BLACK POWER IN THE SUBURBS

THE MYTH OR REALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURBAN POLITICAL INCORPORATION

VALERIE C. JOHNSON

Black Power in the Suburbs

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Valerie C. Johnson

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Dedication

To my maternal grandmother, Wilma Heffney (1900–1969),
my mother, Grace Johnson, my father, William Johnson, Sr.,
and to my brother, William Johnson, Jr.

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Contents

List of Tables and Figures ix
Acknowledgments xi

1 African-American Suburban Political Incorporation 1

2 Prince George's County: Politics and the African-American Migration 23

3 Social and Economic Characteristics of Prince George's County, Maryland 45

4 The Quest for African-American Political Representation in Prince George's County, Maryland 59

5 African-American Prince Georgians: Mobilization for Key Appointments 91

6 African-American Prince Georgians: Policy Influence in the Education Arena 107

7 The Myth or Reality of African-American Suburban Political Incorporation 131

8 A Tale of Two Counties—Present and Past, Affluent and Poor 145

Appendix A: Questionnaire for African-American Community Leaders 163

Appendix B: Questionnaire for African-American Elected Officials 173

Notes 183
Bibliography 199
Index 213

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List of Tables and Figures

TABLES

2.1 Housing Units Constructed (1960–1990) 33
2.2 Owner/Renter Occupancy Rates (1970–1990) 34
2.3 Median Housing Values—(1970–1990) 35
2.4 Washington, D.C., to Suburbs Outmovers by Race (1980) 36
2.5 Washington, D.C., to Suburbs Outmovers by Income (1980) 38
2.6 Washington, D.C., to Suburbs Outmovers by Housing Tenure (1980) 38
2.7 African-American/White Population Trends, Prince George's County (1960–1990) 39
3.1 Socioeconomic Characteristics by Percentages (1990) Prince George 's County, Montgomery County, Maryland, and U.S.A. 46
3.2 African-American/White Socioeconomic Comparisons, Prince George's County, Maryland, 1990 47
3.3 African-American/White Owner/Renter Occupancy Rates, Prince George's County (1970–1990) 48
3.4 African-American/White Median Housing Values, Prince George's County (1970–1990) 49
3.5 Housing Characteristics of African Americans (1990) Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Maryland, and U.S.A. 53
3.6 Income Characteristics of African Americans (1990) Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Maryland, and U.S.A. 54
3.7 Employment Characteristics of African Americans (1990) Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Maryland, and U.S.A. 55
3.8 Education Characteristics of African Americans (1990) Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Maryland, and U.S.A. 55

3.9 Socioeconomic Characteristics of African Americans (1990) Prince George's County and Baltimore, Maryland 57
8.1 African-American/White Population Trends, Prince George's County (1970–2000) 147

FIGURES

1.1 A Model of African-American Suburban Political Incorporation 17
2.1 Percent African American for Prince George's County, 1970 40
2.2 Percent African American for Prince George's County, 1980 42
2.3 Percent African American for Prince George's County, 1990 43
4.1 African American Elected Officials, 1970–1994 81
8.1 African-American and White Population Trends (1970–2000) 146
8.2 Percent African American for Prince George's County—1970 149
8.3 Percent African American for Prince George's County—1980 150
8.4 Percent African American for Prince George's County—1990 151
8.5 Percent African American for Prince George's County—2000 152
8.6 African-American Population and Elected Officials 1970-2000 160

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Chapter One

African-American Suburban Political Incorporation

In 1994, the voters of Prince George's County, Maryland, elected Wayne Curry as their first African-American county executive. The election of African Americans to positions of power is certainly not new, however, Curry's election to the top elective position in the county signaled a turning point.

For African-American Prince Georgians, Curry's election represented the long-awaited finale to their thirty-plus-year quest for control over the county's governing apparatus. For those who study urban/suburban politics and demographics, Curry's election represented the complete transformation of suburban Prince George's County from a predominantly white enclave of the nation's capital to a premier majority African-American suburb, and one of the largest concentrations of African-American affluence in the nation.

