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# Denver and Boston: Why One City Elects Black Mayors and the Other Has Not

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### **Mile High Mayors**

Michael Hancock gives his victory speech after winning a runoff election on June 7, 2010, to become Denver's second black mayor. The first, Wellington Webb, who served three terms, applauds at the far left. Beside him is his wife, former state representative Wilma Webb. Mary Louise Hancock, the new mayor's wife, is at the far right. Including Federico Peña, a Mexican-American, three of Denver's last four mayors have been African American or Hispanic. The city has a smaller black population than Boston but a larger Hispanic one. Reprinted by permission of Patricia Duncan.

# Denver and Boston: Why One City Elects Black Mayors and the Other Has Not

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**Kenneth J. Cooper<sup>1</sup>**

Denver's population is only 10 percent black, and has never been above 12 percent in any Census, yet in July 2011 the city elected a black mayor. Michael Hancock, a former city councilman, is actually the second African-American mayor of Denver. Wellington Webb served the limit of three terms through 2003. Three of the city's last four mayors have been of color. Federico Peña, a Mexican American, became the first in 1983.

At 24 percent, Boston's black population is twice as large as Denver's and has been so throughout the three decades during which Denver has sent two African Americans to the mayor's office. Boston has never elected a black mayor or, more broadly, one of color. An African American came the closest in 1983, when former state representative Melvin H. King placed second in the preliminary election before losing to City Councillor Raymond Flynn in a landslide in the general election. King remains the only black candidate who has run a competitive race for mayor in Boston.

Although situated in distinctly different regions, Denver and Boston have much in common. The total population in each is about the same, around 600,000. The racial-ethnic balance among residents is similar: Boston is slightly majority-minority, while the majority in Denver is narrowly non-Hispanic white. The level of educational attainment in both is on the high end, and the black poverty rate in each is low, compared

with other large cities. The form of government and the election process are the same in the cities. Both are Democratic strongholds. In the 1970s, Denver and then Boston were the first northern cities that federal courts ordered to desegregate public schools, prompting opposition from white critics of “forced busing,” although the reaction in Boston was violent, broader, and lasted longer. Another difference: In Denver, founded more than two centuries after Boston was, ethnic consciousness does not have a prominent place in the city’s life or politics, except for a Hispanic population that has a Mexican-American core but has grown more diverse with recent immigration.

What accounts for the divergent outcomes in mayoral elections in the two cities? The traditional explanation within Boston’s black community has been its population is too small, an assessment premised on an unspoken assumption that racially polarized voting will prevail. The first black mayors elected in major northern cities did ride black majorities into office in the 1960s and 1970s, but in recent decades African American candidates have been winning urban mayoralties without that political advantage (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, p. 830). How did Webb and Hancock win in a majority-white city?

Recent elections demonstrate that racially polarized voting is diminishing in Boston. Exhibit A is Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, who dominated the city’s polls in his winning campaigns in 2006 and 2010. In the 2011 race for at-large seats on the City Council, Ayanna Pressley and Felix G. Arroyo, an African American and a Latino, respectively, finished first and second. A Chinese American, Suzanne Lee, came within fewer than 100 votes of ousting City Councillor Bill Linehan in a district where voting has always been dominated by South Boston, where the incumbent lives.

Another explanation offered for why Boston has never had a black mayor is the city’s history of long-serving incumbents, limiting opportunities to compete for an open mayor’s office. Although mayors who have been in office for multiple terms are difficult to defeat, it does happen. For instance, Peña, Denver’s first mayor of color, helped oust a longtime incumbent in 1983. Thomas M. Menino, in his fifth term, has been mayor of Boston since 1993, longer than any of his predecessors.

He has given no hint he plans to retire before the next election in 2013, when he will be nearly seventy-one. He will have been in office more than twenty years.

Whenever or however Menino leaves office, Boston's black community should be prepared to field a competitive candidate or candidates for the mayoralty. Only a few major cities have not elected an African American or Hispanic to the top job. This article reviews the literature on the factors that lead to the election of black mayors. Boston and Denver are assessed based on those factors. Some are hard to measure, so the author renders judgments on those factors from having lived in both cities and covered politics as a journalist for three decades. The overall assessment finds the cities and their black communities share some factors, particularly in terms of socioeconomic and political structures. The difference in the size of the black population in the two cities turns out to be an important factor that does work against electing an African American mayor in Boston, but not in the way that is commonly assumed. Apparent differences in the internal resources of each black community have played a major role in shaping the divergent mayoral results.

To explore more deeply how black mayoral candidates in Denver have succeeded, the campaigns of Webb and Hancock are recapped. Neither was initially expected to win, and they adopted similar political postures to achieve victory. Both are pro-business, moderate Democrats, rather than avowed progressives. The winning coalitions that both assembled were broader than African Americans, Hispanics, and white liberals. A generation apart in age, the elder Webb did not mentor Hancock in his political career, but did support his mayoral campaign.

King's campaign for Boston mayor in 1983 is analyzed to identify its strengths, according to the literature on factors that help African Americans win the top office. His "Rainbow Coalition," for example, contained some elements of a successful coalition. The city's nonpartisan elections attracted a large field of nine candidates for the preliminary, with the white candidates splitting much of the white vote. Finally, the research articles and campaign recaps are used to extract lessons about what Boston's black community must do to put the mayor's office within reach.

## Factors in Electing Black Mayors

Researchers who have attempted to explain why black mayors get elected identify a total of thirteen factors that make winning more or less likely. Some studies examine a relatively small number of cities in depth. Other research gathers data on a much larger number of cities. These large-scale studies are more reliable. A total of five studies published between 1977 and 2006 are reviewed.

