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Black Women and the American Political System

by
Dorothy A. Clark

Black women and politics—it is an association rarely made by the American electorate. As a group, black women have never been prominent players in the nation's political arena. In a system of decision making and power holding designed and dominated by white men, black women are an alien group in the formal political process. Their participation in that process has been limited—indeed often blocked—by a hierarchical system of race, gender, and class oppression that relegates black women to the lowest rungs of the political power ladder.

America appears to be entering a new age of politics for women, one that also suggests a change in the status of black women in the system. A growing number of black women are vying for elective office, including national legislative seats. Twenty-one black women are seeking election to the House of Representatives in this election. The increase can be attributed partly to the new geography of the congressional landscape, redrawn on the basis of population changes to create twelve new black legislative districts.¹

According to David Bositis, political analyst with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C., “Trends are up substantially for women and black candidates . . . [creating] an ideal set of circumstances for the election of black females.”²

There are currently 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 26 of which are held by blacks, 4 of them women. If voters turn this “ideal set of circumstances” into reality, it is possible that five or six more black women may claim seats in the House.

The Illinois Senate Race

Currently, none of the one hundred seats in the U. S. Senate are held by blacks, but that too could change if Illinois Democrat Carol Moseley Braun is elected. Braun won an upset victory in the March Democratic primary, defeating two other contenders to win the party's candidacy. One of them was two-term incumbent Alan Dixon, whose vote to confirm the much-contested nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court rankled many constituents. Braun's Republican opponent in the race for the Senate seat is attorney Richard Williamson, whose well-connected political career includes stints as adviser to presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Of course, Braun is no newcomer to politics and government either, having served in the Illinois legislature and currently holding the post of recorder of deeds for Cook



County. If she wins this closely watched race for the U.S. Senate, Braun will become the third black ever elected to this legislative body. The first was Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who served from 1870 to 1871. The second, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, served from 1966 to 1978. A victory for Braun would also mean that she would become the country's first black female senator.

Would such a victory signify the elevation of black women's political status, or would it represent another “black first,” one of those historic milestones that contributes more to a sense of racial pride than to effecting fundamental change? Bositis assesses Braun's advance as an important inroad that holds substantial promise for changing policy, especially if she shares her newfound status with white women.³

Amazement and jubilation were the responses to Braun's win in the primary; such an impressive breakthrough by a black woman had not been anticipated. The search for reasons to explain her political success began

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with the question of who voted for her and why. She received the almost obligatory majority of the state's black vote, 82 percent. Statistics also reveal that Braun garnered 26 percent of the white vote and 40 percent of the women's vote.⁴

Political pundits and the media cite voters' exasperation with incumbents, a mood that has seemed to overtake the nation, as one factor that helped foster a climate amenable to Braun's aspirations. Particularly in regard to women, they report that exasperation churned into outrage with the controversy fomented by allegations of

sexual harassment against Thomas during his confirmation process.⁵ The claims made by University of Oklahoma law professor Anita Hill and the Senate's handling of the matter and subsequent approval of Thomas for the Supreme Court galvanized women to assert themselves more forcefully in the political process.

Black and White Feminism

But, this newly mobilized phalanx as depicted in the media is composed of primarily white women. The Thomas-Hill matter and the highly charged nature of gender politics it uncovered has shown no signs of fostering any sort of coalition between black and white women in the political arena. White women, brandishing the Thomas-Hill issue, have moved to elbow their male counterparts aside to gain greater access to the political system. For instance, in her run for a U.S. Senate seat, one-time Democratic vice-presidential hopeful Geraldine Ferraro of New York used the example of Anita Hill in a television campaign advertisement to wage her battle against her opponents—Republican incumbent Al D'Amato and two other Democrats contending for the party's nomination, State Attorney General Bob Abrams and New York City Comptroller Liz Holtzman.

The ad, which shows a photograph of Hill, states that just as Republican senators and others engineered a "blistering smear campaign to discredit" Hill, similar forces had lined up against Ferraro to cast aspersions on her business dealings. "A year ago, a woman fighting for change was smeared. Don't let it happen again," the ad said.⁶ The campaign skirmish became all the more curious when Holtzman used Hill to counterattack Ferraro. "One difference between Anita Hill and Gerry Ferraro: Anita Hill came forward and told the truth," Holtzman's subsequent television ad stated.⁷

The Thomas-Hill controversy, played out as it was in the media, caused much consternation among blacks. Yet, it appears that for blacks, the issue has not served as the same type of political ammunition that it has for whites. Notably, black women have not employed the controversy to oppose their male counterparts in the political sphere, where traditionally they have had a marginal presence. It may be argued that this has not occurred simply because black men do not dominate decision making and power holding in politics. While this could be a factor, it does not adequately explain why the plight of Anita Hill seems to be more of a rallying point against the patriarchal order for white women than for black women.

