

**Talks at GS**  
**Melanie Campbell,**  
**President and CEO,**  
**National Coalition on Black Civic Participation**  
**Convener, Black Women's Roundtable**  
**Joyce Brayboy, Moderator**  
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**Joyce Brayboy:** My name is Joyce Brayboy [sp?].  
Welcome to Talks at GS. I'm a managing director in the office of government affairs here at Goldman Sachs. Today, in partnership with Goldman Sachs One Million Black Women initiative, I'm so excited to be joined by Melanie Campbell, president and CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation and convener of the Black Women's Roundtable.

The National Coalition is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to increasing civic engagement in Black communities. Melanie, welcome. We are so glad you are here.

**Melanie Campbell:** Honored to be here, Joyce.

**Joyce Brayboy:** I've known Melanie for over 20 years, and I have to say, in preparation for this session, I learned

so much about you that I did not know and just am fascinated by your story. So I really want everyone to have a chance to get to know you, so please tell us a little bit about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you grow up? And one of the things that I think the audience would find so interesting is what are the earliest moments in your childhood, especially as it relates to activism and political engagement? Like, were your parents or other family members political activists growing up? Let's start there.

**Melanie Campbell:** Well, I come from this wonderful big town that anybody's heard of. Mims, Florida. Heard of it? You heard of it?

**Joyce Brayboy:** I have not.

**Melanie Campbell:** Mims, Florida, is in central Florida.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Okay.

**Melanie Campbell:** And it has a civil rights history. Harry and Harriet T. Moore, for folks just to search that on whatever engine you search, and you'll find out about Mims, Florida, because in the '50s, their house was bombed. Harry Moore was the president of the state NAACP and was killed for registering people to vote. And him and his wife, the house was bombed and they both died from that bombing.

So my hometown has that history, unfortunately. But also growing up in that space, you definitely were exposed to people coming through my hometown. My father was an

activist, very active. My mother, both of them were teachers at different points of their career but very active in the community.

**Joyce Brayboy:** But from there, you went on and started your professional career in Atlanta. And you were really, you know, you worked for, I was about to call him congressman, but the legendary Mayor Maynard Jackson. And you were just exposed to so many prominent leaders. Coretta Scott King, Ambassador Andrew Young, Julian Bond, and others. And so how did that exposure lead to your work in political engagement, voter participation, and the whole civil rights current engagement?

**Melanie Campbell:** First of all, Clark College, now Clark Atlanta University, is known for social justice. The Atlanta University Center, which is a consortium of historically Black colleges and universities, really when you think about the movement of the '60s, the sit-ins in North Carolina of course but also Atlanta. And so it was just part of the fabric. It was part of, like, street life, if you will. Everywhere you looked, you would be exposed to different folks who were part of the civil rights movement especially.

But also politically. Just like you mentioned Maynard Jackson. So my freshman year, I was recruited by Tommy Dorch. And Julian Bond was the local president of the NAACP at the time. And they recruited students to get involved. So it was just one of my community service works, you know, the things that I got involved with doing voter registration with the NAACP and others. I actually went to school for business. I wanted to make money. Let's be clear, all right? Still want to make money.

But, you know, I was involved with that on my after hours, if you will. It became part of my social life. And I actually did a time in corporate America, but what was driving my purpose was really trying to figure out how to help my community, how to help through social activism. And so that shifted my career. I stayed in corporate America for about seven years and then hit my head: Don't do this. And quit my job.

But I had something else driving me, that I wanted to do more. Never thought I'd be in Washington, D.C. Wasn't on my radar at the time, but I got very active in the community. And then I ended up getting hired by Maynard Jackson, who is the mayor of Atlanta, one of the first

African American mayors of Atlanta. But I also stayed active because Mrs. King was still living. Coretta Scott King was living. Joseph and Mrs. Evelyn Lowery, and SCLC. And then the NAACP. So all these civil rights organizations, it was just part of the street life.

Congressman Lewis, at that time, he was on the city council. So we were active. Alberta King was a student. She was at Spellman. So we were all a part of this network of young people who had careers of all kinds, but we all had this central place of where we got together to really fight for the movement work.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Well, I think as I --

**Melanie Campbell:** Like going to happy hour. When it was happy hour, we'd go to a protest.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Exactly. It gives me goosebumps to hear you talk about it because what's interesting now, I have to admit, that now you and I are at a point where we look back and so many of the young colleagues here at Goldman Sachs are so fascinated by it. But then it also makes me realize like, wow, we really did have the opportunity to get to know and sort of sit at the feet of

these amazing leaders, many of whom, unfortunately, we've lost.

