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## Black Power at the Polls: The Harold Washington Campaign of 1983 and the Demise of the Democratic Machine in Chicago

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As long as the black people of Chicago—and the same can be said of cities throughout the country—remain politically dependent on the Democratic machine, their interests will be secondary to that machine.

Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, 1967

If you don't have any political power, then you don't get represented very well. And so people bind themselves together to exercise their collective thinking through the American process called voting.

Renault Robinson, *Chicago Reader*, 1982

### INTRODUCTION

Ten days before the Chicago mayoral election of 1983, a white Chicagoan wrote to the *Chicago Tribune*, “I fervently hope that Chicagoans will be colorblind when they cast their mayoral votes on April 12. Let their choice be governed solely on the basis of the candidate’s administrative and fiscal talents, buttressed by professional and personal integrity.”<sup>1</sup> However, the heated election campaign of 1983 that eventually led to the choice of Harold

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Washington as Chicago's first African American mayor came to be known as one of the most racially divided mayoral contests in modern urban history. Since the late 1960s, the election of African American mayors in the nation's largest cities has usually been characterized by a stark racial divide. But what made the Chicago election unique is that the Democratic primary and the general election exhibited different ways in which race wielded its influence: while in the former campaign race was not openly talked about, the latter was characterized by a heated controversy directly related to race.

In a city that had had no Republican mayor since Mayor Anton Cermak consolidated the Democratic machine in the 1930s, the crucial Democratic primary was fought by three colorful contestants: Jane Byrne, the machine incumbent and the first female mayor of one of the nation's largest cities; Richard M. Daley, Cook County state attorney and son of former mayor Richard J. Daley, the legendary boss of the Chicago political machine; and Harold Washington, congressman from Chicago's South Side. A quarter of a century later, American voters witnessed a similar three-way contest, this time in the larger arena of the presidential election of 2008, between a white woman with formidable political clout, Hilary R. Clinton; a white male with working-class white support, John Edwards; and a former Illinois state legislator and the only current African American member of the US Senate, Barack H. Obama. This similarity elicits renewed interest in the Chicago campaign.<sup>2</sup> As historian Thomas J. Sugrue rightly argues, Washington's candidacy and subsequent mayoralty gave the first black president of the United States an early hint at what politics could and could not do.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the youthful Obama had applied to work for Mayor Washington while he was a graduate student at Columbia University; it was his first step in politics that would lead the Hawaiian with African ancestry to Chicago and eventually to the White House.<sup>4</sup>

Washington's campaign and that of Obama had indeed a common feature in that their campaigns were characterized by a "movement" fervor. However, even a casual observer would notice that there were huge differences between the politics characterized by racial hostility and those that arguably sought to bridge the divide. Thus, it is highly important to qualify and historicize the significance of Washington's campaign. Without that historical qualification, modern African American history would be trapped in a metanarrative of the ultimate triumph of Obama and American liberalism. It is an extremely powerful narrative but incomplete, even misleading. An easy reference to the fulfillment of promises of the civil rights movement, I argue, is working against a deep understanding of the

African American struggle for freedom. In this essay, by tracing turbulent politics in Chicago and evolving black Chicago's dissident activities within the crumbling political machine, I place Harold Washington's election in the history of the civil rights/black power movement and punctuate a troubled trajectory of American racial politics in the urban North.<sup>5</sup>

Studies of Chicago's mayoral election of 1983 have mostly been carried out by journalists and political scientists. Since two highly competitive contests, with different racial overtones, were juxtaposed, it serves as a good case for inquiry into the way in which race affected the election's outcome. Previous studies, without considering the larger context, have placed too much emphasis on tracing the ebb and flow of the election processes. Detailed analysis of opinion polls, media content, and election returns undoubtedly has scholastic merits, but studies that rely on them fail to untangle the complicated way in which racial hostilities came to the surface.

Washington's early demise in 1987, during his second term in office, has made it extremely difficult for scholars to evaluate his mayoralty. Since his first term and early second term were characterized by intransigent city council opposition led by Democratic Party chairman Edward Vrdolyak, which stalled the mayor's every initiative and proposal, it seems that Washington's mayoralty did not achieve anything concrete or sustainable. Arnold Hirsch, an insightful historian of Chicago politics, put it very pessimistically: "The elevation of a new class of African-American officeholders has not . . . substantially altered the social structure of urban America."<sup>6</sup>

In this essay I trace the contradictory double-track road of African American empowerment and racial isolation, illuminating the processes in which Washington's candidacy mobilized a previously disaffected African American electorate in Chicago while at the same time it invoked deep-rooted racial fears. If we look closely at the electoral process and put it in the historical context of the black struggle for freedom, what is revealed is that black Chicagoans' political dissent in 1983 completely changed the Windy City's political landscape. African American voters saw in Washington's election an embodiment of their "empowerment," while activists regarded it as a continuation of the civil rights struggle. However, for white voters, the Washington campaign's "movement fervor" set off their own racial fears and anxiety because they saw in his rise an eventual black takeover of the city.

