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0521849365 - Countervailing Forces in African-American Civic Activism, 1973–1994

Fredrick C. Harris, Valeria Sinclair-Chapman and Brian D. McKenzie

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

To be a poor man in a land of dollars is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.

W. E. B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

Black power recognizes – it must recognize – the ethnic basis of American politics as well as the power-oriented nature of American politics. Black power therefore calls for black people to consolidate behind their own, so they can bargain from a position of strength.

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power*, 1967

The words of W. E. B. DuBois and those of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton a half century later represent a quandary for African Americans in their quest for political equality in America. By the turn of the century when DuBois wrote that to be a “poor race in the land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships,” the political gains that African Americans had received in the aftermath of the Civil War had vanished. Confined to the land that had held them in bondage during slavery with the backing of vigilante violence and the legal complicity of the federal and southern state governments to boot, most African Americans struggled in a state of semiservitude for more than a half a century. Even though DuBois debated Booker T. Washington over the need to restore blacks’ citizenship rights, favoring the fight for political rights over Washington’s strategy of blacks building a firm economic foundation to prove themselves citizens before the white world, DuBois, as this quote suggests and as he would realize decades later, recognized

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blacks' political limitations in a society that marginalized blacks as both citizens and workers.

Writing after the legal triumphs of the landmark civil rights legislation that barred racial discrimination and restored blacks' voting rights during the nation's "Second Reconstruction," civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael and political scientist Charles Hamilton argued in their book, *Black Power*, for the need of blacks to gain political influence through mainstream politics. Indeed, the civil rights movement and the legal protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) created new possibilities for black inclusion in local and national politics. These changes in American life opened political opportunities for blacks that facilitated the transition from protest activism to mainstream politics. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward describe the decline of the civil rights movement and the transition to insider politics: "[I]n virtually no time at all the movement had been incorporated into the electoral system, its leaders running for office throughout the South and its constituencies enjoined to devote their energies to making these bids for office a success in the name of 'black power'" (1979, 253). Like DuBois, Carmichael later recognized the limitations of reforming racial inequality through the political system and advocated the radical transformation of the nation's political and economic system (Carmichael and Thelwell 2003). Hamilton would decades later chronicle the barriers facing civil rights organizations in their efforts to address the economic needs of African Americans in an era when black incorporation into mainstream political life had been firmly secured (Hamilton and Hamilton 1997).

This book considers the state of black political equality in the post-civil rights era by exploring how economic and political forces in American life affect black civic participation. We see the quest for black political empowerment and the realities of social and economic distress in black communities as two sets of competing, and often conflicting, forces on black civic life that simultaneously provide barriers to and opportunities for black civic activism. Our approach to understanding the dynamics of black civic participation in the post-civil rights era is important on several dimensions. As many scholars of civic life in America have argued, participation allows the voices of citizens and organized interests to be heard in the political system. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady note, for instance, that civic

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activism is “not only about individuals – what they do and why they do it,” because, “more than in most democracies voluntary activity in America shapes the allocation of economic, social, and cultural benefits and contributes to the achievement of collective purposes” (1995, 7). Expanding political opportunities in the aftermath of the modern civil rights movement provided African Americans with a means to have their voices heard inside rather than outside the domains of American mainstream political life.

But what if the capacity to have voices heard in the political system is stifled by economic and social circumstances beyond the control of individuals or organized interests? This is a question we pose as we consider the civic activism of African Americans in the post–civil rights era, a period during which African Americans experienced unprecedented gains in the political system and also remained at the social and economic margins of American life. As we show in this study, the dynamics of black civic activism in the post–civil rights era is characterized by a tug-of-war between black political empowerment on one side and economic and social distress in black communities on the other. As blacks gain greater access and influence within the political system, the competitive forces of empowerment tug favorably toward increasing levels of black activism while downward spirals in the economic and social conditions of black communities pull toward less civic engagement. As our study chronicles, this tug-of-war demonstrates that the quest for black empowerment and the realities of economic and social life act as countervailing forces in African-American civic life, where persistently detrimental economic and social conditions in black communities weaken the capacity of blacks to have their voices heard as civic actors.