Not all of the studies cite the same factors, although there is some overlap. Thirteen is the combined total from the studies. The size of the black population is frequently identified as the most important factor. A city with a black majority obviously improves the odds of electing a black mayor. That is not the demographic situation in Denver or Boston, however, and may never be in either city.

An early study of black mayoral prospects broke 264 cities into four groups, according to the percentage of the population that was black in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, candidacies in black majority cities in 1978 were most likely to succeed. The surprise was where those campaigns were least likely to succeed: in cities that were 20 percent to 35 percent black—which includes Boston since 1980. Candidates in cities with smaller black populations of 10 percent to 19 percent—such as Denver—were more likely to win than in those cities (Karnig and Welch, 1980, pp. 55-56). The researchers do not offer an explanation for this divergence in electoral prospects. It is possible that a white majority does not feel threatened by a small black population, whereas white voters in cities with a larger black minority may fear that African American residents are “taking over” if one becomes mayor.

The same study found two socioeconomic characteristics are positive factors in electing a black mayor: a high level of educational attainment and a small gap in median income, compared with white residents (Karnig and Welch, 1980, pp. 56-57). Those measures are similar for Boston and Denver, according to American Community Survey estimates for the late 2000s. In Boston, African Americans earned 57 percent of the median income of white residents; in Denver, 63 percent. The electoral prospects of black mayoral candidates were best in cities where blacks’ median income reached at least 80 percent of whites’. The median income of black households in Boston was higher, in absolute terms, than in Denver: \$35,632 versus \$31,033.



### **A Winning Rainbow Coalition**

Mel and Joyce King raise a victory salute in 1983 after Mel King, a former state representative, advanced to the general election for Boston mayor. King campaigned as a "Rainbow Coalition" candidate and finished second in a field of nine candidates in the October 7 preliminary election. He was the first African-American candidate for Boston mayor to reach the final round of voting. ©Don West. Photo reprinted by permission.

A later, large-scale study of 309 cities confirmed the finding about educational attainment. “The percentage of blacks with college degrees proves to have a substantial effect on the likelihood of observing a black mayoralty” (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, p. 842). In Boston, 19 percent of blacks 25 and older had at least a bachelor’s degree in the late 2000s; 21 percent in Denver did. Both educational levels were slightly higher than for African Americans nationwide, 18 percent.

How well-educated a city’s entire population is also matters, according to another large-sample study focused on the 1990s:

The proportion of a city’s population with a bachelor’s degree significantly increases the chances of Black mayoral election success. This new trend may be the result of the impact of increasing education leading to increased racial tolerance. Also, increased education in the Black community may lead to more political resources, therefore increasing the pool of candidates and their campaign abilities. Furthermore, the proportion of the population with a bachelor’s degree may significantly increase the chances of Black mayoral election success due to the increase in diversity and ethnicity courses offered in the university setting (Gilbert, 2006, p. 330).

This factor is an advantage for black mayoral candidates in both cities, to just about the same degree. In Boston, about 44 percent of residents were college graduates in the late 2000s, while 41 percent of Denverites were, according to American Community Survey estimates. Those levels of educational attainment were well above the national figure of 24 percent.

Boston and Denver choose mayors in nonpartisan elections; ballots omit party affiliations of candidates. That structure helps black candidates for mayor by “creating more opportunity for the emergence of minority candidates” who are not eliminated in party primaries or excluded from running by machine bosses (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, pp. 839-840). Nonpartisan preliminary elections also can create political opportunity for a black candidate competing against a crowded field of white candidates, if they splinter the white vote. That scenario unfolded in Boston in 1983, when King competed against a field of eight white candidates in the first round.



In their government's structure, Boston and Denver share one factor that is a disadvantage for black mayoral candidates. Both have the mayor-council form of municipal governance, which is less likely to yield a black chief executive than the council-manager or commission type, by 5 to 6.5 percentage points (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, p. 839). The cities also share a strong mayor system. The city council of each is the same size, thirteen members split between at-large and district seats. Boston has four at-large members, while Denver has two. Electing more black council members improves the odds for black mayoral candidates. "Each additional black city councilor corresponds to about one percentage point in the probability" of one winning (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, p. 842). Denver has continuously had two black council members since redistricting in 1971, while Boston has had two since the nine districts were first introduced in 1984, and three since 2010. So the level of black representation on each city's council has been about the same during the period Denver has elected two African-American mayors (1991-2011).

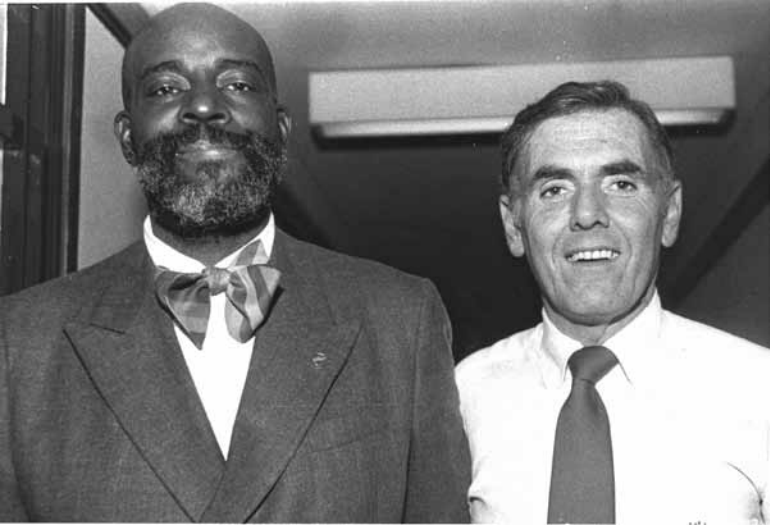
How segregated black residents are from non-Hispanic white residents is another negative factor, though not as significant as the size of the black population and educational attainment as positive factors. "Cities with increased racial segregation are less likely to elect a Black mayor" (Gilbert, 2006, p. 326). Residential segregation in the Boston metropolitan area was substantially higher than in the Denver area from 1980 to 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, p. 69). The segregation index uses a scale from 0 to 1, with 0 representing complete integration and 1 complete segregation (Gilbert, 2006, p. 325). In 2000, the figure for Boston was .658 versus .605 in Denver.