## I. REVISITING THE CIVIL RIGHTS/BLACK POWER DEBATE

In order to understand racially different perceptions of “empowerment,” it is important to decipher the enigmatic, as well as problematic, slogan “black power.” In February 1965, black activist and intellectual Bayard Rustin wrote an important and, in hindsight, prescient essay, “From Protest to Politics,” in which he made several bold proposals for the future direction of African Americans’ struggle for freedom. Rustin pointed out that with “most anachronistic, dispensable, and vulnerable” aspects of the Jim Crow laws gone, African Americans now had to face the more intractable problems of structural inequalities and injustices created by the combined forces of de facto segregation of public schools and housing, chronic unemployment and underemployment of blacks, and expanding urban decay that hit severely disadvantaged African Americans trapped in urban ghettos. Thus, for him, the future challenge of the civil rights movement was not in the sphere of “civil rights, strictly speaking, but social economic conditions.” As direct action became increasingly obsolete and ineffective, Rustin demanded that it be “subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases.” African Americans had to make a conscious tactical shift to “make a bid for *political power*” through a coalition of “Negroes, trade unionists, liberals and religious groups.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, instead of protest activities such as street demonstrations and sit-ins, Rustin was arguing for coalitional political action with liberal candidates to deal with the problems of post-civil rights America while giving less importance to racial aspects of the same problems. Throughout his life, Rustin’s faith in coalition politics never budged. He went so far as to oppose Martin Luther King Jr.’s initiatives to bring Southern protest tactics to Chicago. In 1966, King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) launched the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM), which was led by Albert “Al” Raby, the head of Chicago’s coalition of civic and civil rights organizations, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations. In order to force the city to tackle the perennial problem of housing segregation, the CFM organized a series of protest marches that ventured into white working-class neighborhoods of the city’s Southwest Side and West Side. This rent the delicate fabric of Chicago’s white ethnic communities, which Mayor Daley’s political machine carefully attended to. King and his entourage had to face an angry white mob in these communities, while the black machine elite sided with Daley.

Despite his prevalent image as a machine boss, Mayor Daley maintained his popularity among African American voters until the early 1970s. In the mayoral general election in 1963, the Daley machine pulled overwhelming support from the black wards on the South Side and West Side.<sup>8</sup> In the following years, Daley's electoral strength seemed to be in decline, and, in the 1975 primary election in which he was challenged by an African American state senator, Richard Newhouse, he received only 48 percent of votes cast in the predominantly black wards. However, although a viable black candidate had entered the race for the first time in Chicago's history, Newhouse failed to capture even second place in any of the black wards. Black incumbent aldermen and committeemen continued to show their loyalty to the machine, and even the black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* gave its endorsement to Daley.<sup>9</sup> Around this time, Don Rose, a local political consultant and an astute observer of the machine, said, "The [Democratic] Organization owns a lock on a solid 20 percent of the black vote. This is the vote the Machine would deliver for a George Wallace against a Martin Luther King."<sup>10</sup>

As the civil rights leader's first major effort in the North, the CFM campaign started with a fanfare, but, after facing the entrenched power of the Democratic machine, King left Chicago without any concrete achievement and only a token agreement on open housing.<sup>11</sup> Rustin's opinion was that the protest politics of the civil rights movement were already passé and that, if the tactics were employed in the urban North, it would only alienate one of the indispensable allies of blacks, the Democratic machine politicians, who had nonetheless supported various liberal causes.<sup>12</sup> As if attesting to the soundness of Rustin's prediction, protest politics *a la* Southern civil rights movement was powerless in dealing with the problems of the post-civil rights struggle in cities of the North. Richard J. Daley, for his part, facing ever-increasing dissent from black Chicagoans, adeptly reconstituted the machine's base of support from African Americans to another cohort of discontent, working- and middle-class whites. As William Grimshaw, a political scientist and white liberal campaign organizer, puts it, "The Southwest Side, the area experiencing great racial change, became the Daley machine's new electoral stronghold."<sup>13</sup> This was an area that experienced the CFM's open-housing protest marches in 1966.

Faced with the rise of white conservatism and black power radicalism, Rustin's coalition politics also went nowhere. In fact, his diatribes against separatist solutions were prompted by Malcolm X and his followers gaining support among black urban youth. In the following year, in criticizing black

power advocates' rising star, Stokely Carmichael, Rustin declared that "black power' not only lacks any real value for the civil-rights movement, but . . . its propagation is positively harmful."<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting here that, despite the violent connotations of the black power slogan, Carmichael thought electoral politics was the most important arena where black people could wrest political control from the "white power structure." Together with political scientist Charles Hamilton, he argued:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society. Traditionally, each new ethnic group in this society has found the route to social and political viability through the organization of its own institutions with which to represent its needs within the larger society. Studies in voting behavior specifically, and political behavior generally, have made it clear that politically the American pot has not melted. Italians vote for Rubino over O'Brien; Irish for Murphy over Goldberg, etc. This phenomenon may seem distasteful to some, but it has been and remains today a central fact of the American political system.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly enough, then, in the closing years of the classic phase of the civil rights movement, Rustin as an integrationist and Carmichael as a black powerite both regarded electoral politics as the most important area for the future of African Americans' struggle for freedom. In short, in the post-civil rights era of black struggle, electoral politics emerged as a common space in which both integrationists and separatists could work together.

Admittedly, black power advocacy was one of the principal reasons for the isolation of the African American cause, and black bloc voting was also a part of it. Then, why did urban black activists, at the time when they desperately needed allies in order to deal with intractable urban problems, insist on racial solidarity and even cry for "Black Power!"