BLACK EMPOWERMENT AND BLACK CIVIC ACTIVISM

One of the questions often asked about the political progress of African Americans in the post–civil rights era is “to what extent has black social and political participation changed since the 1960s?” Just as the civil rights movement declined in late 1960s, the process of blacks’ inclusion into mainstream American politics began its ascendancy. This process of inclusion has been described variously in the political science literature as political empowerment and political incorporation, and

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for this study, we use the concepts interchangeably (Tate 1994; Smith 1996; Leighly 2001; Tate 2004). Urban politics scholars use the concept of incorporation to examine how effectively the interests of minority groups are represented in policy-making (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Stone 1989). In their study of the influence of African Americans and Latinos in city politics, Rufus Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David Tabb measure incorporation by the number of minorities on city councils, whether minorities are a part of the city's governing coalition, and whether there is minority control of the mayor's office (1984, 25). In their study of black social and political participation, Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam, define black empowerment, a term they see as interchangeable with black incorporation, as "increases in the control of institutionalized power" in which blacks have "achieved significant representation and influence in political decision-making" through their control of the mayor's office (1990, 377–78).

Our view of black empowerment and incorporation is twofold and differs somewhat from perspectives in the urban politics literature. First, we are interested in the instrumental value that descriptive representation and greater access to the political system bring to black civic activism rather than incorporation as a feature of decision-making in representative institutions. For the purposes of our analysis, we view political access and representation as signals to civic actors in black communities to engage in mainstream politics. As Bobo and Gilliam argue in their study, when "blacks hold more positions of authority, wield political power, and have done so for longer periods of time, greater number of blacks should see value in sociopolitical involvement" (1990, 379). Second, our conceptualization of incorporation derives from the literature on social movements and black politics (Piven and Cloward 1979; Tate 1994; Smith 1996; Tate 2004). We are interested in the participatory consequences of the incorporation of the civil rights movement into mainstream politics where blacks shifted their energies away from marching in the streets and boycotting businesses and turned to insider modes of civic activity such as contacting public officials about problems and working to get political candidates elected.

While protest activism continued to characterize some aspects of black political life in the post-civil rights era, the movement shifted

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away from protest as a political strategy to the sphere of electoral politics (see Figure 1.1). As southern blacks began to exercise their political muscle in the aftermath of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, engagement in mainstream politics became the dominant mode of black civic participation. The VRA “substantially changed the structure of black politics, giving Black Americans new access to the dominant forums within institutionalized politics” (Tate 1994, 16). This process of incorporation was symbolized by the “new black politics” scholarship, which chronicled African-American involvement in mainstream forms of political activities (Shingles 1981; Walton 1985; Morrison 1987; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1991; Tate 1994; Tate 2004).

Civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin (1971) suggested, as early as 1964, that if blacks were going to affect politics, they would have to move away from protest and become a part of the political mainstream in American life. “A conscious bid for political power is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being affected,” Rustin observed. “Direct-action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases. . . . What began as a protest movement is being challenged to translate itself into a political movement” (1971, 112). In the post-civil rights era, Rustin’s call for a new strategy has been largely answered as blacks have secured a place in the mainstream of American political life (Browning et al. 1984; Smith 1996; Reed 1999; Gomes and Williams 1992).

At the turn of the twenty-first century blacks have achieved what was unthinkable in the early twentieth century. The number of blacks elected to public office in the nation has skyrocketed. Over forty members of Congress are black, providing members of the Congressional Black Caucus a bloc of votes that can influence legislative outcomes (Bositis 1994; Singh 1998; Canon 1999). Hundreds of blacks have been elected to state legislatures and thousands more have been elected to other state and local offices. These trends in black office-holding and party activism confirm the incorporation of the civil rights movement into mainstream politics. As Robert Smith explains the process of incorporation, “a group previously excluded from the systematic institutions and processes is brought into these institutions and processes, either because it poses a threat to system stability or maintenance or because it is part of the normal, evolutionary adjustments of a

We The People...
How to make the “political machine” work for you.

Don't Vote...Then Don't Complain We, the people, means 14 million eligible Black voters. That's a lot of people, and a lot of power. But it's a power that's never been properly utilized. Because only 59% of all our eligible voters ever take the time to register and vote. What a waste. You've got the power to influence legislation on housing, health, education, and jobs...all the things that affect you and your family. Your vote is important. Use it to change the way your

representatives act on issues that concern you.

The Government Is The People. Be politically aware. Your political awareness determines what happens in this country. First, make sure the politician who wants your vote deserves it. Check out voting records. Listen carefully to every candidate. Use that knowledge to your advantage. The only way to get “the machine” to work for you is to be a part of it. You must register and vote. We, the people, are responsible for the state of this country. And by using our voting power we can change it. Because the government is the people.