But talk to me a little bit about Dr. Dorothy Height. I think that that's somebody who I always thought was such an icon, and she lived a long time. But I know that's one of your mentors, and I just think that she's a name that we haven't heard as much recently as we should. But she was one of the first and only Black women who would sit in the Oval Office and lead and give advice and guidance to presidents. And so why don't we talk a little bit? I'd love to hear some of how you got to know her. And I know, as I said, she had a real impact on your life.

**Melanie Campbell:** I moved to Washington, D.C. Thought it would be a short stint, and I've been there 26 years. But I moved there to actually work for the organization that I work for now as a deputy. And one of the founding board members is Dr. Height. And so I was able to meet her early in my career at the Coalition. And a lot of the sisters and brothers who really were supportive, but especially the women and Dr. Height mentored. She mentored so many people that we could call names.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Sure.

**Melanie Campbell:** So I was blessed to get to know her. And so I guess I would quickly say, over the course of this time, it was really when President Obama ran for office. Around that time, I was getting a little antsy. Like, I think it's time for a change. Maybe I'll go back to Atlanta where I had some political roots. And really started feeling I want to do more in the civil rights space.

You mentioned Dr. Height, they talk about the Big Six. It was really the Big Seven. And she was one of them. She didn't get the kind of acknowledgment that I still feel she should have gotten, but mentored me. I said I want to do more to really help Black women and have women in this space. And it was still pretty much male dominated.

And so before she passed away, she really mentored me and others. And so then we started really trying to figure out, I have these two hats that I wear. I'm the president of a coalition, but I also convene the Black Women's Roundtable, as you mentioned at the beginning. And that is where I was able to really focus on how we focus on Black women. And she helped me figure that out.



We don't just turn out, we get our families to turn out. We get our significant others to turn out as part of our DNA. So she helped me figure that out and navigate, okay, you have this passion. You want to shift and help me in that way. Many other sisters, too.

**Joyce Brayboy:** I'd also like to have you talk a little bit more about the actual core mission of the National Coalition. And has that changed over the years before you became the CEO?

**Melanie Campbell:** It was started by three organizations -- the NAACP, the Joint Centers for Political Economic Studies, and the AFL/CIO. And really had about 35 organizations that anchored it. And it was started because, after the Voting Rights Act of '65 was passed, about 11 years later, a lot of leaders came together because you still had low participation rates. So it felt like, if they had a coalition, they could work more collectively to get born the national coalition.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Nice.

**Melanie Campbell:** And part of that was also over time developing kinds of coalition-based initiatives that could focus on different parts of the organization. So with the coalition, we focused on voting, civil rights, other kinds of social justice issues, but we created something called the Black Women's Roundtable. There was a new equal rights amendment movement taking place that I'm involved with now, but it was a way for Black women to have a table. Because in the broader women's movement, it wasn't as welcoming as one would think back in those times. And so the Coalition created this thing called the Black Women's Roundtable. And it's where we focus on empowerment of Black women and girls from a civic engagement, yes, but from a policy perspective and an empowerment perspective. So we have four platforms that we focus the work. Health and wellness. Economic security and prosperity. Education. And global empowerment.

So we have our entrepreneurship project. I'm ready, I'm here fighting on this side. But also we're empowering and providing solutions for upward mobility for Black women and our families.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Well, that's such a perfect segue,

because as you know, one of the ways that we have brought you into the GS family is because you agreed earlier this year to join the advisory council for our One Million Black Women initiative. And I think it's something that is very near and dear to my heart. You've been involved in a number of the listening sessions. And just tell us kind of what your thoughts were going into it, what the feedback has been, and what else can we be doing to have a real impact and drive the greatest impact?

**Melanie Campbell:** So I was excited. I was honored, for student of all, to be asked. And I just wanted to make sure it was something that, if I'm going to be involved, that I can really make a difference in it. Because like all of us, I'm not looking for any extra work.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Projects, yes.

**Melanie Campbell:** Right? But if this can move the ball. Because one of the things that drives the work that we do with the Black Women's Roundtable really has to do with cozying some of the disparities. Our whole idea, when we created some of these initiatives and work, was really to look at not the disparities but how can we move

the ball? Think long term that could maybe move the ball. So that was the real difference for me being interested and again honored to be seen as somebody who could help make a difference as you all move this really could be transformational change.

Not that it's going to solve all the problems, but it can be a guiding light for others, I hope, that could see how they can move the ball.

**Joyce Brayboy:** And don't you think this type of initiative is so important, not just to Black women but to our communities, to society, to our country?

**Melanie Campbell:** I'm not saying that was the only reason, but it's a good business decision. Because who makes the decisions when it comes to it? Most Black women are the majority heads of households. They make the decisions. And so I think the other thing that interested me was the research that was done to even look at how -- I'm blanking.