Although home to a large African-American middle class, Prince George's County can be likened to a tale of two cities, one affluent and the other one poor. Nonetheless, Curry's victory was largely viewed as a group victory. In 1994, having recently become a numerical majority in the county, African Americans coveted the opportunity to finally elect one of their own to a position of prominence.

When one considers the range of interests among African Americans in Prince George's County, the notion of a group victory is puzzling. However, African Americans in Prince George's County are not unique in their predilection to view the first-time election of an African-American as a group victory or, in this case, as a sign of group political incorporation. Although conceptually ambiguous, terms such as *African-American community* or *African-American political incorporation* are continually evoked, erroneously creating an image of a monolithic African-American community.[1]

To be sure, African Americans do not share the same experiences, nor do they possess the same socioeconomic or political interests. This fact is perhaps most compelling in suburban Prince George's County, given its unique demographic makeup, where socioeconomic disparity among African Americans is as great as that between African Americans and whites. Nonetheless, African-American leaders consistently express the need for a unified "black agenda." The media speak of the "black community" and "black political leaders," and scholars discuss "black political incorporation" and "black political power," as if the political and socioeconomic ascension of a segment of the African-American population represents political and socioeconomic power for all African Americans.

Prince George's County's transformation presents a unique opportunity to reexamine our conceptualization of group political incorporation. It also presents a laboratory to study African-American migration from the inner city into the suburbs; the openness of suburban governing coalitions and structures as African-American populations increase; African-American mobilization efforts to become a part of suburban governing coalitions; and, most significant, the impact of class interests on African Americans' ability to press forward a policy agenda in suburbia.

The history of African Americans presents numerous examples of unified political action. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the march across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, and the 1963 March on Washington are just a few. History is replete with political events that have exhibited African-American solidarity in the fight for basic civil and political rights. What happens, however, when gains have been made in the quest for basic civil and political rights? Are African Americans any more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to unify behind a policy or an issue, despite the impact on their particular individual social and class interests?

This book addresses these questions by examining the factors that impede African-American political representation and the policy positions that African Americans advance in the education arena in suburbia. It also presents a model of African-American political incorporation that takes into account African-American socioeconomic diversity and competing interests.

Education policy is a significant policy area to examine, because it has been a political battleground for groups seeking to either alter or maintain their socioeconomic position within the American political economy. It also is significant to a study of suburbia because of its effects on the migration patterns of whites in the city and in racially transformed suburbs.

This analysis covers the 1971–1994 period in Prince George's County, Maryland. This period is significant because it surveys the rise of African-American political representation and activism in the educational arena. In 1971, a group of African Americans joined with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to

file suit in federal court, challenging the county's system of segregated schools. In 1994, African Americans won the highest political office in the suburban county, and majority representation on the board of education. An analysis of the period following the 1994 Curry victory is presented in the epilogue.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SUBURBANIZATION

Despite growth over the past thirty years, African-American suburbanization is not new. Although the latest stage of African-American suburbanization is markedly different from previous periods, African Americans have lived in suburban communities since the 1920s. During the 1920–1970 period, however, African-American suburbs were either poor or working-class jurisdictions.

Poor African-American suburban communities were underdeveloped and often unincorporated areas on the city's periphery, with a limited tax base for adequate schools and government services. These communities typically lacked adequate water and sewage infrastructure and were more similar to poor African-American urban communities than to white suburban communities. As J. John Palen notes, "while such small communities were technically in the suburbs, socially and economically they were not of the suburbs."[2]

Solidly working-class African-American suburbs were one step above poor African-American suburbs. Examples of this type of suburban community include Robbins and Harvey in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Although different, both types of early African-American suburbs stood in direct contrast to the typical image of white, middle-class, homogeneous, suburban communities.