In fact, African Americans had a complex and nuanced understanding of American politics and society, and their advocacy of black power did not necessarily mean they favored separatism or parochial black nationalism. In their studies of Detroit's black ghetto in the late 1960s, political scientists Joel D. Aberbach and Jack L. Walker found that for white people "black

power” invoked black domination or urban unrest, while for black people it was more likely to connote subtle issues of tactics and emphasis in the struggle for equality: almost 40 percent of whites thought that the slogan meant “black rule over whites,” whereas only 9 percent of blacks held the same view. And 57.8 percent of whites perceived the slogan as meaning either black rule over whites, reverse racism, or violent behavior; but only 16.5 percent of blacks perceived it to mean that. According to Aberbach and Walker, black power supporters were more likely to hold the view that the slogan meant they should have a fairer share in the benefits of American society and that “blacks who are most favorably disposed toward black power simply do not see the political world as one where blacks can gain smoothing only at the expense of whites . . . but a large number of whites do see things this way.” And, as the slogan served as a rallying cry for the black community, what the researchers found in the black ghetto was “a more unified, more highly mobilized black political community” than in the 1950s and early 1960s. This emerging black community was restless and still groping for “new forms of political expression and participation.” They nevertheless did not lose faith in the American political system. “Even the most militant advocates of black power” showed “a willingness to participate in political campaigns and elections.”<sup>16</sup>

In fact, in subsequent years in Detroit, black middle-class intellectuals and black power advocates equated their alleged “powerlessness” with lack of representation in local government, and they launched vigorous voter-registration drives. In 1973, their efforts in part bore fruit when Coleman Young was elected mayor of the Motor City, which was widely heralded as the coming of an age of black power in city hall.<sup>17</sup> Ten years later in Chicago, another northern industrial city along the Great Lakes, as urban decay continued unabated—or was even exacerbated by President Ronald Reagan’s budget cuts to cities—the mayoral election would unfold against the backdrop of differing notions of black power and concomitant racial tension.

## II. MACHINE POLITICS IN CHICAGO AND AFRICAN AMERICAN DISSENT

In 1979, Jane Byrne, a former commissioner of Consumer Sales, Weights and Measures and Cook County Democratic Party cochair under Chairman Daley, was elected mayor, defeating Michael A. Balladic, Daley’s successor in the machine after the boss’s death in 1976. As a Daley protégé, Byrne had also been a machine insider, but, because she was running against the

incumbent, she appealed to voter discontent with Bilandic's revamped machine, calling Democratic leaders such as Bilandic, Vice Mayor Edward Vrdolyak, and other machine politicians a "cabal of evil men." A massive snowfall during the primary, which caused a serious traffic problem, certainly helped this renegade in her challenge to the machine. But it was solid support from black Chicagoans, now reaching well over 30 percent of the electorate, that decided the election's outcome. In the election, which was decided by a slim margin of 17,000 out of a total of 800,000 votes cast, Byrne won fourteen out of sixteen black-majority wards, and 36.1 percent of her votes came from those wards.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, black Chicagoans had much to expect from the new mayor. But, as Byrne hastily mended the soured relationship with the "cabal of evil men" and came back into the machine's fold, she had to face the newly activated black community that her candidacy itself had led outside the machine for the first time in Chicago's history.

During early 1981, the rift between Byrne and the African American community came out in the open when a controversy over public education spilled into ward politics. When a South Side alderman from the 17th Ward resigned, Byrne appointed Alan Streeter, an African American precinct captain, to the post. Byrne undoubtedly thought Streeter was a loyal machine Democrat, and his promotion to the vacant post was not so unusual by Chicago's political standards. But African American grassroots leadership had a different opinion and filed a suit to demand a special election. The federal court decided the appointment was improper and ordered the city to hold a special election in June.<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime, Streeter was named by Byrne to the Education Committee of the city council, which had been engulfed in a heated controversy over the mayor's appointments to the Board of Education. Byrne appointed two white women from the Northwest Side who had been fierce opponents of busing and desegregation efforts in 1977. The black community reacted with a series of protests organized by the Chicago Black United Communities. The CBUC was formed in January 1979 with Lutrelle "Lu" Palmer, a popular radio talk show host and black nationalist, and Dorothy Tillman, a movement veteran who came to Chicago as a member of an advance team of the SCLC in 1966, as their leaders. While the CBUC's opposition to Byrne was a natural outgrowth of their school-reform activities, after civil rights activist Jesse L. Jackson joined them, their activities grew into a powerful coalition of grassroots activists.<sup>20</sup> As protest activities were heating up, Streeter decided to break with Byrne and refused

to support her school board appointees. Byrne reacted with vengeance. According to Streeter, influential ward officials threatened him: if he opposed her choice of board members, she would “do all that she could to defeat me, including using her control over patronage.” Deprived of the machine’s support, Streeter was now supported by grassroots activists, and, in the end, he prevailed in the special election for alderman, winning 55.6 percent of the vote.<sup>21</sup>

