

## "When Being Strong Wasn't Enough"

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newwave@tulane.edu

African American women are perceived ? and perceive themselves ? to be strong. That strength can help and hinder them in the political process, according to Melissa Harris-Lacewell, associate professor of politics and African American studies at Princeton University.



Melissa Harris-Lacewell, right, meets with members of the Tulane community after her talk on the uptown campus. (Photo by Tricia Travis)

Harris-Lacewell, who wrote the award-winning *Barbershops, Bible, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton 2004), talked about her research on Wednesday (Feb. 3) in the Lavin-Bernick Center on the Tulane uptown campus. The School of Liberal Arts and the political science department sponsored her lecture.

Harris-Lacewell's academic research is the basis of her upcoming book, *Sister Citizen: A Text for Colored Girls Who've Considered Politics When Being Strong Wasn't Enough* (Yale University Press). The book examines the connections between shame, sadness and strength in African American women's politics.

"Assumed self-reliance is quite robust among black women," said Harris-Lacewell, who lives part-time in New Orleans and is the partner of New Orleans mayoral candidate James Perry. "If you want to give a black woman a compliment, call her strong."

At the same time, black women's popular culture suggests that strength can be potentially detrimental to personal relationships, mental health and the race itself.

Because they are so strong, black women will get out there to do the political work, she said, but they do it in the background for others because they don't want to appear selfish.

"African American women," she added, "end up being extraordinary community activists for other people's interests."

Harris-Lacewell also discussed how shame affects African American women's political involvement.

"Shame is social. Shame is global," she said. "Shame makes us want to hide, which is important to politics. If racial pride is political, racial shame is political."

*Tammy C. Barney is the external affairs officer for the Newcomb College Institute.*