Human Energy—
America's Greatest Resource
People are America's greatest

untapped resource. They provide the real energy that runs this country. We have to work together to solve our problems...to utilize the potential of every person in this country. It begins with us. Our families, our communities. Join your local church, community and political groups. Band together and make your voices heard. There's strength in numbers. We've got to stop wasting Human Energy. It's America's greatest resource.

CONCERNED BLACK AMERICANS

Coretta Scott King
Coretta Scott King
National President,
National Council
of Negro Women
(NCCW)

Jesse Jackson
Jesse Jackson
National President,
People United
for the
Remedy
(PUR)

Warren E. Jordan, Jr.
Warren E. Jordan, Jr.
Executive Director,
National Urban
League

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Pastor, Ebenezer
Baptist Church,
Atlanta, Ga.

Robert D. Carter
Robert D. Carter
National President,
National Association
of Negro Business
and Professional
Women (NANBPW)

Rev. Leon H. Sullivan
Rev. Leon H. Sullivan
Founder &
Board Chairman,
Supremacy
Educational
Center of
America (SECA)

Ray Wilkins
Ray Wilkins
Executive Director,
National Association
for the
Advancement of
Colored People
(NAACP)

Edna H. Williams
Edna H. Williams
National President,
The Joint Center
for Political Studies

GATE
THIS MESSAGE COURTESY OF THE GASP CO. CORPORATION.
HUMAN ENERGY: AMERICA'S GREATEST RESOURCE.

FIGURE 1.1. “We The People . . . How to make the ‘political machine’ work for you.” Source: *Crisis*, June/July 1977

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democratic society to claims of new groups for inclusion, incorporation, or integration” (1996, 21). Evidenced by examples such as the contentious seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention, as well as the more recent prominent roles of black political actors and organizations such as Jesse Jackson, Condoleezza Rice, and the Congressional Black Caucus, black incorporation has been the result of both the threat reduction and evolutionary adjustments Smith describes.

The rise of black political empowerment is believed to be one of the primary factors that stimulated black civic participation since the civil rights movement. In the immediate aftermath of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, black office-seeking and black office-holding not only stimulated voter registration and turnout in black communities, but it also fostered civic activities in black communities beyond the voting booth. Those effects were immediately realized in the South, where blacks flexed their political muscle and converted the energy generated from protest campaigns into electorally directed activism. As James Button notes in his analysis of the civil rights movement’s impact on social and political change in the South:

Besides working on the inside to improve conditions, black elected officials were frequently instrumental in promoting increased political participation by black citizens. Not only were blacks much more likely to register and vote when a member of their race competed for public office, but in numerous other ways minority citizens were more attentive to and involved in local politics when a black assumed office. (1989, 227)

Indeed, the participatory effects of emerging black empowerment, especially in the South, were observed by black officeholders themselves. These newly elected officials often attributed their success to a black electorate that contributed to their campaigns in a variety of ways. As these officials reported during the 1960s and early 1970s, their black constituents became active in their campaigns by contributing money, by canvassing voters on their behalf, and by becoming generally more attentive to politics and governance in their communities. For instance, Barbara Jordan, who would later become one of the first blacks to be elected to Congress from the South after Reconstruction, noted how her election to the Texas State House in 1966 stimulated the political participation of blacks in her district. She observed

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a “new awareness of politics on the state level among Negro voters in particular” and recalled how her election heightened political awareness of her black constituents. “By and large Negroes had not known what a state senator or state representative did,” Jordan explained. “Upon my election, there was an awaking to politics on the state level. This interest has encouraged people to follow the papers and become interested in the bills pending before the Legislature” (Bond 1968, 32). Other newly elected black officials in the South noted how their electoral wins raised hopes for improving services and economic conditions in black communities as well as encouraged other blacks to run for public office. Geneva Collins, who was elected as county clerk of Claiborne County, Mississippi, in 1967, observed that her successful bid for public office “seemed to give the Negro race the feeling that they had made the first step toward overcoming discrimination, poverty, and neglect in every arena.” Thus, “they feel like they can progress, and this in itself made more people run for public office” (Bond 1968, 8).