The other five factors are more straightforwardly political in nature and also more difficult to measure with precision. For cities lacking a black majority, coalition-building is an obvious prerequisite for an African-American candidate to win the mayor's office. The other political factors identified are: group cohesion, leadership, political consciousness, and organization (Nelson and Meranto, 1977, p. 26). Harnessing these internal resources is necessary for a successful political mobilization.

## **Coalition-Building: Black-Brown, Black-White**

The emergence of Boston as a majority-minority city since the 2000 Census has raised hopes of a powerful coalition of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian voters. The presence of recent immigrants not yet naturalized in each racial-ethnic group has meant the combined number of eligible voters falls short of a majority of the electorate, and the goal of a dominant political coalition remains unrealized. At the leadership level, relations between African Americans and Hispanics in Boston have been relatively warm and far less fractious than in many large cities. The cooperation was evident after the Boston NAACP won the school desegregation lawsuit in 1974. El Comité de Padres pro Defensa de la Educación Bilingüe (Parents Committee for the Defense of Bilingual Education) soon entered the case in U.S. District Court as a plaintiff-intervener representing Hispanic parents during the implementation and monitoring phases. More recently, black city councillors have had cooperative relationships with Felix D. Arroyo and his son Felix G. Arroyo, who have served as at-large councillors at different times. The elder Arroyo, who in 2003 became the first Hispanic councillor, joined in a political alliance with black Councillor Charles Yancey and then-Councillor Chuck Turner. In 2009, the Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus renamed itself the Massachusetts Black and Latino Legislative Caucus.

As promising as a black-brown coalition may appear in Boston, it is not the only route to the mayor's office—and may not be the most likely one. A study of ten northern California cities found that black-white coalitions succeeded more often in increasing the number of blacks elected to local offices. "Because neither blacks nor Hispanics constituted majorities in any of these cities, strong mobilization occurred only with biracial or (less commonly) multiethnic coalitions" (Browning, Marshall and Tabb, 1986, pp. 577-578). Coalitions with liberal whites were found to be more likely to succeed in this small-scale study. A larger one did find that "black-Latino coalitions are likely to be most crucial in nonmajority cities" but added: "Similarly, political incorporation has been found to be much more likely when blacks form coalitions with liberal whites" (Marschall and Ruhil, 2006, p. 843). That study, however, found neither type of coalition to be statistically significant. That conclusion may be a case of so-



### **A Winner in Defeat**

Mel King and Raymond Flynn after King congratulated Flynn on his victory in the 1983 general election for Boston mayor. Flynn, a city councillor and former state representative from South Boston, defeated King 65 percent to 35 percent on November 15. Though he lost, significant items on King's campaign agenda won. Flynn adopted King's proposed policy on neighborhood development and hired a diverse leadership team at City Hall. ©Don West. Reprinted by permission.

phisticated statistical models obscuring basic political arithmetic: A candidate from a minority population *must* form a coalition of some kind to win an electoral majority.

The winning candidacies of Webb and Hancock in Denver have more closely resembled a black-white coalition than a black-brown one. In the city, African Americans (12 percent in 2010) and the much larger population of Hispanics (32 percent) have been competitors for the mayoralty more so than collaborators. A study of how much black and Latino voters in Denver support candidates from the other group concluded:

It is not that black and Latino voters won't support other minority candidates; it is that their commitments to the general cause of minority empowerment are not as profound as their commitments to their own groups. From this perspective, the

notion of rainbow coalitions and the like may be little more than political rhetoric if the hearts and desires of urban minorities are not fully vested in this vision (Kaufman, 2003, p. 125).

In his first run for the mayor's office in 1983, Webb was eliminated in the preliminary election that sent Peña into the general election, which he won. In 2011, Hancock narrowly beat a Hispanic candidate to finish second in the preliminary election. In the final stretch of that campaign, Peña endorsed the white candidate (as did the defeated Hispanic candidate), and Webb supported Hancock. In the final election, Hancock put together a broad winning coalition of blacks, liberal and conservative whites, and some Hispanics. He fared well in established Mexican-American neighborhoods, but not in neighborhoods populated by recent Hispanic immigrants (Griego, June 2011, p. B1). Other research has shown many such immigrants arrive with negative stereotypes of African Americans drawn from entertainment shows and news media reports made in America and transmitted to their home countries.

The pattern of longtime Hispanic residents favoring a black candidate, and recent immigrants not as much, is likely to be repeated in Boston. Puerto Ricans (who are not immigrants) long dominated the city's Hispanic population, but the number of immigrant newcomers from the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries has increased significantly. Puerto Ricans are still the largest subgroup of Hispanics in the city, but no longer the majority, at 28 percent in 2010. Dominicans, 24 percent, were the second largest. As the city's overall Hispanic population has grown, to 18 percent in 2010, and neared the black population at 24 percent, the prospect of political competition has increased. An Asian-Latina, Sonia Chang-Diaz, holds a state senate seat in a district that was drawn in the early 1970s specifically to make it possible to elect the first black state senator in Massachusetts.