The next confrontation between Byrne and black grassroots activists occurred over a longtime site of Chicago racial disputes, public housing. In March 1982, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development released a report on the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). The report called the CHA one of the worst managed public housing agencies in the nation and a “vehicle of patronage.” It demanded the resignation of its chairman and principal Byrne fundraiser, Charles Swibel.<sup>22</sup> Byrne abruptly announced she would move into the Cabrini-Green housing project (most of the project’s 13,545 residents were black) and use the apartment as her part-time home. It was certainly an eccentric “move” for a big city mayor, but it was fitting with her feisty character. The national media initially praised her action as “humanitarian and political genius.” Even Renault Robison, an African American police union organizer, CHA board member, and future campaign manager for Harold Washington, noted, “This takes a lot of guts. . . . If this works, the mayor’s political stock in the black community will rise 100%.” But it wasn’t long before African Americans became suspicious of her motives and began to regard her action as condescending and outright patronizing.<sup>23</sup> Alderman Danny Davis, an African American and the sole independent member of the city council, criticized her actions, saying she confused “symbolism with substance” and that her action was heaping “insult after insult after insult as though blacks are totally ignorant.” And some black activists, Palmer and Tillman among them, even accused her of turning the apartment into “a police state.”<sup>24</sup>

Needless to say, Mayor Byrne’s “move” did not bring any solution to the massive problems of the beleaguered CHA, and, facing the possibility of a federal housing funding cut, the mayor decided to reorganize the CHA board. In a political miscalculation she appointed not only another white, Andrew Moony, as chairman but she also replaced two black board members with whites. During the summer, African American protest actions became increasingly militant, with an attempt to take over a CHA board meeting, which resulted in the jailing of Palmer. It was around this time that Jesse Jackson again entered the fray and proposed boycotting ChicagoFest, a

summer-long food and entertainment event that the city had been boosting to attract tourists to the postindustrial city.<sup>25</sup> As was often the case with maverick Jackson's activities, there was little boycott coordination, and the protest activities just petered out.<sup>26</sup> However, what happened later in Chicago served as a testing ground for the strategy both Bayard Rustin and black power advocates had envisioned years earlier, when the initial excitement the boycott sparked grew into a coordinated effort to register voters.

Despite the desires of the civil rights leadership, voter registration and participation of blacks in Chicago had constantly been about 10 percent lower than that of whites. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, the black community witnessed increasing insurgent activities led by articulate civil rights leaders. But, in Chicago, those activities were juxtaposed with the machine's tight hold over black voters. During Daley's and, subsequently, Bilandic's machine mayoralties in the 1970s, the African American community began to lose interest in voting, and the mayoral election turnout in the predominantly black wards fell to a historic low of 35 percent. (The figure dropped further to a dismal 27 percent.)<sup>27</sup> Thus, in the mid-1970s, Chicago's black community was confronting an internal contradiction between street agitation and voting apathy.

A survey conducted by the Chicago Urban League (CUL) in 1979 found that "some perceived unresponsiveness or inadequacy of the political system" was a major reason for African Americans nonparticipation in elections. Among the nonregistered, 49.9 percent said they were "not interested in any of the candidates," while 32.2 percent said they were "fed up with the whole political system." But, beyond the widespread political apathy, the CUL researchers found that "if black political participation could be increased by 5 to 10%," black voters "might effectively determine the outcome" of the 1983 mayoral election.<sup>28</sup> This report became the source for the prediction that a viable black candidate could win the mayoralty. Before long, those organizations that participated in the ChicagoFest boycott, such as Palmer's CBUC and Jackson's Operation PUSH, on the one hand, and the more established mainstream organization, such as the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the CUL, on the other, launched spirited voter-registration drives. And, in September, their independent efforts coalesced in a consortium, the People's Movement for Voter Registration.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas mainstream media attention was mostly focused on ubiquitous Jesse Jackson's performances, the drive's most bold and novel acts were

initiated by a coalition of neighborhood organizations generally known by its acronym, POWER (People's Organization for Welfare and Employment Rights). In the putative hometown of a racialized "welfare queen," POWER opened registration posts at twenty public aid and ten unemployment compensation offices. While joining the electoral process, its leaders had dissident protest politics in mind: Tillman, as a POWER leader, explained that the drive was aimed at "catching the people at the very moment of their discontent." In the end, their effort led to a historic registration record of over 120,000 new voters, including 40,000 who were registered at welfare and unemployment offices. As a result of multifold grassroots activities, the mundane effort of increasing voter registration in a city in the North had led to movement fervor. Through the electoral process, massive mobilization, which the CFM failed to produce in 1966, was finally achieved in Chicago. As an African American Chicagoan put it, registering to vote became "in vogue, just as marching was in the 1960s," and "taking to the street" meant filling out a registration form.<sup>30</sup> Vernon Jarrett, an African American journalist, reported at the time, "They are angry at Reagan, disgusted with Mayor Byrne, and they also see the possibility of a black mayor in 1983. These factors combined to 'finally get black folks moving down South.'"<sup>31</sup>

### III. HAROLD WASHINGTON'S PROTEST/ELECTORAL FUSION POLITICS

Concurrently with the registration drive, black grassroots leadership began a search for a viable candidate for the upcoming mayoral election. Although Harold Washington's candidacy was frequently mentioned in Chicago's press, he was reluctant to join their effort: he told grassroots activists that 50,000 newly registered voters was a precondition for him to run.<sup>32</sup> Once the registration drive transformed the mood of the community, on November 10, 1983, Washington finally decided to enter the race.