White feminists tend to see themselves as being in conflict with men, and the tawdry farce into which Thomas's confirmation hearing degenerated exacerbated this conflict. There is, however, a different perception of this battle of the sexes among black women, who along with black men must contend with racism. Historically, black women have found that while they must battle discrimination based on both gender and

skin color, the struggle for racial parity has often taken precedence over that of gender equality. It would be futile for black women to fight for equal rights as women while their rights as people of color are denied. Gender equality would mean nothing to black women without the eradication of racial oppression. The contemporary white feminist movement tends to exhibit a lack of understanding of this fundamental difference in black women's experience. As a result, black women have been alienated not from feminist concerns, but from the movement.

According to sociologist Vivian Gordon, contemporary white feminists presume that black males hold positions of power equal to white males and thus "often attempt to impose upon black women a definition for black male/female relationships based upon their perspectives which identify all men as the enemy."⁸ Black women, however, have not accepted this aspect of feminist ideology which could promote gender divisions that would weaken the black liberation struggle. "Black women continue to insist that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the emancipation of the total African-American community," says Gordon. "Primarily, such women view themselves to be co-partners with black men in the struggle against oppression by defining liberation to include freedom from all forms of oppression, including sexism."⁹

The fact that the Thomas-Hill issue has failed to promote the growth of political solidarity among black and white women is far from surprising, given the long

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history of uneasy politics between these two groups. White women of the antebellum South saw no similarities between their own subjugation and the treatment of enslaved black women and thus were participants in the oppression of black women. In the North, white female abolitionists frequently barred black women from joining their organizations. Later the suffragists, many of whom had been abolitionists, excluded black women from their movement to acquire voting rights, incensed that the Fifteenth Amendment extended the franchise to black men and not white women. The modern feminist movement, as well, has had an antagonistic relationship with women of color because its white, middle-class perspective has had little currency for women whose standpoint is not grounded in that ideology. While the effects of oppression experienced by white women cannot be dismissed or minimized, it is crucial to recognize and acknowledge that their oppression is not compounded by racism.

White women, as a group, have a degree of recognition as viable participants in the nation's political system that black women do not. The oppressive triumvirate of racism, sexism, and classism has totally eclipsed this group on America's political horizon. Note how black women are obscured in the demographic percentages tallied to study Braun's victory in the Illinois primary. Are they to be counted among the black vote or the women's vote? The face of the black vote is most likely male, while that of the women's vote is white. Where, then, does this leave black women?

A Black Woman's Place

For a brief but peculiar moment, black women did begin to figure prominently in the politics of the 1992 presidential campaign. The Democratic and Republican parties, abetted by the media, invoked a stereotypical image of the "bad" black woman and attempted to put her back in her "place."

First, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton targeted rap artist-activist Sister Souljah, labelling her a racially divisive force in the nation and protesting her participation in a Rainbow Coalition event in Washington, D.C. He based his assessment on remarks Sister Souljah made in an interview conducted after the Los Angeles riots, to explain the mentality of gangs who perpetrate violence. Clinton, incensed at her suggestion that the violence that has taken so many black lives would eventually begin to claim white ones, chastised her for promoting discord between the races. Sister Souljah, who has been active

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mainly in the New York area, was not nationally known until Clinton tried to silence her by making her an example of an undesirable—and outspoken—black woman whom America did not need.

The Republicans launched a similar offensive with Vice-President Dan Quayle's scolding of U.S. Representative Maxine Waters, a Democrat from California. Quayle demanded that Waters apologize for, in his interpretation, calling President Bush a racist after her comments that the president was unconcerned with black Americans.

Both incidents displayed the arrogance with which the dominant culture tends to respond to blacks who do not speak in ways that appease whites. Neither Sister Souljah nor Waters acquiesced to their critics. Clinton and Quayle, two privileged males at the center of America's white-dominated, patriarchal political system, chose to inject black women into the presidential campaign in a highly charged, negative way. Their

criticism implied that black people, not white racism, are responsible for the persistence of America's "race problem."

A History of Black Activism

Despite the current focus on women advancing to the fore in American politics, black women continue to be largely excluded from the formal political process. This exclusion, however, does not signify a lack of activism on the part of black women. Theirs has been a vital activism, exercised in a variety of ways and at various levels, but always central to the empowerment of black people. History is replete with accounts of black women who, individually and as a group, of necessity have defined ways particular to their status and condition in the struggle for freedom. Their efforts have resulted in large and small successes for black people in America.

The experience of black women in the United States is not one of an apolitical or uninvolved presence. Nearly three decades ago, author Edward T. Clayton noted that black women traditionally outnumbered black men in "performing the grassroots tasks necessary to political success," adding that, "The Negro woman has been the mainstay of the Negro man in politics almost since the post-Civil War South."¹⁰ Although Clayton sees the role of black women as primarily a supportive one, they nevertheless had a significant impact on their communities.