Although King ran in 1983 as leader of a "Rainbow Coalition," the support he actually assembled was composed mostly of African Americans and white liberals. After all, the city's population was only 6 percent Hispanic in 1980, compared to 22 percent black. Only 5,000 Hispanics were registered to vote by April 1983; three times as many were unregis-

tered (Cooper, 1983, p. 1). A black-Hispanic coalition could not carry King to victory. From his years as a state representative and activist, King had strong links to liberal whites in the city's South End, where he grew up and still lives, and across the city. A successful black candidate for mayor in Boston will successfully appeal to white liberals, as King did, but also to white moderates without an activist bent. King's "Rainbow Coalition" was limited to 35 percent in the general election.

### **Internal Resources of the Black Community**

King's campaign did succeed in energizing, mobilizing, and uniting the city's black community, which remains riven with internal divisions, particularly ones based on place of birth. The divide between native- and foreign-born blacks has grown deeper in the intervening years, with the influx of Haitian, other Caribbean, and African immigrants, all of whom some native-born blacks view as interlopers and competitors for resources. At the same time, many black immigrants pin negative media stereotypes (criminal, lazy, and welfare-dependent) on native-born blacks and isolate themselves from people who are often their neighbors (Cantave, 2011, pp. 113-116). In the late 2000s, 29 percent of the city's black residents were foreign-born.

Some blacks with long family histories in Boston also regard relative newcomers born elsewhere in America as intruders, especially people who find professional success or attain local prominence. At a public forum that the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, Boston NAACP, and Trotter Institute at UMass Boston held on the "State of Black Boston" in 2010, one black woman in the audience disparaged "implants"—conflating "imports" and "transplants." Being born in Boston of Caribbean parentage may have helped King overcome the divisions over nativity within the city's black community.

In contrast, Denver has a small population of black immigrants (8 percent in 2000), and comparatively few black families who have lived in the city more than a few generations. Much of the black population is descended from families formed after World War II, when a number of soldiers and airmen stationed at military installations in the area liked Denver well enough to settle there. Other migrants began arriving from

the nearby states of Kansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas. In more recent decades, migrants have come from around the country. Although Webb and Hancock came of age in Denver, neither was born there—Webb in Illinois, Hancock in Texas. Their birthplaces did not seem to matter to black voters, who rallied behind both.

Without conducting the same survey research in the cities, it is difficult to quantify the level of black social cohesion in each. But from living in each city sixteen to seventeen years, the author has observed far less division and much more cohesion in Denver than in Boston. Internal disunity is a major obstacle to Boston electing a black mayor or, more broadly, one of color, as African Americans are the city's largest minority group.

The final three factors—leadership, political consciousness, and organization—are likewise difficult to measure. One study counted the number of black organizations in different cities. The top category was two or more (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 39). This is a crude measurement. Both Boston and Denver have a National Urban League chapter and an NAACP branch, although Boston's are much older, being among the first local affiliates of the national organizations. It should be noted that Mayor Hancock had been a well-regarded president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Denver, at age 29.

A more useful approach may be to consider specific examples of *political* leadership and organization. As a mayoral candidate, King was an effective leader. His campaign challenged the established political order, created an exciting sense of possibility in the black community, and attracted support from white residents who shared his progressive outlook. His "Rainbow Coalition" may have provided the model for Jesse Jackson's first presidential campaign in 1984. The ideological nature of King's and Jackson campaigns, however, turned out to be self-limiting in terms of electoral success.

Another contribution that King made before his mayoral campaign boosted his candidacy and, importantly, political organization in the city's black community. In 1978, then-state representative King and John D. O'Bryant, a member of the Boston School Committee elected citywide, cofounded the Black Political Task Force, a volunteer organization that interviewed and endorsed candidates for various offices based

on the community's interests and then distributed copies of its slate at the polls on Election Day. Anyone who supported the task force's goals and committed to participate in electioneering could join. Professionals from diverse fields and community activists joined and became politically engaged and educated. Some members developed into candidates, some successful, some not. Charles Yancey, currently the senior member of the Boston City Council, is a former task force president. He had to resign from that leadership post after winning a council seat in 1983 because task force rules dictated the president could not be an elected official (who might guide decisions based on self-interest, rather than the community's interests).

The open membership also helped overcome internal rifts based on place of birth. In the year of King's mayoral campaign, the president of the Black Political Task Force was Ricardo Millett, a bilingual Panamanian-American of Jamaican ancestry (Cooper, 1983, p. 1). At the time, he was executive director of the Roxbury Multi-Service Center. Professor James Jennings, a bilingual black Puerto Rican, was an active member at the time.

The civic engagement of the Black Political Task Force undoubtedly produced votes for King in the 1983 campaign. It was a potent political force for two decades. After successfully pursuing a redistricting lawsuit in the early 2000s, it lapsed into inactivity and invisibility. Its demise considerably diminished political organization in the city's black community.

In Denver, black political organization followed an informal model that was amazingly successful in getting candidates elected, including a mayor and a district attorney. Beginning in the early 1970s, a cabal of young black Turks led by Webb met regularly on Saturdays to plot a political course. One objective, ultimately not achieved, was to thrust aside black elected officials who were older. Webb recalled that he, "along with other members of my political group, was a typical thirty-year-old who thought the old-timers were out of touch with the younger generation. It was our time to grab some power. We thought many of the longtime black politicians were of the 'get-along-to-go-along' philosophy" (Webb, 2007, p. 105). Two targets were the senior African American on the City Council and the only one in the Colorado Senate.

The cabal of five black men, most of them lawyers, succeeded in advancing their political ambitions by running and supporting each other's campaign. Webb described the outcomes:

I came to know a young attorney named Dan Muse when I was working at the Jobs Opportunity Center. Muse would join me at Saturday morning meetings with attorneys Raymond Jones, King Trimble, and Norm Early.