**Joyce Brayboy:** The Black Womenomics Report.

**Melanie Campbell:** Thank you. Black Womenomics Report. I think that was really important to be able to see. But the average Black woman retires, goes through -- so the wealth gap, not income, even though that's important, the wealth gap is really something that holds our communities back, not being able to build generational wealth and how important that is. And so that's the other reason for my interest in this initiative.

**Joyce Brayboy:** And through this partnership that we have with your organization, you've participated in a number of the listening sessions. And are there two or three or a few takeaways that resonate that are consistent that you've heard in each session and that aligns with the agenda and the work that you're doing, particularly through the roundtable?

**Melanie Campbell:** I think the top two or three deal with economic issues, whether it be someone has opportunities to grow a business, start a business, which is definitely aligned. And you deal with other economic challenges, affordable housing. One of the hardest issues that we're going to have to face and it's still not talked about enough I think as a crisis is affordable housing. So

if you can't find anyplace to stay and live, if two thirds of your paycheck is going to where you sleep at night, you don't have the opportunity to build wealth. So the reality is affordable housing is a real issue for our nation, not just Black folks, but our nation. And it definitely impacts the ability to build wealth.

Health disparities. Infant mortality. Maternal mortality. All of these kinds of things that I know that are, as I'm getting involved in being a part of the advisory group, knowing these are some of the things that you all are working at. And hoping that we can make some great things happen over the time.

**Joyce Brayboy:** What I would like to just share, one thing that I was so struck by something you wrote in your recent roundtable report on the status of Black women. You said, whenever there's a crossroads in history, Black women will always come to the front lines and answer the call. Where is that front line today? And from everything you witness, why do Black women always answer that call?

**Melanie Campbell:** Ooh. So that's a lot to go with that.

**Joyce Brayboy:** That's a lot.

**Melanie Campbell:** That's a lot. When you think just from a historical perspective, even when it came to the right to vote, as an example, Black women were there helping to give women the right to vote even when Black people didn't have that right to vote themselves. And when you the about yesterday was Veteran's Day. I was watching this documentary that's coming out that talked about women but also the role of Black women in that who came on the front lines when folks went to war long before you and I were probably even here. They had Dr. Height in this documentary that's coming out really soon. But it just shows the role that we have played in this nation when it comes to major issues.

And then if you go even further back, the role we've had to play in this country. So I just think it's part of not just our history with our president. Now we have the first woman vice-president, right? Black and South Asian woman president breaking those glass ceilings. But I think the role that we play is significant. And when we do it, Dr. Height would always tell us, I come in the door as a

woman. I come in the door as an African American. So I'm dealing with both of those realities. And I don't get to choose which one I am. And so when we come in the door, we have to find a way to own that. And now I think what's happening in this generation, you have people, a lot of young people in this audience, it's really great to see, are breaking down those barriers even more and demanding more and women are demanding more. So that's exciting for me so eventually I can just go sit somewhere and drink some mint julep.

**Joyce Brayboy:** That's right.

**Melanie Campbell:** Go, go!

**Joyce Brayboy:** Well, we do have to continue to represent to have that presence. And we need young women to speak up and step out.

**Melanie Campbell:** I mean, the social justice movement of today, when you think about what happened with Black Lives Matter movement, all of that, when young people took to the streets after George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and all the names that I can't



all name today, young people stepped up. And they drove that.

And my fear is that we will lose the meaning of what that was about. It was so multiracial, multigenerational, multiethnic. And I would show up, you know, I do this work all day. But we would show up to support young people. You know, this is your moment. Every generation has to step up to that call. But I also believe that there's roles to play from an intergenerational perspective and support young people's leadership because of what happened to me many, many decades -- not decades -- ago when people poured into me. And if I was at the table, I would say to people, if you're at the table, you're at the table. And be able to know that you're at a leadership table, but you're not just there for yourself. So the model of servant-leadership is where I was poured into. That I'm here to serve in that role, but at the same time, my role is to make sure I'm opening the door.

I don't have to wait 20 years to say, okay, it's your turn. There's no passing the baton. That's just a myth. It's just like, hey, it's your generation's time. What can I do so that we continue to pay it forward?

**Joyce Brayboy:** Talk to us about what are the moments where you just had to pinch yourself when you thought, wow, I'm from Mims, Florida, and here I am now, I've sat in the Oval Office, I've met with presidents. And what is a piece of advice that you learned? You're now mentoring so many others. But of the mentors you've had and being in these rooms, what's a piece of advice that you learned along your journey and being in these rooms?

**Melanie Campbell:** I would say the first time being in the room with President Obama, to be honest, because of the historical nature of that. And being in that room and, as you mentioned, many times being the only woman. But I had been mentored by Dr. Height to understand that, when you're in the room, you know you have to do these two things is to broader Black America that you represent, but you're also representing Black women. Women, period. And so many times I'd have to be the one to bring up things that were really critical, issues that were really critical for Black women but also broader to deal with the issues that were broader to our community. So that would be always.