Harold Washington was born in 1922 at Bronzeville on the South Side of Chicago. His father, Roy Washington, was a Democratic precinct captain of the 3rd Ward, the home turf of powerful black machine "underboss" William Dawson. The black precinct captain's son got a law degree from Northwestern University Law School and opened an office with his father, who was corporate counsel for the city of Chicago. In 1953, he succeeded his father as precinct captain and dutifully climbed up through the machine's ranks to become a state representative from 1965 to 1977, and then a state senator. In 1980, he won a seat in the US House of Representatives that was previously held by legendary icons of black politics in Chicago Oscar

DePriest and William Dawson.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his political initiation as a machine insider, Washington was one of the earliest renegades from the Daley machine. In 1966, during the height of the CFM's demonstrations, he refused to cooperate with the mayor. And, in the 1970s, his opposition to Daley's prerogatives became increasingly vocal and visible, which sometimes pitted him against then state senator Richard M. Daley. Then, in the 1978 state senate election, the machine retaliated, slating two obscure candidates with the same surname in order to confuse the voters, which made Washington's break with the machine irreparable. Washington won the election by only 236 votes.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas, in 1982, Washington's initial reluctance to enter the mayoral race was informed by his experiences as a machine worker and politician (he could estimate the votes), it was his expertise in flying over the stormy weather of Windy City politics that grassroots activists valued the most. That is one reason why the activists avoided slating the visible but controversial activist on the street, Jesse Jackson. Of the choice, Renault Robison said, "If we didn't think we'd win, he would not be out there. . . . He has been in the machine and out and has risen all the way."<sup>35</sup>

The detailed process of the Democratic primary has been amply discussed elsewhere. For the purposes of this essay, it suffices to say that, because the campaign debates were focused on city finances and economic development, race was not *openly debated* during the campaign. One of the reasons for reticence to discuss race was that, in Chicago, the African American electorate was such an indispensable part of the Democratic electorate that to pull a plurality in the heated three-way contest, neither Byrne nor Daley could afford to alienate black voters.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the election returns showed clear division by race: except for the 1st Ward (Chicago's downtown), Washington's support came mostly from predominantly black wards and he made little inroads in white districts. But, because white votes were almost evenly split between the white candidates and the African American turnout reached a historic 74.5 percent, Washington grabbed victory by a margin of 36,145 votes out of 1.3 million votes cast.

However, there had been one critical exception in which racial issues rose to the surface. As the opinion polls showed that Washington had solidified his base in the black community, the Democratic machine was desperate to cut into Daley's white supporters. So, during the final weekend of the campaign, the new Democratic Party chairman, Vrdolyak, played the race card on behalf of Byrne. In the white neighborhoods on the Northwest Side, he reportedly said the primary contest was "a racial thing." He

continued, “A vote for Daley is a vote for Washington. . . . We’re fighting to keep the city the way it was.”<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, as scholars and contemporary observers pointed out, the blunt way that race was employed worked against Byrne. The previous lead that she held over Daley slipped to her white opponent; playing the race card eventually caused her defeat.<sup>38</sup>

But it would be too hasty a conclusion to say that white voters found race baiting repugnant in itself. Rather, they became afraid that if they voted for Byrne they would be called “racists.” At the same time they genuinely feared racial integration, which they thought a black mayoralty would inevitably bring about.<sup>39</sup> In the following general election, their *double anxiety*—of being dominated by blacks and of being called racist—was targeted by Bernard Epton, a wealthy insurance consultant and state senator from the University of Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park, who was running on the Republican side.

By early March, Epton’s campaign theme became clear: he launched a series of fierce attacks on Washington’s past legal problems and negligence—that is, his failure to file an income tax return that resulted in forty days in jail, suspension from the bar for three years on account of failure to give required service to clients, and failure to pay various utility bills. Moreover, TV viewers were bombarded with a campaign advertisement that depicted Washington as a convicted criminal overlaid with the message “Epton for Mayor, Before It’s Too Late.” Washington’s camp rightly criticized the campaign tactic as injecting race into the contest. However, Epton denied any racist intention, claiming instead that overlooking Washington’s problems because of fear of being called racist would be nothing more than “reverse racism.”<sup>40</sup>

Washington’s protest/electoral fusion politics further stoked white voters’ fears. During the general election campaign, some of Washington’s statements invoked renewed controversy among disaffected white Chicagoans. When he announced his candidacy in November 1982, he told his mostly black supporters, “We have given the white candidates our vote for years and years and years. Now it’s our turn, it’s our turn, it’s our turn.” He cautiously refrained, however, from mentioning experiences specific to the black community. The “we” in the statement became clear when he said in the same speech, “Every group, when it reaches a certain population percentage, automatically takes over. They don’t apologize. They just move in and take over.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the black mayoral candidate presented himself as, in the popular parlance of the black power era, the candidate

who was “unapologetically black” when communicating with “one of our own.”

Washington’s statements should not be regarded as an expression of radical black nationalism. For example, during the registration drive of 1982, John Stroger, a black machine politician and a moderate Cook County Commission member, describing black Chicagoans’ experiences and desires, said: “We have been the coal that has heated the pot. Now it’s time for us to get in that pot so that we can improve our social and economic plight in this city. It can be done through the ballot box.”<sup>42</sup> Washington’s statement was not a gaffe but rather a reflection of African Americans’ resolve to work inside the American electoral system.