We all had high aspirations. Jones wanted to be a judge; he became a state district court judge and went on to the Colorado Court of Appeals. Trimble was good at organizing and mentioned one day that he wanted to run for Congress; instead, he had stints in the state legislature and on the Denver City Council. Early wanted to be Denver's district attorney; he achieved that goal when Dale Tooley died in office and Governor Roy Romer appointed Early, who was an assistant district attorney, to the top job. Early later was elected and served for more than ten years.

It's ironic how life works, because at the time we began our political meetings, Early and I never dreamed that in 1991 we would be running against each other to be Denver's first black mayor (Webb, 2007, p. 104).

Webb's ambition at that early stage was to run for Congress, not mayor (Webb, 2007, p. 142). He was elected a state representative and city auditor before winning the mayoralty. In his first term, he appointed Muse as city attorney (Webb, 2007, p. 251). Five members of the cabal have served in government offices, with three of them winning elections—citywide elections in the case of the mayor's, city auditor's, and district attorney's offices. In addition, Webb's wife Wilma won election as a state representative. That is an astounding track record for a personal network, rather than a formal organization. By comparison, the institutional model of the Black Political Task Force has greater potential



for sustaining and replicating civil engagement, in part because young Turks grow old. Webb turned seventy in 2011, for example. The other problem with forming such a closed, intimate group of friends (all men, mostly lawyers in this case) is that it denies access to political engagement to other individuals and representatives of other demographic groups within a black community.

Besides political organization, Denver's then-young Turks provided strong political leadership. Two of the informal group's members, Webb and Early, guaranteed Denver would have its first black mayor in 1991 by reaching the final election for a head-to-head contest. Remarkably, Webb leapt from 7 percent in an early poll before the preliminary election to victory with 58 percent in the final, defeating Early, the better-financed favorite. Webb was reelected mayor twice. He had previously won a city-wide election to become auditor, a position comparable to New York City's comptroller, who acts as a check on the mayor's financial powers. In Denver, the auditor's office has often been a stepping-stone to the mayor's office (Webb, 2007, p. 241). Early won two elections as Denver's district attorney. Together, the two onetime allies won six of eight citywide races they participated in. One indisputable measure of political leadership is electoral success.

"Political consciousness" may be the most nebulous factor cited in the research. The one study that cites that factor defines it as "the realization by the group and its leadership that their common fate can be influenced by group political action." King inculcated that kind of consciousness in Boston by making members of the black community believe an African American could be elected mayor. A sense of "black victimization" because of unemployment, job discrimination, and urban deterioration may afflict, in particular, working-class African Americans. "These persons are so caught up in the sheer struggle to survive that political matters generally cannot stir their interest; and even if they did, they would have little time to devote to them politically." Contributing to "a feeling of competency to affect the course of political events and decisions" are membership in political organizations, newspaper readership, and sufficient education to grasp "complex political issues" (Nelson and Meranto, 1977, pp. 26-27).

Two factors that underlie political consciousness, income and education, are similar in the two cities. In the late 2000s, 23 percent of Boston's black families lived in poverty, while 22 percent in Denver did. Four large cities without black majorities and higher black poverty rates than Boston have elected black mayors (Minneapolis, Minn.; Kansas City, Mo.; Columbus, Ohio; and Seattle, Wash.).

On another underlying factor, black neighborhoods in Denver generally do not suffer from urban decay. Rather, they resemble mostly white, suburban-style West Roxbury more than majority black-and-Hispanic Roxbury. The more recent development of much of Denver is a major reason for that difference. The city's housing stock is simply much newer. Housing could affect political consciousness in the two cities more significantly because of the big gap in black homeownership: 40 percent in Denver, compared with 30 percent in Boston in the late 2000s. Homeowners who pay property taxes are more likely than renters to develop an awareness that voter turnout in their neighborhoods can impact the delivery of city services and the responsiveness of elected officials. There can be a downside to comfortable homeownership in pleasant surroundings, though. A decade before Webb won the mayor's office for the first time, a black state senator from Denver decried "the brick bungalow syndrome," a reference to a housing style common in the city. Regis Groff observed black families get absorbed in securing material comforts and ignore "the values of concern for their community and fellow man" (Cooper, 1981, p. 1). By contrast, Boston has a longer and broader tradition of black activism that dates back to the 1700s.

Without survey research conducted in both cities, it is difficult to know whether one black community or the other has a greater sense that its members can impact the outcome of political campaigns.

### **How Boston and Denver Stack Up**

Based on the thirteen identified factors that contribute to the election of black mayors, on six the two cities are similar. Boston and Den-

ver have shared the advantages of nonpartisan elections, high citywide educational levels, and black city council representation that has been roughly equivalent. The two black communities both face the disadvantage of a mayor-council form of government. African-American income and educational levels are close in both cities.

Blacks in Denver, compared with those in Boston, have the consequential advantage of being a smaller minority and, less significantly for political aspirants, being less segregated by residence.

Besides Boston's black community being a middling minority, the most important differences with Denver's have to do with the internal resources of each community. Black Denver, which is less internally diverse, has greater cohesion. Election results and the fulfillment of the young cabal's ambitions demonstrate that African Americans in that city have benefited from stronger political organization, better leadership, and more effective coalition-building. How the cities compare on the other factor, political consciousness, is unknown.

In conclusion, Black Denver and Black Boston rate virtually the same on six factors, nearly half of the total of thirteen. Denver has the edge on six other factors, including two factors for which there are statistical measures, population size and segregation. That city fares better than Boston on four other impressionistic factors: political cohesion, organization, leadership, and coalition-building. No judgment is made as to levels of political consciousness, the thirteenth factor.

