In a hapless attempt to explain how a man living on unemployment who reportedly has no cell phone, computer or clue could have received a clear majority win in the race for the Democratic Party's U.S. Senate nomination, Democratic state Sen. Robert Ford opined that perhaps a disproportionate number of the black electorate voted for Alvin Greene because they assumed he was black.

"No white folks have an 'e' on the end of Green," he told The Post and Courier. "The blacks after they left the plantation couldn't spell, and they threw an 'e' on the end." As if to emphasize Ford's point, many of the images splayed over the media are of Alvin Greene posing in a T-shirt that reads "Greene Family Reunion 1993."

Ford's observation surely arose from an honest befuddlement with a situation that has left most of the political establishment grasping for answers. His many years of experience in the Lowcountry have certainly informed his assumptions about how the name "Greene" might play to the African-American electorate; Greene is, in fact, a common name among African-Americans in South Carolina.

But his comments overlook the important but little known history of how freed slaves used names to develop their own identity - one of the few things they could control. (They also ignore the equally common appearance of the name "Greene" among white S.C. families - not to mention Nathanael Greene, the Revolutionary War hero after whom Greenville was named.) If we look to the rich and nuanced reasons that name changes occurred after the Civil War, we can better understand his analysis of how racial politics may have played into the current mess.

Literacy was, of course, extremely rare among enslaved people in South Carolina, and doubtless many names were changed because of ignorance and error by post-war generations of freedmen and women. At the same time, however, enslaved people were acutely aware of the implications of names, and much evidence points to name changes that were deliberate and thoughtful expressions of identity and allegiance.

When slaves first claimed their freedom, they often changed their names. Some took on names such as Lincoln or Sherman to honor their heroes. Others adopted their former masters' names or used derivations of "freeman." Many slaves reclaimed the names of their parents or grandparents - not African names, but the names of former owners. Records from escaped and freed slaves who fought for the Union, and later tried to claim federal pensions, indicate that if they had a
surname it was usually from their mother. Upon enlisting in the black regiments, these men would choose or be assigned with the surnames of their former owners. After the war, most of these soldiers seem to have taken their father's name. Regardless of the cause or opportunity, in all these cases, changing one's name was clearly an opportunity to start anew and to claim a place in a world.

Since more than one pundit has floated the theory that Vic Rawl lost because his name came second on the ballot, comedians have been mocking South Carolinians for our sudden embrace of alphabetical order. But while the stealthy silent 'e' will not fully account for Greene's curious success, perhaps our electorate's attentiveness to such subtle language cues as the letter "e" does help explain it.

With all due respect to the Civil Rights veteran Robert Ford, we should give people more credit. Those who came before us might not have been literate, but they surely knew what was at stake in one of the most momentous decisions in their lives - finally claiming the identity to which they were entitled, and for which they had long labored. If you can only spell one word, it certainly will be your name. And you'll spell it in a way that matters to you.

As for Alvin Greene, the great tragedy of his situation is that if his interviews indicate anything, he seems to have no idea what is at stake in the precarious political identity he has just stumbled into, rather than earned.

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