Although Washington’s campaign was largely based on the African American community’s disaffection with the Democratic machine and its resurgent interest in electoral politics, the candidate himself clearly recognized the importance of gaining white votes. For the purpose of easing white anxiety and for better coordinating campaign activities, on December 12 he decided to replace his activist campaign manager Renault Robison and picked up Al Raby, not because of his leading role in the CFM but for his managerial expertise as an aid to Governor Dan Walker and as head of the Peace Corps in Ghana.<sup>43</sup> But the movement fervor was not lost on Raby. Rather, it became more pronounced. In vocabulary coming directly from both the color-blind civil rights movement and the color-conscious black power movement, Raby explained the historical importance of Washington’s candidacy:

The white power structure depends on Blacks believing that only whites can run the city well. If enough self-doubt can be sown in the minority community, they will never have to give up their power. Harold Washington’s campaign grows out of the civil rights movement and is its political expression. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in and gave his life so that poor Blacks, Latinos, and whites could share the American dream. . . . Today, here in Chicago, Harold Washington is continuing that civil rights movement.<sup>44</sup>

For Raby, the campaign’s ultimate prize was clear. He declared, “If Blacks vote for Harold Washington[,] the machine’s power base will crumble.” It was certainly not a protest candidacy.

Needless to say, Raby’s appointment did not effectively counter rising hostilities and deepening anxieties in the predominantly white wards. In

these circumstances, Washington's color-blind promise of "a city that will represent the city" also had different meanings among blacks and whites.<sup>45</sup> As discussed, African Americans understood black power as an expression of their aspiration for a fair share, while whites deemed it a black takeover. Washington and his supporters' cry for their "turn" was similarly considered by whites as an approaching black domination and by blacks as rectifying past unfair practices under the machine. African American demands and aspirations were thus interpreted through racially differing notions of power and having a chance. It meant for all Chicagoans a decisive break with the past, but since the sense of the past was also related to white voters' yearning for security, this slogan further alienated white Democrats.<sup>46</sup> Despite the Washington camp's repeated denials that they would not force integration in exclusive white neighborhoods, their pledges rang hollow in the already polarized city.

In late March, Epton made serious inroads into not only the Democratic machine's strongholds on the Northwest Side and Southwest Side but also into the liberal North Side lakefront wards. In Marquette Park on the Southwest Side, the neighborhood that had been hit by CFM's demonstration in 1966, a crowd of four hundred filled a restaurant banquet room where they heard the candidate's pledge to fight for a "strong neighborhood," a thinly disguised appeal to their racial anxieties.<sup>47</sup> As David Axelrod, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter and the future campaign manager of Barack Obama, observed, white voters "suspect crime and taxes will soar and property values plunge if a black should win. . . . Those fears are not rational, but they are very real."<sup>48</sup> In addition, in the liberal lakefront wards on the Near North Side, a self-proclaimed left-wing liberal voter expressed fierce ideological opposition to Washington's campaign slogan:

I couldn't and wouldn't support any candidate—black, white, purple, pink, liberal, conservative or middle-of-the-road—with Washington's background. . . . I also think, as a card-carrying, left-wing liberal, that it's not the black's "turn," it's not the white's "turn." It's time for competent administrators in public office, not political hacks who seem to believe that the end, however ugly it may become, justifies the equally sordid means.<sup>49</sup>

The criticism was coded with color-blindness, but its spirited color-blindness was undoubtedly working against the black candidate.

It is worth noting here that Epton was not a conservative Republican. In

Springfield, he had often teamed with Washington to sponsor a number of progressive bills. Furthermore, his career shows an interest in the civil rights cause: in the immediate aftermath of King's assassination on April 4, 1968, he went to Memphis to march with striking sanitation workers.<sup>50</sup> Epton himself had been consistent in denying his campaign's racist intention long after the election: all through the campaign, Epton reiterated, "The main issue is integrity, honesty and open government."<sup>51</sup> It was Epton's color-blind accusations about Washington's past and his distance from blatant racism that made it easier for white Democrats to cross over party lines to vote for him. As Axelrod observed, "Those questions [Epton picked up on] have provided a ready alibi to some self-professed liberals who privately have qualms about a black mayor."<sup>52</sup>

On April 12, amid heightened racial hostilities, Chicagoans went to the polls. It was a foregone conclusion that the election returns would reveal, again, a stark racial polarization. Washington emerged victorious with only a 48,250 vote margin out of 1.3 million votes cast. He succeeded in capturing the wards with a large Latino/Hispanic population by 74 percent, a significant improvement from the primary's 25 percent, but he lost enormous numbers of white Democratic voters. Only 12 percent of white voters cast their ballot for the black nominee of the Democratic Party.<sup>53</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

As the general election campaign was nearing a close, a problematic phenomenon of racial bloc voting was, on the one hand, actively encouraged as an expression of racial pride and, on the other, viciously attacked as reverse discrimination. Interestingly, an election exit poll conducted by a local TV station, WBBM-TV, showed that, despite the racially polarized voting pattern, only 4 percent of blacks and 5 percent of whites admitted that race was the reason for their choice: a majority of Epton voters indicated that "honesty" was their main reason for their voting preference, whereas a majority of Washington voters said that they thought he was a "better leader."<sup>54</sup>

All through the mayoral campaign, Chicagoans were groping for a way to get at the meanings of race and racism, but the lines delineating race baiting from rightful accusations were always blurred. For most white Chicagoans, African American racial solidarity was anathema, but for the black Chicagoans who successfully elected their first black mayor, it was empowering. If white fear was "real," a black takeover was not something

that a racial heuristic based on their everyday life. Although race was deliberately injected into the campaign, Epton's appeals were buttressed by whites' different understandings of the meaning of black power and empowerment. Although Washington won the election, there was probably a ripple that affected the presidential election of 1984 when Illinois went Republican, joining the Reagan landslide.