And understanding that the people who poured into me like a Dr. Barbra Skinner, William Skinner, and others, I'm always thinking about them. And thinking about my mom, who's no longer with us, but just thinking about I'm not here for me. I'm here because I'm representing. I'm not the only one. You've got Sherilyn Eiful [sp?], with LDF, who's a part of it. And also through the Black Women's Roundtable.

Like we met recently with Vice-president Harris, with some of the folks that we know beyond and some of the sisters who paved the way who know what it's like to work in that West Wing. We all came together around the issues that are important to Black women. Voting rights being one of them. That's really, really critical and some of the economic issues. So before we ended up, actually, it was like that first direct action that we took that we ended up meeting with Vice-president Harris and President Biden. But then also meeting with President Biden and just really pushing the issues that are important.

So that for me, when I'm in these spaces, trying to remember I'm not there for myself. Because that's easy. To be honest with you. So for me, it's just trying to

remember that. And it's in my DNA because it was poured into me that way. I don't say I get it right every time, but I try my best.

**Joyce Brayboy:** When you look back over the past 18 months, I mean, there was just so much trauma in every aspect of our lives. I constantly find myself reflecting back and thinking about what we've learned from these difficult situations. And I made a note to say that things we missed, those we lost, giants like Vernon Jordan and Colin Powell, not to mention the stuff we've forgotten. We just forgot things in different aspects of our lives, being so overwhelmed in one way or another.

And then I know that you really went through a lot as well in your personal life and with some health challenges. But yet tell us how you coped. And how were you able to survive and thrive? Because again, you have not missed a beat, and you are on the front lines every day.

**Melanie Campbell:** Yeah. Well, first of all, this is my first time in New York since December of 2019. And so traveling here, for a minute I paused, right? And I paused because I know you know this, I survived COVID but I

almost didn't survive it. In September 2020 -- my years are meshing.

**Joyce Brayboy:** September 2020.

**Melanie Campbell:** Yes, yes. Me and one of my family members were exposed to COVID on a trip to a family funeral. Was exposed to it. Woke up and within a matter of a few days I ended up in ICU for about three weeks. And wasn't sure I was going to make it. They weren't sure I was going to make it. And I really ended up wanting people out, like, I'm not the one to get sick. I'm the one to go take care of folks. So for a minute it was like an out-of-body experience, but I was blessed. And the role I played had me in a different category, quite honestly. But I still had a lot of challenges and there were a lot of things that still happened in these hospitals.

I love health care levels at a whole other level of what they go through every day to show up and walk in a room with someone that could give them COVID. But yet they still gave you the care. I had some hiccups in there. So that process of being vulnerable like that was its own awakening for me of my own mortality, quite frankly, but

also to understand and lift up what health care workers go through and what families have to go through.

So I share the story and I shared it at times to say to people it's not the flu. It's not the flu. And I developed pneumonia within a couple of days of being exposed. So it was a real challenging moment. Sometimes when I talk about it even now, it's like I'm talking about somebody else. But it was me. And so I try to use it to just share with people. Not shame people but just say, hey, this thing is real. And even now sometimes some folks don't understand.

So coming here with masks. There was a moment where I wouldn't travel, I wouldn't do anything, I wouldn't be around anybody.

**Joyce Brayboy:** I was quite alarmed and disturbed. And then you have to reach out to the other people who we have as mutual friends. And so I feel so fortunate.

**Melanie Campbell:** The sister prayer circle and brother circle. I mean, the thing that was really moving was the amount of support. But I also knew that was a

blessing, too. I also knew that there are people who don't have that. Who don't have that. And it did make a big difference.

**Joyce Brayboy:** We'll conclude with just asking you: What would you like to leave us with or encourage us to do about how each person in this room and those watching can actually make a difference in their own communities?

**Melanie Campbell:** Well, just you are the leader you're looking for. That's not a cliché; that's real.

**Joyce Brayboy:** You are the leader you're looking for.

**Melanie Campbell:** Yeah. All of us have a role to play, right? And help somebody else. You know, whether it's your colleague or somebody else coming along. And I think this is like the dash. What did I do in my dash? Did I make a difference? And surely I remember hearing Cicely Tyson, one of her last interviews, when she talked about it, she said she wanted to make a difference. Did I make a difference? And I think that's all we can do. And have some fun along the way and some joy. Joys! Have some joy. I tell young people, don't lose your joy. Or if you

hadn't found it, try to find a joy. Happiness comes and goes. Joy, no matter what's going on, that'll get you through. And that's what's gotten through so far.

**Joyce Brayboy:** Thank you, Melanie Campbell, for joining us at Goldman Sachs, for Talks at GS. We are so honored to have you here.

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