The emerging black political empowerment in the post-civil rights era and its attendant effects on black civic participation were not confined to the South. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York had black elected officials in local and state government as well as black representation in Congress before and during the civil rights movement, but demographic shifts in the 1960s and 1970s led to the election of more blacks to public office when these cities became increasingly black as whites departed for the suburbs. Political empowerment outside the South was symbolized by the election of blacks to mayorships during the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in cities such as Flint, Cleveland, Gary, Detroit, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Hartford, and New York, among many others.

These first-time campaigns to elect a black to the mayor's office often generated high levels of civic participation in northern black communities, as well as in southern cities such as Atlanta and New Orleans. For instance, William Nelson and Phillip Meranto, in their analysis of the 1967 campaigns of Richard Hatcher of Gary, Indiana, and Carl Stokes of Cleveland, Ohio, as the first black big-city mayors elected in the nation, note the “bandwagon effect” of black mayoral candidacies on black civic participation. They observed that these elections stimulated participation in the black communities of Gary and Cleveland in which

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“hundreds of volunteer workers – many of whom were grass-roots individuals with no previous experience in political campaigning” – were able to deliver the votes for Hatcher and Stokes (1977, 325).

The political incorporation of African Americans since the civil rights movement is also realized through activism in the Democratic Party. Blacks’ loyalty to the Democratic Party, which was cemented during the 1970s and 1980s, has netted influence and some power in party policy and leadership (Smith 1990; Tate 1994; Smith 1996; but see Frymer 1999). Indeed, black delegates to the National Democratic Party have comprised nearly a quarter of all delegates to the convention since the mid-1980s (Joint Center for Political Studies 1988). Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party fought to be seated as delegates at the 1964 Democratic Convention, but by 1988 blacks sat on the Democratic National Committee’s Executive Committee and served in large numbers on the party’s Platform, Credentials, and Rules Committees. Indeed, 20 percent of the Platform Committee, the body responsible for shaping the policy perspectives of the party, was black, and the chair was then Representative William Gray III, who was also chairman of the powerful Budget Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives (Joint Center for Political Studies 1988).

Black influence in the Democratic Party was reflected in the phenomenal increase in black delegates to the party’s national conventions. When the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party contested the seating of the all-white delegation from Mississippi in 1964, there were only 65 black delegates seated at the convention, which represented less than 3 percent of all delegates (Jaynes and Williams 1989). By 1984 black representation at the convention had increased tenfold, accounting for nearly 18 percent of all delegates. The 1988 convention saw even greater growth. That year, 23 percent of all delegates to the convention were black, up considerably from 1984. A year later, Ron Brown became the first, and only, African American selected as chairman of the National Democratic Party. Brown would later become Secretary of the Commerce Department under the Clinton Administration, serving alongside the largest contingent of African Americans to ever be selected as presidential cabinet secretaries. Access and influence in the Democratic Party are a long way from the two seats offered to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 and

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demonstrate blacks' incorporation into political institutions since the movement.

The political incorporation of blacks in the post-civil rights era is also evidenced by Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential bids. Even though the effectiveness of Jackson's campaigns have been debated by students of African-American politics (Reed 1986), the campaigns are considered to be critical moments in civic activism of African Americans in the post-civil rights era. Opinion surveys taken during the campaigns indicate surges in black civic engagement that at times exceeded the participation of whites. Indeed, in 1984 blacks were nearly twice as likely as whites to report attending political rallies and distributing campaign literature. Blacks were also three times more likely than whites to report helping others register to vote (Cavanaugh 1985).

ECONOMIC FORTUNES AND BLACK CIVIC ACTIVISM

Although the growth in the number of black elected officials, greater levels of access and influence in the Democratic Party, and the presidential bids of Jesse Jackson furthered the incorporation of African Americans into the mainstream of American politics, blacks' political empowerment has not been matched by black economic progress. Persistently high levels of black unemployment, surges in inflation, rising income disparities among blacks, growing levels of criminal victimization in black communities, and increased competition for low-wage and semiskilled jobs from influxes of immigrant workers reflect volatility in the economic and social fortunes of black communities at the same time that blacks were gaining political empowerment. These economic and social forces also have implications for understanding the dynamics of black political participation.

Students of black politics have noted Bayard Rustin's call for a tactical shift from protest to institutionalized politics, but students of black civic life have largely overlooked his prediction about transformations in the American economy and how those transformations might affect the future economic prospects of African Americans. Indeed, Rustin noted that the "greater problem" facing black communities would be the economic dislocation of a large segment of low-skilled and