This survey of the research literature helps explain why Denver has elected black mayors but Boston has not. That research, however, does not help explain *how* those feats have been accomplished in Denver. For that, it is necessary to examine successful mayoral campaigns there, Wellington Webb's first victory in 1991 and Michael Hancock's win two decades later. How each candidate conducted his campaign may be instructive in understanding how Boston's black community can overcome its disadvantages.

## Factors in Electing Black Mayors, Boston versus Denver

Positive Factors	Boston	Denver
% Black Population	Minus	Plus
% Black College Graduates	About the Same	About the Same
% College Graduates in City	About the Same	About the Same
Black Income/White Income	About the Same	About the Same
Black Council Representation	About the Same	About the Same
Nonpartisan Elections	Same	Same
Community Cohesion	Minus	Plus
Political Organization	Minus	Plus
Leadership	Minus	Plus
Coalition-Building	Minus	Plus
Political Consciousness	Unknown	Unknown

Negative Factors	Boston	Denver
Mayor-Council Government	Same	Same
Segregation (Metro Area)	Minus	Plus

### Webb's Long Walk to the Mayor's Office

By the time Webb ran for mayor the second time in 1991, he had been an elected or appointed government official for two decades, having served as a state legislator, regional federal official, state cabinet secretary, and city auditor. He had campaigned citywide twice, finishing fourth in the 1983 preliminary election for mayor and capturing the auditor's office four years later. He had ample name recognition. In his younger years, Webb had been a community activist—similar to Mel King—who had served as local president of Jesse Jackson's PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), had walked out of a governor's inaugural because he had appointed no African Americans to his cabinet, and had joined with the local leader of the Black Panther Party in staging a protest in the mayor's office over police brutality (Webb, 2007, pp. 6, 103, 127).

Unlike King, activism did not define Webb's political identity, his government service did. Webb had been regional director during the Carter administration of what is now the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, and a cabinet officer in charge of Colorado's Department of Regulatory Agencies, which oversees professional licensing and business regulation. His first mayoral run was ill-conceived and unfocused. His campaign for auditor four years later shaped his identity, which would carry him into the mayor's office, as a competent manager. The slogan for his auditor's campaign was "Thoroughly Fair, Totally Qualified," and he ran as a pro-business candidate, not as the liberal Democrat he is. He also tried to separate his competence and race: "The newspapers kept saying that if elected, I would be Denver's first black auditor. I didn't want to be labeled a black candidate. I wanted people to look at me as the right person for the job." There were echoes of activism, though, in his support for an unsuccessful ballot initiative to allocate a percentage of the city budget to helping the homeless (Webb, 2007, pp. 186, 189, 190). He finished first in the preliminary election and won the final handily.

The mayor's office opened up in 1991 when Peña decided not to run for a third term. The favored candidate had been a member of Webb's cabal, District Attorney Norm Early. The former collaborators previously had fallen out over which candidate to support in a legislative race (Webb, 2007, p. 119). The first poll done for Webb put his support at 7 percent and Early's at 67 percent (Webb, 2007, p. 204). In all, seven candidates made the preliminary ballot.

Early quickly emerged as the front-runner, collecting the most money in campaign donations and endorsements from most of the city's black pastors. Against the counsel of advisers, Webb fashioned a campaign theme similar to the one he had used in the auditor's race, positioning himself as the candidate with "a plan for the city, good management and competence" and the one who put "substance over style" (Tucker, 1995, p. 51). The reference to style was intended as a contrast to Early, who, with his wife, was a dashing presence on the social scene of the city's upper crust.

Webb would make it through the runoff and into the mayor's office with innovative political tactics. Despite the endorsements of pastors, Webb cultivated elders of their congregations who had influence with other parishioners. Of the ministers, he later explained that "I knew their members didn't always agree with them. So I made sure I was escorted into each of the churches by some of the oldest long-standing members who had credibility" (Webb, 2007, p. 213). A former aide, in her account of the campaign,

said “his unorthodox plan would wildly succeed” (Tucker, 1995, p. 51).

Hustling for the votes of black churchgoers would not be enough, however, to win. His finances were so short late in the preliminary campaign that he could not afford television advertising. Out of that financial desperation came a brilliant tactic. At his staff’s suggestion, Webb decided to walk the sprawling city, as former governors of Colorado, Illinois, and Florida had walked their states to win elections. The mayoral candidate added another element to campaign-walking: “I would walk during the day, right to a stranger’s house, where I would spend the night” every night for the last three weeks before the election (Webb, 2007, p. 225). He held hot dog roasts in neighborhood parks close to his hosts’ homes. A big man at 6-foot, 4-inches tall with size 12 feet, Webb cut an imposing figure as he walked the city accompanied by supporters who distributed campaign buttons that, once again, emphasized competence: “Walk with him, Win with him—He knows the Way” (Tucker, 1995, p. 74). He worked his way through a cross section of the city:

He was spending the night in homeless shelters, public project houses, tree-lined mansions and sprawling upper-middle class ranch homes. He was an overnight guest of people in their working middle-class homes, apartments in large complexes, and avant-garde condominiums. He ate at their breakfast and dinner tables or at neighborhood cafes, slept in their spare bedrooms, on sofa beds or cots, and talked with them on their front porches (Tucker, 1995, p. 75).

His tour attracted a bonanza of media coverage. That was not all: In his first five days of walking an average of ten miles, he picked up eight percentage points in polls (Tucker, 1995, p. 75). Webb rode his 210-mile walk into the runoff by finishing second behind Early in the preliminary election. It was the first time two black candidates would meet in a major city whose population was mostly white, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (Tucker, 1995, p. 99).

