

# MAXINE WATERS' FIGHT FOR US

*Last summer she took on the White House and the Tea Party. Now, in an ESSENCE exclusive, the fearless California congresswoman tells us why she supports President Obama, what's at stake for Black women in 2012 and what keeps her going at 73*

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Rep. Maxine Waters has never found it difficult to speak up for Black folk, poor folk, womenfolk, the undercounted, unheard and often unseen. Last year the California Democratic congresswoman faced criticism after breaking the “Black People’s Code of Silence” and challenging President Barack Obama’s administration. What did she want? To address what she called the “unconscionable” unemployment rate among Black Americans. With Black unemployment almost double the national average, we are disproportionately impoverished and hurting from the foreclosure fiasco. Feeling our pain, while on a national Jobs Initiative Tour, she echoed a frustrated Detroit town hall gathering and said, “We’re getting tired y’all.” Waters also made headlines after telling a packed audience in Inglewood, California, that, as far as she was concerned, “the Tea Party can go straight to hell.” Right-leaning bloggers went off, but Waters’ comments galvanized many Black folks and ignited lively debates in our beauty parlors and barbershops across the country. As Election 2012 approaches and President Obama looks to capture even more than the 95 percent of Black voters who sent him into office in 2008, Waters talked with ESSENCE about why we must be engaged in the process and why she supports the President and also stands by her words.

**ESSENCE: What’s at stake for Black women and their families in 2012?**

**MAXINE WATERS:** There is so much at stake. We are in a nonperforming economy right now. [In the Congressional Black Caucus’ jobs initiative], which brought more than 30,000 job seekers face-to-face with hundreds of employers, of course there were men but the women—single parents—were desperate for jobs. [We met] Black women who don’t have a lot of resources, don’t have much in the way of assets, and poor women who are increasingly homeless. Now, having said that, not all Black women are poor. And not all are as desperate. But the competition is keen. And Black women graduating from college are having a harder time competing for top-level professional jobs. We had a period of time when it appeared that Black men and Black women were competing. Now we’re back to Black women competing more with White men for professional jobs.

**ESSENCE: “The Tea Party can go straight to hell”—tell us about the context for this and why ESSENCE readers should be concerned about the Tea Party.**

**WATERS:** First of all, let’s talk about the setting we were in: This was put together by SEIU [Service Employees International Union]. People got up and talked about their situation, how bad it was: They lost their house, they didn’t have a job. And [they said] what was the Congress of the United States doing about it? And the Tea Party came up somehow. You have a whole set of Democrats who are fighting for jobs and fighting for government assistance and fighting for health care and fighting for more money for education. So [if] you are angry about what Congress is not doing, it’s because the right wing ▷

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Republicans are in charge and they're driven by the Tea Party. The Tea Party has rallied on the Hill, they've been very confrontational, and there was even a story that they spat on a Black member of Congress. What people need to know is that we're not afraid to *fight* for them, even in the face of [groups] like the Tea Party; your voice is not going to be silenced by the Tea Party or anybody else, and as far as I'm concerned, they can go straight to hell. That's the context.

**ESSENCE: Let's talk about the President. To borrow a word that you used recently, it was a "curious" summer for you. Stemming from your comments on the jobs tour, where do you stand on President Obama, especially after his remarks at a CBC Foundation event where he challenged the audience to "stop complaining?"**

**WATERS:** I [will] preface [this] by saying, I support the President. I have supported the President on all his legislative issues: Health care reform, big-time. Pell grants. Small-business tax credits and investment. I was a founder of the Out-of-Iraq Caucus. One of my legislative initiatives [is in the President's] jobs bill. Even in Detroit, I said, "You love the President; we love the President." So there is no question about my support for the President. My style of work is to be an advocate for poor people. People of color. Women. And it is consistent with my career. In doing that, I will point out weaknesses in the system. I am hopeful that my work is not seen as nonsupport for the President, because I am certainly supportive. I know that the folks on the Republican side certainly are not going to serve us better than this President could do.

**ESSENCE: How do you address those who say, "Now is not the time to criticize the President?"**

**WATERS:** Think about it from my perspective. We talked [back then] about unemployment at 16.7 percent, this sense of desperation. When is the time to talk about that?

**ESSENCE: So you said you support the President. Why does the President deserve Black voters' support?**

**WATERS:** Well, first of all, Black people are very proud of having a Black President at this time in the history of this country. I'm a progressive and I support progressives. If he was a conservative Black president, I wouldn't support him. Just like I wouldn't support [Herman] Cain. He is not aligned with me philosophically. And so I support the President for

## MAXINE'S MOJO

Rep. Waters pulls no punches and takes no prisoners

Calling out the White House on high Black unemployment and challenging the Tea Party is nothing new for Waters.

The sharp-tongued and sharply dressed Democratic congresswoman, who is entering her twenty-second year representing a diverse, California district, made her mark and has taken some hits for standing up and speaking out for her community. This is something President Bush learned in 1992, after he convened a meeting of congressional leaders and his Cabinet members to the White House to discuss urban problems following the Los Angeles rebellion in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. Waters, a freshman congresswoman who had represented the South Central area of Los Angeles as an assemblywoman since 1976, made her way to President Bush's door, uninvited, and took a seat—one of the rare occasions she hasn't been on her feet for her constituents.

both reasons: proud that he is the first African-American to achieve the presidency of the United States, and because he leans more toward the progressive end.

**ESSENCE: Why do Black women's votes matter?**

**WATERS:** We vote in larger numbers than Black men. Black women feel a strong obligation to exercise that vote because they have seen the pervasive destruction and marginalization of Black men who have been in the forefront of civil rights and other efforts to empower our community. And Black women are disproportionately heads of households. They believe that public policy matters. [They] are still in larger numbers at the PTA meetings and advisory committees. They're the ones forcing our men to get health care and get checkups. Black women are so involved in our society and how it operates and what's good for it, and for us.