Although the word "suburb" continues to evoke images of economic, social, and racial homogeneity, suburbs are just as diverse as the cities that they surround.[3] This is particularly true for black suburbs. As Harrigan (1993) notes, African-American suburbs vary in socioeconomic status, from those comprising old, previously rural communities, to those that are affluent, to those that are mere extensions of the inner-city communities that they border.[4]

The factors that precipitated African-American and white suburbanization were as distinctive as the suburbs that they initially occupied. White suburban migration was greatly enhanced and facilitated by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans, established by the National Housing Act of 1934, and Veterans Administration (VA) loans, which were made available to GIs returning home from World War II. Both housing policies established federally guaranteed low down payment long-term mortgages. These programs were in direct contrast to high down payment short-term mortgages that made early home ownership difficult.

Although the express purpose of the two federal housing policies was to jump-start the housing industry, features of the legislation promoted the construction of homes outside of the inner city. Title I of the Housing Act of 1934, for example, provided FHA insurance for loans to repair and renovate existing housing stock in the city. Section 503 of the Housing Act, on the other hand, provided FHA loans for the construction of new one to four family units. Between 1935 and 1974, 75 percent of the total FHA insured home mortgages went for new housing construction.[5]

The disparities that existed in support of the two loan programs were the result of FHA bias toward housing construction in economically sound neighborhoods. Considering the dilapidated conditions of urban neighborhoods, this bias basically guaranteed that new housing would be built outside of the inner city, far away from African Americans and other poor minorities who were viewed as a bane to property values.

Even more exclusionary in impact, however, was the FHA promotion of racial covenants that barred the sale of housing to nonwhites.[6] Despite the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), declaring racial covenants legally unenforceable, racial discrimination in housing continued relatively unabated until the fair housing provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

By 1970, mass, white suburbanization had become a reality. The 1970 census of the population was the first to show that a majority of Americans lived outside of the inner city. However, the bulk of suburbanization was white, while African Americans, other minorities, and poor whites were primarily confined to the inner city.

After World War II, the migration of African Americans and other poor minorities to northern and Midwestern cities set off a chain reaction of white flight from the city. While the cities represented the Promised Land for minority and poor city migrants looking for better paying jobs and a better life, the lure of the suburbs represented the Promised Land for whites. School integration and busing only exacerbated the white flight to the suburbs.

Images of urban poverty and slums were juxtaposed in the American psyche with those of tranquil, tree-lined, suburban communities. The common perception was that movement to the suburbs would offer whites a safe haven from the ills associated with rising urban crime and poverty, and would provide them with a better life for their families. In many ways, this common perception created a self-fulfilling prophecy as city tax coffers were drained of needed resources, and strong and viable communities began to crop up outside of the city limits.

Although the 1968 Fair Housing Act greatly facilitated African-American suburbanization, other forms of housing discrimination continued to thwart equal access to housing in the suburbs. While legally sanctioned discrimination had abated, it continued, infact, through practices such as racial steering,

which directed African Americans away from white areas. As a result of Title VIII of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, however, those African Americans who could afford to began to move outside of the city and were no longer confined to African-American poor and working-class suburbs.[7]

Once it began, African-American suburban migration grew at accelerating rates. During the decade of the 1970s, the number of African Americans living in the suburbs increased by 50 percent.[8] As it had for whites in previous decades, African-American movement to the suburbs became a status symbol and held promises of better housing and educational opportunities for African-American children.[9]

Although this migration wreaked further havoc on the amount of resources available for city services, for those moderate and middle-income African Americans who were able to move, it was an opportunity to share in the rich public resources seemingly available in the suburbs.

The reception that African Americans received in the suburbs, however, was chilly at best. The same factors that drove mass white migration away from the city were renewed as African Americans moved to predominantly white suburban communities. As it had been in urban jurisdictions, the integration of public schools again became a contentious issue.

As African Americans settled in inner-tier suburbs such as Prince George's County, they immediately sought political influence within suburban governing coalitions. And as they had previously in the city, African Americans also began to attack barriers to socioeconomic opportunity in the suburbs.