Since the election of Barack Obama, scholars and pundits often talk about an era of "postracial" America. However, poll after poll reveals that there is still a significant perception gap as to how race affects American society. Obama's job approval rating itself reveals a deep divide between races: while his African American approval rating has always been over 80 percent, his approval by whites rarely goes above 40 percent.<sup>55</sup> But these figures tell neither the intensity of racism nor racist sentiment, because, during the post-civil rights era, as in 1983 the Chicago general election, race and racism are highly contested notions. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues in another context, during Washington's protest/electoral fusion challenge and his subsequent mayoralty, race was "providing sites of dialogic exchange and contestation" and "race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation." Race as a "metalanguage" resolved Chicagoans' voting behaviors and political choices.<sup>56</sup>

As the massive defection of white Democrats suggests, the Democratic machine was thrown into serious disarray. On the eve of the vote, Mae Goodman, a local freelance writer with a fifty-year career of reporting, wrote, "We watched Chicago's Democratic machine, which, only yesterday seemed so invincible, become immobilized and fall apart. We watched the political hacks scurry around like rabbits, switching loyalties and lamely defending their actions."<sup>57</sup> Before the election's victor was called, the losing side was already clear.

In their open confrontation with the most powerful political machine in the nation, African Americans showed their determination to no longer accept placement on the lowest rung of the machine's ladder. If African Americans wanted to have a fairer share of the machine's spoils, they had to challenge the machine itself and, if necessary, break with it and crush it.<sup>58</sup> That is the meaning of black power as it emerged in electoral politics in post-civil rights urban America.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the editor, Voice of the People, *Chicago Tribune* (hereafter cited as *CT*),

April 2, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see, Clarence Page's forward to the revised edition of Gary Rivlin's *Fire on the Prairie: Harold Washington, Chicago Politics, and the Roots of the Obama Candidacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); and Peter Nolan, *Campaign!: 1983 Election That Rocked Chicago* (Northfield, IL: Amika Press, 2011), Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 24–46.

<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Melvin G. Holli and Paul M. Green, eds., *The Making of the Mayor: Chicago, 1983* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984); Paul Kleppner, *Chicago Divided: The Making of a Black Mayor* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985); William J. Grimshaw, "Harold Washington: The Enigma of the Black Political Tradition," in *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, ed. Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 183–201; Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931–1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Abdul Alkalimat and Doug Gill, *Harold Washington and the Crisis of Black Power in Chicago: Mass Protest* (Chicago: Twenty-First Century Books, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, "Harold and Dutch: A Comparative Look at the First Black Mayors of Chicago and New Orleans," in *The Making of Urban America: A History of Planning in the United States*, ed. John W. Reys, 265–81 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 266.

<sup>7</sup> Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, February 1965, 25–29.

<sup>8</sup> Len O'Connor, *Clout: Mayor Daley and His City* (New York: Avon, 1975), 179.

<sup>9</sup> John Allswang, "Richard J. Daley: America's Last Boss," in *Mayors*, 155–59.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Whitehead, Jr. and Joel Weisman, "Is LaSalle Street Grooming the Black Mayor?," *Chicagoan*, August 1974, 80.

<sup>11</sup> For the SCLC's efforts in Chicago, see, James R. Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Yasumasa Fujinaga, "The Chicago Freedom Movement," *Journal of Historical Studies* (Historical Science Society of Japan) 758 (January 2002): 16–32.

<sup>12</sup> Bayard Rustin interview in *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South*, ed. Howell Raines (New York: Penguin, 1977), 52.

<sup>13</sup> Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary*, September 1966, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 44–45.

<sup>16</sup> Joel D. Aberbach and Jack L. Walker, “The Meanings of Black Power: A Comparison of White and Black Interpretation of a Political Slogan,” *American Political Science Review* 64 (June 1970): 370–71, 376, 387–88.

<sup>17</sup> Editorial, “Must Create Power Base,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 19, 1973; Wilbur C. Rich, *Coleman Young and Detroit Politics: From Social Activist to Power Broker* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 77–85.

<sup>18</sup> Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, 145; Kleppner, *Chicago Divided*, 115–16; Paul M. Green, “Michael A. Bilandic: The Last of the Machine Regulars,” in *Mayors*, 170; Dianne M. Pinderhughes, *Race and Ethnicity in Chicago Politics: A Reexamination of Pluralist Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 243.

<sup>19</sup> Kleppner, *Chicago Divided*, 141–42.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Tillman, “Movement Activism from Martin Luther King to Harold Washington,” *Research in Urban Policy* 2 (1986): 160–61; Alkalimat and Gill, *Harold Washington*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> “Support of Blacks for Chicago’s Mayor Appears to Be Eroding,” *New York Times* (hereafter cited as *NYT*), July 15, 1982; Alkalimat and Gill, *Harold Washington*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> “US Panel’s Report Criticizes Chicago’s Housing Authority,” *NYT*, March 18, 1982.