**ESSENCE: Getting back to jobs, the CBC covered a lot of ground and heard from a lot of people on your tour. What did you take away from that experience?**

**WATERS:** The ways we apply for a job in today's world have drastically changed. This idea that you're going to go to a human resources office and make an application and perhaps get an interview is over. You can't go in and say, "Oh, I want to work for IBM and I'm going to call them and they're going to tell me where to put my application in"—no, no, no. You have to get on the Internet. Every day you have to be on the Internet, putting in applications and following up. And networking is extremely important.

**ESSENCE: Are you saying that the people you crossed paths with weren't aware of this?**

**WATERS:** Unfortunately, too many minorities are in the position of not knowing how to look for a job. Basically they need to be trained to look for jobs. There's been this description of the jobless oftentimes as people who really don't want to work. That's not true.

**ESSENCE: How are you using that information?**

**WATERS:** The Congressional Black Caucus has bills that could be helpful with job creation. Now when you have legislators on the opposite side of the aisle, the Tea Party folks and so on who say, cut, cut, cut, cap, cap, cap, reduce government significantly, get

rid of departments, get rid of jobs, we have to really understand that the public sector and the government at one point in the history of this country were our employers of last resort. They talk about getting rid of regulations. When we look at food safety and the scares that we have had recently—E. coli bacteria in spinach, in cantaloupes—[when] we get rid of those regulations, not only do we put our society at risk but we lose a lot of jobs along with that.

**ESSENCE:** Did some of this legislation come from the jobs tour?

**WATERS:** No, that came before the jobs tour. What we're doing following the jobs tour is more of how to teach our people to get on the Internet. The Office of Minority and Women Inclusion, the Neighborhood Stabilization Program are examples of legislation that is job-creating. Now we have a big jobs proposal that has been presented by the President that takes on several different aspects of job creation. For one, repair of the infrastructure. We're all supportive of that—in fact [it includes] legislation that some of the caucus members had already introduced, but it is a big issue because our roads and our bridges and our water systems are in great need of repair. Also money for building, repairing and redeveloping schools—job intensive—all very important. [There's also] small-business tax credits that will help small businesses to not only get the inventory they need but to get up to speed on their computer capability.

*“We must never forget there is still racism in the system.”*  
—MAXINE WATERS

**ESSENCE:** You referred to the unemployment rate in some of the Black communities that you toured and others, of course, as “unconscionable.” You talk about jobs legislation. What would you say is the first step that needs to be taken in some of these areas? What’s the solution right now?

**WATERS:** We must never forget that with all the success we have had there is still exclusion and racism in the system. And we must always be prepared to legislate in ways that will help to get rid of that kind of exclusion. I'm convinced that age discrimination is at play and it seems to be hitting Black women very hard.

**ESSENCE:** Jobs and mortgages go hand in hand. Talk about what needs to be done to address the mortgage crisis.

**WATERS:** This subprime meltdown has been very hard on our community. I'm very much involved [with this] on the House Financial Services Committee. We went through red-lining [and] we fought that very hard. Then we reached a point in time when financial institutions discovered there was a way to get a lot of money out of these communities. And they came up with all these exotic products. No documentation loans, little or no down payments, ARMs, and we were so happy that we could afford this home. And we got into loans that we could not afford—that were fraudulent in many cases. I wish our churches would do more in having the kind of support that would say, “In our church we've got lawyers, we've got accountants, we've got realtors. So bring your document to church. We're going to set up a time when somebody can walk you

## OUR CRITICAL ISSUES IN 2012

Black women had the highest rate of voter turnout of any group in 2008. Now here are key issues that will affect our communities and our votes this year:

### 1. JOBS

Last year the unemployment rate for Black women hit 13.8 percent. For Black men it peaked at 19.1 percent. Last October the Senate killed Obama's American Jobs Act. This year the President is breaking out key aspects of the bill, pushing for incremental votes that may help you.

### 2. HEALTH CARE

By March the Supreme Court will hear a dispute arguing the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act. Make sure your lawmakers know where you stand on this issue. Call the Congressional switchboard at 202-224-3121

### 3. THE MORTGAGE CRISIS

If you were among the 4 million home owners who were foreclosed on improperly in 2009 and 2010, call 888-952-9105 to have your case reviewed.

### 4. EDUCATION

The President announced new rules for low-performing Head Start centers to compete for federal education funds. Visit [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) for more information.

### 5. VOTER SUPPRESSION

Onerous voter registration measures pending in about 30 states could keep some of us from the polls. Contact your board of elections now to find out what's up in your state.

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through this document.” Almost a second opinion. We need more education rather than allow ourselves to get ripped off by unscrupulous loan initiators.

**ESSENCE:** After 21 years in Congress what keeps you going at 73?

**WATERS:** I'm obviously in good health and have a lot of energy. And that's almost a prerequisite for this kind of work I do. I am motivated by the sense of creating fairness. I see a lot of unfairness, I see a lot of people who don't have hope and a lot of people who get advantages they don't deserve. And so I fight for equal opportunity, for fair treatment and for justice. There's obviously a need for that; it has been all my lifetime; it will probably be after I'm long gone.

**ESSENCE:** Who or what is your source of strength?

**WATERS:** I have a mother [Velma Moore Carr] who is 95 years old, who is not only a very strong woman, but an uneducated yet very wise woman. And so having seen my mother, nothing is too difficult for me. Nothing is too lowly. And I have a great family. My children and grandchildren. And I have my husband, Sidney Williams, who is just a real solid human being who's very anchored—and who believes that I can do no wrong [laughs]. □

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