REPRESENTATION VERSUS POLITICAL INCORPORATION

If achieving political incorporation were simply a matter of representation on policy-making bodies, it would surely seem that African Americans in Prince George's County are well on their way. But political incorporation is much more tangible than representation on policy-making bodies. It also entails the ability to become an integral part of policy-making coalitions that promote the interests of a particular constituency. Although representation on policy-making bodies is an important prerequisite to political incorporation, on its face it does not guarantee influence over the policy-making apparatus.

As numerous urban case studies attest, the quest for political incorporation by newly emerging groups typically encounters resistance, and often it entails changing the existing governing coalition to one that is more amenable to power and resource sharing. Although newly emerging groups promote representation to advance their interests, the battle does not end there.

As Mack H. Jones (1978) argues, there is a difference "between having power, political and otherwise, and being associated with those who have it;

between participating in the decision process and actually influencing the outcome of that process; and between the symbolic trappings of political power and political power itself."[10]

Bachrach and Baratz (1970) also make a distinction between power and influence in the decision-making process. They argue that investigators place too much emphasis on decision making, ignoring the real power that exists in non-decision making—or the extent to which power is inherent in the ability to limit the scope of what is placed on the public agenda, or to influence the type of policy that is recognized as negotiable.[11]

They maintain that there are two faces of power. The most significant often is less apparent, and it entails the ability to influence community values and political procedures and rituals, and to reinforce barriers to the public airing of policy conflict.[12]

Both the Jones and Bachrach and Baratz formulations are typically applied to the contest between distinct groups with competing interests. Nevertheless, they are also applicable to the contestation of competing interests within groups, particularly a socioeconomically diverse group such as African Americans.

Reed (1999) argues that the "black community" "is a reification that at most expresses the success of some interest networks in articulating their interpretations and programs and asserting them in the name of the group."[13] Therefore, what often are presented as "black interests" are the distinct interests of a segment of the African-American community—those who have been most successful in articulating their claims.

To determine the conditions that impact on African-American political incorporation, it is first and foremost necessary to define what "black interests" are, an undertaking that is typically ignored in most analyses of African-American politics. Are there any authentic black interests among a socioeconomically diverse community of African Americans in suburbia? Unless "black interests" pertain solely to issues related to civil rights or racial equality (issues that affect all African Americans), it would seem that one segment of the African-American community would have to subordinate its interests in service to the aims of another.

Reed argues that there is conceptual inadequacy in the "presumption that there are, or can be, authentic or automatically discernible community interests and that, therefore, political legitimacy rests on appeal to such interests."[14] To this extent, when we study the policy interests of the African-American community, it is necessary to discern whether the policy, or the action that proceeds from it, proportionally influences all group members.

Every political organization holds a set of biases or interests that forms the basis of its political struggle with competing interests. This is as true for

African Americans as it is for other groups. As E.E. Schattschneider (1983) argues, "organization is itself a mobilization of bias in preparation for action."[15] Schattschneider maintains that:

> the pressure system makes sense only as the political instrument of a segment of the community. It gets results by being selective and biased; if everybody got into the act, the unique advantages of this form of organization would be destroyed, for it is possible that if all interests could be mobilized the result would be a stalemate.[16]

Some interests become the foundation by which other interests are either addressed or suppressed. This holds true not only in competition between groups but also within groups. In their study of minority political incorporation in ten Northern California cities, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) recognize a middle range in which political incorporation is not complete, and where minority political participation in a biracial coalition may result in co-optation.[17] While the authors maintain that protest is not enough, it also is clear that representation alone is not enough to secure substantive "group" gains. Some interests are addressed, while others are suppressed.