So Denver in 1991 would get a black mayor either way. In the first debate between the two black candidates, Webb cast himself as an urban mechanic who would provide better basic services and put two police

officers in each patrol car. He closed the debate with this declaration: "I am not running to be mayor of the black community; I'm running to be mayor of Denver. My twenty-one days of walking also is the way I will govern; I want to stay close to the people of this city" (Webb, 2007, p. 240). Webb won the final by continuing his walking, starting in the southern part of the city, which is predominantly white and more conservative than most of the city, an area whose politics resemble those of the West Roxbury neighborhood in Boston. His momentum overwhelmed Early. Webb won 58 percent to 42 percent, carrying every city council district and all but 75 of nearly 500 precincts. A poll showed he was favored by "virtually every age, income and ethnic group" (Tucker, 1995, p. 150).

Future black mayoral candidates in Boston can extract several lessons from Webb's first successful campaign to be Denver's chief executive. He emphasized what he would do, not what he believed, and appropriately so, because a mayor's office is more functional than ideological. He ran an inclusive campaign, rather than a racial one that asserts "it's our turn" to govern. He tapped the great African-American tradition of improvisation to compensate for a big disadvantage in campaign resources. On his walks, he made personal contact with white voters who were not natural supporters, winning over many and conceding no part of the city to his opponents. Boston Councillor Ayanna Pressley's foray into West Roxbury and Roslindale in the company of Councillor John Connolly during the 2011 campaign served, though less methodically, the same political objectives as Webb's walks.

### **Hancock: A Unifying Voice**

Compared to Webb, Hancock did not have a long career in elective office behind him when he ran for mayor in 2011. Then forty-one years old, he had been a member of the City Council for eight years, representing a predominantly black district that includes Denver International Airport. Twice he had been elected the council's president, testimony to his popularity with his peers, which would benefit him in the mayor's race.

On the council, similar to Webb as mayor, Hancock was "a business-friendly moderate" who worked to deliver libraries, improved streets and sidewalks, and an expanded science museum to residents of his district

and the rest of the city. He was not a media flash (Osher, May 2011, p. A1). In his mayoral campaign, he took a decidedly pro-business stance, emphasizing economic development, increased access to capital for small and start-up businesses, and creation of what he called an “aerotropolis” in the undeveloped area around the city’s distant airport (Meyer, May 2011, p. A1).

Ten candidates entered the preliminary election to replace John Hickenlooper, who had resigned as mayor once elected Colorado’s governor. Two candidates were Latinos; Hancock was the only African American in the race. It was his personal story, which could be titled “Up from the Projects,” rather than his council record, that dominated his appeals to voters. His mother and father, a hard drinker, divorced when he was six, leaving her to support ten children alone. The family bounced between motels and apartments without electricity before moving into a public housing project near downtown (Plunkett, 2001, p. B1). Compelling TV ads told “his Horatio Alger-like story in moving 30-second clips. Many say it was the reason for Hancock’s growing popularity” (Meyer, June 2011, p. B4).

Hancock barely edged out the better known of two Latino candidates and finished second to make the final election. The top three finishers were closely grouped, a couple percentage points separating them. The results closely followed the city’s racial-ethnic geography. The top finisher, the son of a popular former governor, won predominantly white areas; Hancock the black areas; and the top Latino the Latino areas (Griego, May 2011, p. B1)

Hancock now faced a better-financed white candidate. Hancock kept telling his life story, which emphasizes the “American” part of “African American,” and maintained the positive tone of his campaign. The unifying slogan of Hancock’s campaign: “We are all Denver.” His opponent, Chris Romer, tried to beat back Hancock’s momentum with negative advertising, a tactic that backfired (Barnes-Gelt, 2011, p. D1). Hancock won by the same margin that Webb had in his first winning mayoral race, 58 percent to 42 percent, and the victory was likewise powered by broad support. “As all the old hands in city politics predicted, the ethnic geography that marked the general election vanished. All manner of boundaries—neighborhood, economic and racial—were crossed. Denver, with a popu-



lation that's about 10 percent black, now has its second African-American mayor in 20 years" (Griego, 2011, p. B1).

Hancock's victory holds the same main lessons as Webb's. The councilman ran a non-ideological campaign that reached out to a broad swath of voters. His emphasis on business was not based on the premise of the infallibility of the market, but rather confidence in government's ability to collaborate with private enterprise to grow the local economy. His slogan was inclusive, and similar to Massachusetts Governor Patrick's in 2006 and President Barack Obama's in 2008. It is also noteworthy that the racial-ethnic voting in the preliminary election did not continue into the final election. In a multicandidate field for an open seat, contenders are expected to target their natural base, as Mel King did in his 1983 race for Boston mayor. Hancock, in a less polarized era, was able to expand his base in the final balloting to the entire city of Denver. His support from white council members in the southern part of the city boosted his vote there.

### **Boston: The Path to the Mayor's Office**

From examining the research on electing black mayors and the two successful mayoral campaigns in Denver, how to position Boston's black community so one of its members can capture the mayor's office becomes apparent. These steps could overcome the community's biggest handicap in mayoral politics, its middling minority size, which is not likely to change anytime soon, if ever. With the breakdown in polarized racial-ethnic voting, the most necessary actions pertain to boosting the internal resources of the black community. More than two decades ago, another researcher posed a similar question as this article—in that case, why black residents of Boston had been unable to build a successful biracial political coalition—and reached a similar conclusion. "To achieve political and economic progress the black community must first address its internal problems. Fragmentation remains a continuing problem....To attain incorporation into power circles that control the policy process, blacks must unify across class lines, develop new leaders, groom candidates for office, and aim for strategic offices which control patronage and policymaking" (Travis, 1990, pp. 119-120). That article's title was "Boston: The Unfinished Agenda." Twenty-two years later, it is still unfinished.