Highly notable is Mary McLeod Bethune, an adviser to presidents Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman. Bethune was especially influential in the Roosevelt administration, the only woman appointed to his "Black Cabinet." As a key member of Roosevelt's "Black Braintrusts," Bethune used her directorship of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration to establish a strong advocacy base at the federal level for blacks, particularly women and youth.

The record goes back much further, to all the black women who resisted and defied the system of slavery. It includes Maria W. Stewart, who is considered America's first black female political writer, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, who migrated to Canada where she became the first black woman newspaper editor in North America. Sojourner Truth, who via her now-famous question, "Ain't I a woman?," declared that although black females neither fit the mold of the feminine ideal crafted for their white counterparts nor were afforded any of its benefits, they were not devoid of womanhood or humanity. There were the women who in the late 1800s mobilized to form the black Women's Club Movement. The intrepid Ida B. Wells Barnett commanded international support for the antilynching campaign she spearheaded to combat the brutal mob murders of black men and women. Indeed, masses of black women have made vast contributions in the struggle against oppression through family, community, the educational system, the arts, politics—in all spheres of American life. And their work has gone largely unacknowledged.

The Dawning of a New Era

Is the American political system becoming more inclusive of and responsive to black women? The fact that black women are seeking elective office is evidence of marked advancement. However, their inclusion cannot even be called gradual—it is occasional.

Amid the excitement and wonder over the dawning of a new era in politics for women, the general exclusion of black women from the formal process persists. This is reflective of the status assigned to them by mainstream American society. By their resistance to this, as well as

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to the overall program of white supremacist oppression, black women have forged a tradition of empowerment activism. Because it seeks to break the monopoly of white control over societal arrangements, empowerment activism is adversary to mainstream political functions.

A more critical question is this: Can the American political system, one of the pillars of a society stratified by racism, sexism, and classism, accommodate the presence of black women? If mere accommodation were the goal, the onus would no doubt be placed upon black women and their presence would likely be a dim one. The existing political framework was not intended for the full participation of any group other than the one which dominates it. Only when this framework is dismantled, or at the least, undergoes substantial ideological restructuring, will it allow for the equitable representation of the nation's disenfranchised citizens. In the meantime, masses of black women will continue their tradition of activism, though still largely unacknowledged.

Notes

¹Representation in the U.S. House of Representatives is based on population. Congressional districts are redrawn every ten years on the basis of changes recorded by the federal census. Amendments made in 1982 to the Voting Rights Act require that legislative districts be redrawn so as not to dilute black voting power.

²David Bosisis, telephone interview with the author. 4 June 1992.

³Ibid.

⁴*Emerge*, June 1992, 9.

⁵Ibid., *Ebony*, June 1992, 121. Reports on voter dissatisfaction with incumbents also dominated mainstream news outlets.

⁶Associated Press, 27 August 1992.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Vivian Gordon, *Black Women, Feminism, and Black Liberation: Which Way?* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 27.

⁹Ibid., 56.

¹⁰Edward T. Clayton, *The Negro Politician: His Success and Failure* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), 122–123.

Dorothy Clarke is a journalist and a research associate with the William Monroe Trotter Institute.

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A Historic Moment: Black Voters and the 1992 Presidential Race

by Clarence Lusane

¹⁴Ron Walters, "Clinton's Gall," *Washington Post*, 16 June 1992.

¹⁵Robin Toner, "The 1992 Campaign Strategy: Perot Makes Major Parties Do Some Major Rethinking," *New York Times*, 4 June 1992.

¹⁶Ron Walters, *Black Presidential Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37.

¹⁷Ibid., 28.

¹⁸Barbara Reynolds, "Without the Black Vote, Party's Over for Democrats," *USA Today*, 13 March 1992.

¹⁹Gary Maloney, ed., *The Almanac of 1988 Presidential Politics* (Falls Church, VA: The American Political Network, 1989), 34.

²⁰Richard Benedetto, "Perot Attracts Support From Swing Voters," *USA Today*, 17 June 1992.

²¹Clarence Lusane, "Souljah Story," *Black Political Agenda '92*, June 1992, 6.

²²William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1992, 33–44.

²³Richard Benedetto, "Perot Vote Tilts to Clinton," *USA Today*, 20 July 1992.

²⁴Kathleen Quinn, "If Perot Were Black," *New York Times*, 11 June 1992.

²⁵Michael Isikoff, "Perot's Rhetorical Drug War Raises Questions," *Washington Post*, 9 June 1992; and Frank Snepp, "Ross Perot's Private War on Drugs," *Village Voice*, 9 June 1992, 25–28.

Clarence Lusane is an author, activist, and freelance journalist in Washington, D.C. He is currently the editor of the newsletter *Black Political Agenda '92*. His writings have appeared in *Black Scholar*, *Washington Post*, *Oakland Tribune*, and other publications. He is the author of *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs* and *The Struggle for Equal Education*.