they have to understand that Black folk will be on them to push for their issues and they should not resent that, but take that like any other interest group pushing their issues before the government for
some kind of results. But, that calls for a certain level of sophistication within the Black community itself. What we have [now] at the national level is, “Don’t embarrass me.”

**In what ways do the interests of Blacks differ significantly from those of progressive whites? How do they differ from those of Latinos?**

This comes down to the question of coalition building with progressive Whites and our Latino brothers and sisters. Whether or not there are issues which can be merged with African American issues. We reach a point with progressive whites…when the acts against people of color are so egregious, they you can’t deny its bad, then progressives will try to repair those [situations] and get something done with those. But, when we move beyond the more egregious acts, acts like somebody being hanged, shot, killed or raped – when you move to more subtle and more nuanced questions then I think you have a problem with even progressive Whites because they too are moving from a position that if you change the law then everything else will be okay – equal opportunity – that’s all we need. An example of that would be the 1960s split between progressive Whites and civil rights groups headed by Black folk. Whites began to split off when Blacks began to say we want affirmative action to give Black folk a little more of a head start. White Jewish progressive began to split off, and some of them became neoconservatives or whatever. They began to split off from the Black groups because now we have come to the fork in the road where we have to decide what it is we are going to do substantively for the group. White progressives also have a tendency to be more closely aligned with socialism or communism and the socialist internationalist movement. But, that is not necessarily a movement attuned to the needs of African Americans. In a more generalized fashion, they tend to lump us all altogether, and say that the needs of poor Whites and other dispossessed people are [all] the same. I think these are well meaning people who have no animus against Black folks per say,
but when it comes to real issues and changes…When you talk about American White progressives they do have a belief in race-neutral policies. Let’s say the qualifications for become a police person you have to be 5’10”, a certain level of education and so forth then these are objective qualifications that anybody can meet. But, they are not looking at the history of some of the qualifications as they were written. If someone is just driving while Black its egregious if the police officer approaches the person and shoots the person…But, if the police officer simply stops you as a young Black person, and for no other [apparent] reason, then all they will argue is that well they stop everybody. These are the kind of subtle things that translate into public policy. Stop-and-Frisk was obvious because they zeroed in on Black and Latino boys, but other public policies are less so.

For Latinos, it’s interesting because some would believe there should be a natural relationship between people of color. But, among Latinos or Hispanics there are a lot of differences, they are not monolithic. You have those who are more associated with their European heritage than with their African heritage. So there is a split there and it’s not as monolithic or homogenized as you might think in terms of their beliefs and their views on questions. But, I also should point out to you that in my experiences I have been with African American groups that have wanted to keep Latinos out. The argument is and was that Black folk have blazed the trail and lost life, limb and property, and now these interlopers have come in trying to trade on what Black folk have done and jump ahead of Black folk. So there is that element of animosity among some between Black groups and Latinos. It’s not across the board of course, but you do see some of that cropping up now and then in some groups when we want to attempt coalition building.
It goes back to the idea of what do you bring to the coalition? What I bring to the coalition is so unique it cannot be replaced. If you come to the coalition begging, and have nothing to offer then you become dependent and you do lose out. But, effective coalition building…Carmichael and Hamilton talked about this, is that you bring to the coalition resources – it doesn’t have to be money, it could be people, it could be access, you bring something that the coalition lacks without your input, so that your issues become important. You don’t come to the coalition begging. It think sometimes that gets lost in coalition building. Remember also that coalitions are not forever, you want to use them to reach specific objectives.

Currently, there are a number of grassroots organizations that promote some version of a “Black agenda” to advance the collective interests of African Americans but none of them have won broad support. What factors have prevented the coalescence of the Black electorate around a Black political agenda?