THE ORIGINS OF "BLACK INTERESTS"

The rise and the articulation of an authentic "black interest" date back to the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when

> the nature of the challenge posed by disenfranchisement and the consolidation of the Jim Crow order exerted an understandable pressure toward a defensive and group-conscious orientation that also buttressed [black] elite interpretations and programs. . . . The totalistic nature of the white supremacist threat, which in principle affected all black people equally, buttressed the impetus to craft singular racial agendas.[18]

Although the concept has little to no basis in political reality, as Reed asserts, its use continues today, setting "the terms of mainstream black political debate."[19] In this context, black interests are promoted on the basis of whatever official black representatives say they are. Black leaders' hegemonic control of corporate black interests, argues Reed, allows them to utilize the "moral force of racial populism," even when it undermines black grassroots efforts.[20]

It is out of this orientation of black politics that concepts such as African-American political incorporation or African-American policy influence

have grown. If African-American political incorporation entails the ability to advance African-American interests, then it stands to reason that full African-American political incorporation can only take place when all African Americans within the community share the same interests and are working in a cohesive manner toward the same goals.

As in the Jim Crow South, this may be easier to accomplish when the policy to be advanced relates to basic civil rights such as voting or equal public accommodations—issues that create the potential for group socioeconomic or political exclusion. Conversely, full group political incorporation may be difficult to accomplish when the issue disproportionately influences socioeconomic standing. Policy is never neutral but is biased in the interest of some at the expense of others. This holds true within and outside of the African-American community.

TOWARD A MODEL OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SUBURBAN POLITICAL INCORPORATION

An accurate model of African-American political incorporation must examine internal and external factors— the pattern of relationships and the interaction within and outside of the African-American community. Internal and external factors affect the African-American community's ability to elect African Americans to political office, and the policy positions emanating from the African-American community.

External factors relate to patterns of interaction and relationships *outside* of the African-American community. They include the availability of allies to assist in the formation of a challenging coalition and the subsequent position of African Americans within the newly formed coalition; the strength, stability, and practices of the existing coalition; and/or external pressures arising from the court system or federal government mandates.

Internal factors relate to patterns of interaction and relationships *within* the African-American community. Because the African-American community is so diverse, one of the most significant internal variables is the type of policy or issue under consideration, and the impact that it has on the lives and aspirations of various segments within the African-American community. Again, when a policy is set forth as one that is "in the interest of the African-American community," one must ascertain which socioeconomic segment of the population it impacts and/or whether the impact is proportional across socioeconomic subgroups. Other internal variables include African-American population size and the socioeconomic and organizational resources within the African-American community.

The Impact of Population Size

The size of the African-American population has an impact on African Americans' ability to win elective offices and on the response to their policy positions and demands. In his seminal study on the impact of African-American voting in Tuskegee, Alabama, and Durham, North Carolina, William Keech (1968) observes that until African Americans made up a majority of the population, they were unable to win significant political gains in Tuskegee, Alabama. Similar public-sector progress, however, occurred in Durham, North Carolina, even though the African-American population was proportionally smaller.[21]

The differences were attributed to the varying responses of the politically dominant white population. In Tuskegee, African Americans were confronted with a white community that was resistant to relinquishing political power. In Durham, the white community did not view the smaller African-American community as a political threat, and thus, it was more willing to allow changes in the distribution of public-sector goods. Differences between the white community's response in Durham and Tuskegee also can be attributed, in part, to the more entrenched racism of the Deep South.[22]

James Button (1989) supports Keech's claim that a relationship exists between the relative size of the African-American population and gains made in the public sector. Button maintains that while improvements in African-American employment or protective services were usually greatest in majority African-American communities, cities with medium and low percentages of African Americans typically experienced few differences in the level of service improvements.[23] Both studies recognize the existence of a middle range of a relative African-American population at which whites feel most threatened and resist African-American service demands.