<sup>23</sup> “Chicago Mayor’s Plan Evokes Disbelief,” *NYT*, March 24, 1981.

<sup>24</sup> “Mayor Byrne Plans to Move to a Project,” *NYT*, March 23, 1981; “Cabrini Protesters Call It ‘Police State,’” *CT*, April 14, 1981.

<sup>25</sup> Alkalimat and Gill, *Harold Washington*, 29; Kleppner, *Chicago Divided*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> “’82 Fest Plays to Biggest Crowd So Far,” *CT*, August 9, 1982; “ChicagoFest Nets More Than \$700,000,” *Chicago Defender* (hereafter cited as *CD*), September 1982, monthly city edition.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Preston, “The Resurgence of Black Voting in Chicago: 1955–1983,” in *Making of the Mayor*, 41; Allswang, “Richard J. Daley,” 151.

<sup>28</sup> Chicago Urban League, “Why Chicago’s Blacks Do Not Register and Vote” (September 1981), 1, 6a.

<sup>29</sup> “Voter Fever,” *CD*, September 1, 1982.

<sup>30</sup> “Voter Registration Drive,” *CT*, August 24, 1982; “‘POWER’ Drive Nets 12,500 Registered,” *CD*, September 8, 1982; “Black Registration Hits Record High,” *CD*, October 7, 1982; Ben Joravsky, “Party Loyalists Face Independent Challenges,” *Chicago Reporter*, December 1982, 3.

<sup>31</sup> “A Way to Achieve Respect,” *CT*, September 12, 1982.

<sup>32</sup> “More Voters, More Power?,” *CT*, October 1, 1982; “Voter Surge Puts Heat on Rep. Washington,” *Central Standard Time* (hereafter cited as *CST*), October 7, 1982; “Washington in Mayoral Race,” *CD*, November 11, 1983.

<sup>33</sup> Alfredo S. Lanier, “Congressman Harold Washington,” *Chicago*, February 1983,

100.

<sup>34</sup> Robert McClory, "Up from Obscurity: Harold Washington," in *Making of the Mayor*, 3–16; Alfredo S. Lanier, "Congressman Harold Washington," *Chicago*, February 1982, 100.

<sup>35</sup> "Discusses Dilemma of Coming Election," *CD*, October 5, 1982; "Chicago Ripe for Black Mayor," *CD*, November 11, 1983.

<sup>36</sup> Rick Soll, "Sawyer Still Stunned by Byrne Loss," *CST*, April 3, 1983.

<sup>37</sup> "Charges Fly as Campaign Winds Down," *CST*, February 21, 1983.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Bob Wiedrich, "Race-Baiting Gave Byrne the Hook," *CT*, March 1, 1983; Kleppner, *Chicago Divided*, 177–83.

<sup>39</sup> For the fear of neighborhood integration, see, "A One-Issue Mayoral Race," *CT*, March 27, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> Kleppner, *Chicago Divided*, 210–11; "Epton Still May Be Long Shot," *CT*, May 27, 1983; "Irate Washington Retaliates," *CT*, April 8, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> "Washington Makes Plea for Support from Blacks," *CT*, November 15, 1983; Laura Washington, "80% Solution," *Chicago Reporter*, March 1983, 5.

<sup>42</sup> "Voting Drive in 'High Gear,'" *CD*, September 28, 1982.

<sup>43</sup> "The Activist," *CT*, April 17, 1983.

<sup>44</sup> "The Meaning of Harold Washington's Campaign," n.d. (ca. December 1982), 2, Harold Washington Archives and Collections, Central Office Personnel File, box 4, Special Collections Department, Harold Washington Library Center.

<sup>45</sup> "Byrne Pledges to Help," *CD*, February 24, 1983.

<sup>46</sup> For a conservative notion of the past, see, "Northwest Side's Voters 'Like It Like It Is,'" *CT*, January 30, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> "Serenades and Cheers for Epton," *CT*, March 27, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> "Washington's Campaign Blunders Boon to Epton," *CT*, March 27, 1983.

<sup>49</sup> "A Few Thoughts on Racism, Bigotry," *CT*, April 4, 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Editorial, "Lightweights in a High Wind," *CT*, March 28, 1983.

<sup>51</sup> "Epton Withdraws from TV Program," *NYT*, April 11, 1983; "A Battered King Surveys the Wreckage and the Dream," *CT*, May 19, 1983.

<sup>52</sup> "Election Not as Simple as Black and White," *CT*, April 10, 1983.

<sup>53</sup> For the analysis of voters' racial makeup, see, Alkalimat and Gill, *Harold Washington*, 54, 103.

<sup>54</sup> "Chicago Leaders Urge Civil Unity after First Black Mayor's Election," *NYT*, April 14, 1983.

<sup>55</sup> Gallup, Obama Weekly Job Approval, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122465/Obama-Weekly-Job-Approval.aspx>, accessed, November 26, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 252.

<sup>57</sup> “Goodbye 1983 Mayoral Campaign!,” *CT*, April 12, 1983.

<sup>58</sup> After Washington’s sudden death during his second term in 1987, Chicago had its second acting mayor in twenty years. When the mayoral election was held in 1989, Richard M. Daley again entered the race not as the boss’s son but as a reform candidate. By the end of his term in 1989 he was the longest-serving mayor in Chicago’s history. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, 206–13.