That speaks to a lot of things. It speaks to a diversity within Black thought in terms of where we want to go. That diversity hits on the class dimension within the Black community that we have to grapple with. We also have to grapple with the question of “How much allegiances do we as Black folk the American dream or the American idea?” How do various groups within this country attach themselves to the [idea of America]. Is there within the African American group a portion of us who have no faith in what is labeled the American dream, and another portion who have a great deal of faith in that idea, and who build their agendas and their actions around that American dream. Those who stand outside of that dream feel that the dream is antithetical to us as a people. Those are the kind of things I am trying to think through. Now, that comes back to your question about the Black agenda. Who will represent folks in terms of creating this agenda? If we look at Black elected officials, do they create the agenda for Black folk, or do Black folk send them in with an agenda? That becomes a
question for me because….if Corey Booker goes into the U.S. Senate, whose agenda is Corey Booker looking at? Is it the folk who he had a relationship with when he was mayor, big corporate interests who helped him out? Is his agenda tied to their agenda or to those who live in Newark who are still suffering and who need a different agenda? So, building the Black agenda becomes very problematic. There are groups that have attempted to define the agenda – the Nation of Islam, they have an agenda, the Black Panthers, they have an agenda, even Tavis Smiley had agenda with the series he did some years ago. Everybody has an agenda, but they don’t seem to be talking to each other…I just talked about the allegiance to the American dream. It’s something that’s pure theory right now, but it’s something that I think is worth trying to think through…Does your agenda move toward the American dream paradigm or does it move toward a radical difference from that particular American dream? Those are crucial points. Number one, define the American dream, and then discover what those groups think which stand outside of the [pursuit] of the American dream. Let me give you kind of a crude example. There was a proposal at one time that Black folks should take over the inner cities because that’s where the Black population is, and then move out all of the Latinos, all of the Asians and other folk who have come into the community and then this would be our thing. Then we would build something Black Panther style. That’s the kind of thing you have to grapple with. Although many agendas have been articulated, trying to implement them becomes a problem. Let’s say that I am a Ben Carson, then I’m well inside the American dream, and for me where I take my stand, that whole business about slavery is already taken care of, it doesn’t matter, and it’s not of any consequence. Let’s start from where we are right now; if you are inside the American dream and you are either Shelby Steele or Ben Carson, you are okay with a passing wave at the country’s past history. But, if I’m somebody different my position is that all of that history
bears on what happens today…for somebody more radical you will see it in a different way. My grandmother used to say, “You may be through with the past, but it’s never through with you.” She used to say that all the time…. I think that you can certainly have what can be labeled a Black agenda, but the problem becomes is it only going to be manifested with certain Black elected officials or certain self-appointed Black leaders?

**What are the key factors that make for effective political leadership?**

What makes effective leadership is listening to the constituency and gaining legitimacy from that constituency. There are various avenues to gaining legitimacy. Martin Luther King, Jr. gained legitimacy without benefit of an electoral vote but rather through approval of the masses. Corey Booker or other elected officials gain their legitimacy through the ballot box. Obtaining legitimacy is paramount in order for one to truly be effective. You talk more about what it is that [the people] want than what it is you want for them. You may want to inform what they are trying to push. But, at the end of the day it’s about what the constituency thinks is in its best interest. Effective leadership also calls for constant communication with the constituency. That is that you do not listen to only to those around you, you have communication lines open to that constituency in whatever form it takes. If you are representing somebody eighty years old you are not necessarily going to use the internet. I mean you have open, constant contact going on. Also, effective leadership needs to know the limits of what their group can do alone. There are also times when a leader must know that they need [resources] from outside of the group – that goes back to coalition building. How you understand what coalitions are about, and how you deal with them, that to speaks to effective leadership. Can only Black folk represent Black folk? Does that mean that only women represent women? Is it possible for an African American
groups to consider a non-Black person to be their leader? That’s another question. Something that the group itself must think about is resource generation. How are you going to get resources? You do need resources of all kinds in order for Black leadership to be effective. We can question how Al Sharpton’s group gets there money, or the group that Jesse Jackson had. But resources are needed and these are real questions.