Lawrence J. Hanks' (1987) study on the struggle for African-American political empowerment in three Georgia counties also asserts the importance of population size. Through case studies of Hancock, Peach, and Clay counties Hanks examines the significance of leadership, organization, and resources in the African-American political empowerment process. His study of Hancock County depicts how, among other factors, an overwhelming African-American population was necessary in order to defeat white racial bloc voting, and to overcome low levels of African-American voter participation. According to Hanks, for African-American officials, the African-American vote, and thus a significant African-American population, becomes the sole support base for empowerment.[24]

Many studies agree that, once elected, African-American officials have a positive effect on public employment, recreational services, and police and fire safety.[25] African-American representation on policy-making bodies also has a

positive impact on the ability to garner sensitivity for African-American interests from white cohorts.[26] According to Button (1989), representation gave African-Americans easy, constant, and relatively quick access to the decision-making arena and to white leaders, both public and private.[27]

Preston (1990) notes that "not only have African-American mayors actively recruited African Americans, Hispanics, and women, they have [also] hired large numbers of them."[28] African-American mayors also have been relatively successful in dispensing city contracts to members of the African-American community.[29] According to William E. Nelson Jr. (1990), "the outstanding record of legislative achievements compiled by African-American mayors over the past twenty years clearly establishes the fact that African-American mayoral offices are not hollow prizes."[30]

These authors address the extent to which African-American mayors have accommodated African-American interests. The question is, however, "whose interests?" Have all African Americans benefited proportionately? Have poor African Americans' interests been subordinated to the interests of the African-American middle class? Surely poor African Americans have not benefited as much from policies pertaining to affirmative action and contracts, however, again we see the tendency to lump all African-American interests together.

While some studies extol the virtues of African-American representation on the life chances of African Americans, others argue that it does little to decrease the socioeconomic disparities that exist between African Americans and whites.[31] Preston (1990) notes that several African-American mayors start out as community activists fighting against the politics of exclusion. Later, however, they lose their vitality to attack new problems with the same vigor.[32] According to Preston, "the new problems of gangs, drug warfare, homelessness, and the need for low-income housing, to name only a few, are difficult problems with regional, state, and national implications."[33]

In line with Preston, Nelson (1990) notes that "despite the heroic effort of African-American mayors, the urban agenda for African-Americans remains unfinished," and that "African-American mayors have not eliminated the social, economic, and political crisis faced by African Americans in America."[34] Nelson attributes their limited success to several factors. Most prominent is the inability of African-American mayors to live up to the dictates of progressive politics, and to "move the quest for African-American political incorporation beyond the narrow confines of elected office."[35] Again, we see that representation alone is not enough. In order to represent their constituency effectively, elected officials must advance a policy that is in the interest of that constituency.

According to Nelson, African-American mayoral candidates have a tendency to enter "into coalitions with conservative white-led political organizations [and] to block the election of race-oriented African Americans." These practices, Nelson argues, can be attributed to the unwillingness of new African-American leaders to directly confront and challenge the system of racial subordination that is pervasive in the political system.[36] It also may be a manifestation of the extent to which group interests are subordinated to particular interests once gains have been made.

Socioeconomic Resources

Whether the issue is greater accountability of African-American representatives, or overcoming the resilience of an opposing established organization, much of what occurs is decidedly predicated upon the socioeconomic resources available within the African-American community. As Clarence Stone (1989) argues in his study of Atlanta, votes count, but resources decide. The power to govern depends on the ability to assemble vital resources. [37] While population size is important to representation, and representation is important to the decision-making process, the amount of available resources determines what gets done. And what gets done often is a matter of what can occur within the boundaries of existing institutional arrangements.

Socioeconomic resources can have a dual impact on African Americans' quest for political incorporation. On the one hand, it may predispose governing officials to favor some interests over others, particularly those that are more in line with existing power arrangements.[38] As Stone notes, public officials operate in an environment that rewards them for cooperating with upper strata interests and often penalizes them for cooperating with lower strata interests. Systemic bias ultimately raises the opportunity cost for poorer groups to have their interests addressed within the political system.[39] Barring extenuating circumstances, it is predictable that middle-class, African-American interests will prevail, particularly in an affluent suburban jurisdiction.

Second, socioeconomic resources within the African-American community will likely have an impact on the type of interests and policy positions that are advanced within the political system. If the level of socioeconomic resources is homogeneous, then group identity or consciousness will likely be present—group members probably will view their position and interests in the same manner. If, on the other hand, socioeconomic resources are skewed, as in the case of Prince George's County, group members may view their positions and interests differently.