

Countervailing Forces In African-American Civic Activism, 1973-1994



Fredrick C. Harris
Valeria Sinclair-Chapman
Brian McKenzie

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

In a first-ever longitudinal study assessing black civic participation after the civil rights movement, Fredrick C. Harris, Valeria Sinclair-Chapman, and Brian D. McKenzie demonstrate that the changes in black activism since the civil rights movement are characterized by a tug-of-war between black political power on one side and economic conditions in black communities on the other. As blacks gain greater access and influence within the political system, black participation in political activities increases while downward turns in the economic conditions of black communities produce less civic involvement in black communities. During the course of black activism from the early 1970s to the 1990s, the quest for black political empowerment and the realities of economic and social life acted as countervailing forces in which negative economic and social conditions in black communities weakened the ability of blacks to organize so that their political voices could be heard.

Fredrick C. Harris is Associate Professor and Director of the Center for the Study of African-American Politics at the University of Rochester. Previously he was a visiting scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation and was named a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Harris is the author of *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*, which won the V.O. Key Award for Best Book in Southern Politics, the Distinguished Book Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the Best Book Award from the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, and the Choice Award.

Valeria Sinclair-Chapman is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Rochester. She is coauthor with William D. Anderson and Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier of “The Keys to Legislative Success in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (2003). Sinclair-Chapman’s research examines the substantive and symbolic representation of black interests in Congress as well as minority agenda-setting on the national level.

Brian D. McKenzie is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M University. Prior to joining the Texas A&M University faculty he was a visiting assistant professor at Emory University. He was also a Fellow at the University of Rochester Center for the Study of African-American Politics from 2002 to 2003. His work has appeared in *Political Research Quarterly*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, and *African-American Research Perspectives*.

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FREDRICK C. HARRIS

University of Rochester

VALERIA SINCLAIR-CHAPMAN

University of Rochester

BRIAN D. MCKENZIE

Texas A&M University



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*To the political activists who made a difference despite
the odds:*

Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Bayard Rustin

And to the political scientists on whose shoulders we stand:

*William E. Nelson, Jr., Hanes Walton, Jr.,
and Linda Faye Williams*

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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

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

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

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

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