To finish the agenda will require community action to:

- Resuscitate and rebuild the Black Political Task Force, or create a successor organization with the same mission to vet candidates, mobilize voters, and groom new leaders who could become candidates. The endorsement process will also identify and build relationships with potential partners in political coalitions. The organization needs to ensure its membership encompasses larger numbers from immigrant communities and also needs to establish a cooperative relationship with the Caribbean Political Action Committee, which remains active and performs similar functions. A similar Haitian committee has gone dormant; its former members could be prime recruits.
- Hold a series of summits to narrow divisions within the community based on place of birth, by fostering honest but civil conversations, dispelling myths, and identifying common interests. Individual summits could discuss tensions between the Boston-born and those born elsewhere in the United States; between the native-born and foreign-born, perhaps by region or, in some cases, country. The discussions could be led by a balanced panel composed of an equal number of participants from each group.
- Increase the rate of naturalization and voter registration of immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, and, more broadly, those of color. Such a campaign before the 2013 mayoral election could test the strength of a diverse but engaged black community. This is an opportunity for collaboration with Latino and Asian communities, which are more engaged in immigration issues and have marshaled more resources to address them. Those resources could be shared with or replicated in the black community. Racial-ethnic coalition-building will grow stronger.
- Strengthen coalition-building with white liberals, who, besides votes, have access to financial resources, experts in organizing campaigns, and social networks that can be tapped for campaign fundraising. Black activists engaged with politics should seek out opportunities to work or volunteer for liberal white candidates (who,

ideally, would already have a Black Political Task Force's endorsement). The U.S. Senate campaign in 2012 of Elizabeth Warren is a chance to build relationships with a first-time candidate and her liberal white supporters. Community organizations can also play a role in laying the groundwork for a political coalition with white liberals, as the Union of Minority Neighborhoods did in building the alliance that succeeded in pushing reforms of the Criminal Offender Record Information Act through the Massachusetts Legislature.

- Force changes in the map of city council districts to make it possible to elect more black, Latino, or Asian members. The research indicates increasing the number of black council members increases the chance of electing a black mayor. For Boston, whose last two mayors rose from the council, more black councillors means more potential mayoral candidates. The map in place for the last decade has constrained black candidacies and tread on the black community's voting rights, by drawing one Dorchester district with more than 90 percent minority population (in legal parlance, "packing"), and by dividing Mattapan, the city's blackest zip code, into three districts ("cracking"). To be a fair map, the one to be redrawn after the 2010 Census should create new opportunities to elect a black candidate in Dorchester, Hyde Park-Roslindale, and Mattapan—if that neighborhood is not divided up three ways. A voting rights lawsuit should be considered if the new map merely protects incumbents without expanding minority voters' opportunities to elect councillors of color.

Those actions will build a foundation for a successful mayoral run. A political axiom holds that "you can't beat a horse with no horse." In other words, the conditions could become ripe for Boston to elect a black mayor, or one of color, but a politically talented candidate is needed to make it happen. The mayoral candidacies of King in Boston and Webb and Hancock in Denver illustrate the characteristics a winning candidate needs to have. They include the leadership ability to bring together and mobilize black voters, the capacity to inculcate a political consciousness that they can impact the outcome, the networking needed to build a broad coalition, a campaign that concedes no demographic group or neighborhood,

wide name recognition of the candidate, and an inclusive message that emphasizes concrete action over ideology.

At present, two black elected officials in Boston have demonstrated mayoral potential. Both are women; Boston has yet to elect a woman as mayor. Sheriff Andrea Cabral twice has been elected in Suffolk County, which encompasses Boston and three suburbs. She has heightened her name recognition by appearing as a political commentator on local television shows. Running the county's correctional facilities has given her the kind of managerial experience that Webb touted in his first campaign in Denver. Her Cape Verdean background could draw more Cape Verdeans into civic engagement with other segments of the black community, increasing internal cohesion. It is uncertain, however, whether white liberals or black activists who work on criminal justice issues would rally behind a law enforcement officer as a mayoral candidate.

Councillor Ayanna Pressley has been elected twice citywide, the last time topping the ticket. From her previous involvement as a volunteer in a number of civic organizations, she has built a wide network of contacts, particularly among activist, liberal, white women. She has positioned herself as an inclusive candidate who is comfortable with and capable of appealing to white voters who are not part of her natural base, as in her joint campaigning in 2011 with Councillor John Connolly in West Roxbury and Roslindale. She appeals in particular to women, without couching her pitch in (feminist) ideology. There was a possibility that if she did not win reelection in 2011, Boston would be without a single woman on the City Council. She made an artful, baldly gender-based appeal: "Somebody, ladies you know this, has to keep these men in line" (Ryan, 2011, p. B1). The line attracts not just feminists, but women of all outlooks who believe men will mess up matters, public and private, without input from women. Pressley, born in Chicago, has dug deep roots into Boston since coming to the city for college, but she would have to overcome nativist sentiment in the black community to mobilize its voters the way King did. That said, the first African American elected to the modern City Council, Thomas I. Atkins, also did—and he was born in Indiana.

Other potential mayoral candidates may emerge, particularly given the uncertainty about how long the incumbent mayor will continue to seek reelection and retain his popularity. Councillor Felix G. Arroyo, who

like Pressley has been elected twice citywide, could emerge as a Latino contender who has close relations with African-American and labor leaders. The candidacies of whoever emerges—and there could be more than one contender—will have brighter prospects for victory once the internal resources of the city's black community are rebuilt and strengthened.

## Notes

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