**You already spoke on this, but is there anything more you would like to say about city politics. What would be the most impactful policy initiative to improve the conditions of poor and working people in the city of Atlanta at this time?**

I that it’s not just for Atlanta but across the country, especially where Black leadership has taken over. But, certainly Atlanta stands out because of its attempt to be prominent. In order for policies to be beneficial for a significant majority of Blacks inside of the city of Atlanta, you have to reorganize the priorities of the city. I argue, and I’m not the only one to argue this, that the priorities of Atlanta have been controlled by the White business leadership, and those priorities for the most part have worked to the disadvantage of the Black population. Because those priorities are priorities that tend to perpetuate what has gone on before. Examples would be the sports arena, the construction of multi-million dollar condos; those are things that the White business leadership has pushed to make the city a national and international city. But, it does not do anything for the bulk of the folk who are stuck in persistent poverty in the city. What you’ve gotten in the administration of this city in the last four and a half decades has been a continuation of the priorities of a rather small elite group. We talk about the Black leadership turn over. But, there is a case to be made for the White leadership [turn over] as well. It has changed in terms of who they are, but the priorities have remained the same. In terms of trying to placate Black folk and Black leadership they have tried to bring Blacks into the fold at some
level – at the chamber of commerce, membership on this particular bank board – but it has not changed the priorities. If you’re going to build a $1.5 billion football stadium in Vine City, in a community where the income level is below the poverty level – you can’t do that. Now you’re finally going to clean the sewers out so the waters don’t backup and overflow as they have been doing for many decades. You can have that same kind of entrepreneurial mentality about extending resources in that community. As opposed to the city saying we are underwriting Mercedes Benz stadium. There are hidden benefits [taken] from the city that you don’t see beyond the bonds and other things. Spreading those kinds of resources and thinking in an entrepreneurial way in terms of housing and job development in the impacted areas. So that the priority shifts somewhat, but we are not getting that kind of thinking. The most recent act with the new development of the so-called “Gulch” area where now you’re going to bring in five hundred developers, and you’re going to use a tax reallocation district, and the taxes are going to be lost to the city, the board of education and the school system. So those funds cannot be used to educate the children, the city cannot use the funds to go out and do better in the areas that are impacted. You’ve got to expand the priorities. You cannot make it so one group gets 99.9% [of what they want] while the other group is only going to get a tenth of a percent. To me that is the problem of the city of Atlanta – the priorities have not been changed over the last four and a half decades that you have had Blacks in power. [Nothing much happened] over by the Braves stadium. If there are changes in the most recent iteration near the Mercedes Benz stadium it’s only because gentrification has taken place, and the city is moving out all of the former residents, and they are building rental units that the former people cannot afford. But, it’s all in connection with the priorities of that small group of people. This area is now going to be a different area altogether and we’re going to push people further and further down the street.
Given your vast experience, knowledge and wisdom is there anything else you would like to say about the current state of Black politics? What are some things that you would say to the up-and-coming generation of Black political scientists, students and researchers to help them provide more positive and substantive outcomes for African Americans in the political process?

Mack Jones has a piece on “The Responsibility of Black Political Scientists.” I certainly recommend that everyone read that piece; it’s a good piece to read. You should also look at a piece by Alex Willingham and Mack Jones “The White Custodians of the Black Experience.” Also, of course, Harold Cruse’ piece on the *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. We all have responsibilities as Black political scientists to be unapologetic when looking at the Black experience in this country, and to look at how the American experience affects Black people. Also, those of us who look [more broadly] at the Diaspora and Black folk around the world – we have that responsibility. Because there is no one else who is going to take up that responsibility….to think outside of established theory in regards to what is out there, and what needs to be done, as opposed to assuming that all theory has been written. It should be sound theory, and sound propositions you are putting forth. But it should not hamper you when paradigms do not exist for what it is you are trying to do. I also think that those of us who have the training and education, we should put that training and education into activism. Don’t sour on activism. Also, [we must] begin to interact outside of your comfort zone. That makes it incumbent upon us as Black political scientists to know what we are talking about so well that folk understand what we are talking about. By that I mean be able to explain something as mundane as the Electoral College and how that may be to our advantage or to our disadvantage. Know what you’re talking about and be able to use that to help the folk in our community. Also,
I can’t say this enough – you’ve got to read, you’ve got to study. You cannot [assume] that everything that flows from your mouth is gospel…you’ve got to read.