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# The Challenge of A Black Presidential Candidacy (1984):

By Robert C. Smith and Joseph P. McCormick, II

(Last of two parts)

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The challenge of political independence, in many ways more difficult than the challenge of ideology, required that "[Jesse] Jackson be willing and able to carry his insurgency into the general election as an independent candidate if the Democratic Party yield[ed] to the pressure of its right wing and repudiate[ed] its progressive heritage and the liberal agenda."<sup>32</sup> The basic impetus of this challenge was to end the "captive" status of the Black vote. In this regard, we quoted Professor Ronald Walters:

*"The major candidates and the party apparatus have believed that the Black vote is a captured vote, unable to mount credible strategies of leverage, so the tendency increasingly has been to ignore both the importance of the vote and the policy interests it represents. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the credibility of the threat of Blacks to retaliate if there is no bargaining, the option has to remain open for Blacks to threaten the Democratic Party with defeat even in the general election by supporting either a Black candidate or a third party candidate."*<sup>33</sup>

We emphasized, however, that "an independent challenge should be undertaken only if the Democratic nominee and the party's platform reject a liberal and progressive agenda."<sup>34</sup>

Since the Democratic Party did not, in its nominees and platform, clearly repudiate the liberal ideology, there was not a clear-cut basis for an independent Jackson challenge in the general election. In addition, Jackson's failure during the campaign to articulate a clear set of progressive alternatives further blunted the imperative of an independent challenge. Certainly there was no basis for such a challenge on the issue of the second primary and the related rules challenges set forth by Jackson. Thus, the centrist Democratic

nominee and platform, and Jackson's failure to articulate an alternative progressive vision, rendered the challenge of political independence moot.

Yet in a large survey of Black voters conducted by the University of Michigan's National Black Election Study, 60% of the respondents stated they would have voted for Jackson if he had run as a third party candidate.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, 45% of the respondents felt that Blacks should form their own political party, suggesting that "blacks would switch their party allegiance from the Democratic party if an alternative was presented which they felt better articulated the interests of blacks."<sup>36</sup> These data suggest that, in spite of the absence of a clear ideological imperative for an independent challenge, Jackson nevertheless might have received substantial support among the masses of Blacks.

Jackson, early in the primary season, publicly toyed with the idea of an independent candidacy,<sup>37</sup> but he apparently never gave it serious consideration, in part, because he had pledged his "word of honor" to his principal Black leadership supporters that he would support the

Democratic nominee. Also, there was concern that he lacked the necessary organization and financing to mount an effective national campaign, especially given the complexity of obtaining ballot positions in all 50 states.

The challenge of political independence was therefore a failure — a failure in the sense that the captive status of the Black vote was not altered in 1984. The Republicans and President Reagan, as usual, ignored the Black vote and the Democratic nominee, Walter Mondale, took it for granted. President Reagan made absolutely no attempt to appeal to the Black community or its policy concerns and Mondale, after the convention, ignored the policy concerns of Blacks and instead relied on the Black community's fears of a second Reagan term (especially with respect to Supreme Court appointments) as the central theme of his appeal to the Black electorate.

Mondale even ignored the minimalist demands of Black leaders set forth at the post-convention "Minnesota Summit" which called for, among other things, high level Black representation in his campaign, control of party registration funds in the Black community and a major policy speech on South Africa.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Mondale did not campaign in the Black community until the final weeks of the election and then sought largely to appeal to the community's hostility to Reagan rather than to its legitimate policy interests.

These characteristics of the Democratic campaign led some Blacks — notably Ronald Walters — to call for a boycott of the presidential ballot in the general election, and may have contributed to disaffection with the Democratic ticket in the Black community and a lower turn-out in November than otherwise might have occurred.



# The Question of Political Independence

One final point: Although the challenge of Black political independence did not materialize insofar as the general election is concerned, Jackson's primary challenge "could be characterized as a 'third party movement' within the traditional two-party system."<sup>39</sup> And Jackson's demonstration of the capacity of a Black candidate to "nationalize the Black vote" establishes the precedent that, within the Democratic Party, the Black vote can no longer be taken for granted and must be bargained for with policy and patronage, at least during the nomination process.

This new reality resulting from the Jackson campaign should have a major effect on the calculations of those Democratic politicians (Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy and New York Governor Mario Cuomo, for example) who might seek in 1988 and beyond to represent the liberal principles and constituencies of the party.

Blacks constitute the core liberal constituency in the Democratic Party and represent more than 20% of the party's national vote.<sup>40</sup> If the party's Fairness Commission reshapes the delegate allocation rules so that they correspond more closely to the one-man, one-vote principle of proportional representation, then a Black candidate in a multi-candidate Democratic nomination contest should possess enhanced leverage and bargaining power.

Thus, Jackson's primary challenge of 1984 suggests that Blacks should be in a stronger position to exert influence on the Democratic Party as it seeks to chart a new direction in the aftermath of the third landslide Republican victory in the last four presidential elections.

## The General Election

In his landslide defeat of Mondale (61% of the popular vote, 49 states and 525 of the 538 electoral voters) President Reagan won the support of virtually all categories of the population in terms of gender, age,

ethnicity, region, education, occupation and income. Mondale received majority support only among Blacks (90%), Hispanics (65%), Jews (66%), those with the lowest income (53%), the unemployed (66%), and union households (53%).<sup>41</sup>

Given the margin of Reagan's victory, the Black vote's impact on the outcome of the election was negligible. Jesse Jackson and other Black leaders had anticipated that increased Black registration and voting in the election might provide the Democratic candidate's margin of victory in a close contest, but Reagan also carried the first time voter in 1984 by the same landslide margin of 60 to 39 percent.

One of the interesting features of the 1984 general election was the discovery by journalists of the phenomenon of racial polarization in the electorate as evidenced by the fact that 90% of Blacks supported the Democratic ticket while 66% of whites supported the Republican ticket. Yet this degree of racial cleavage in the electorate is not new, nor is it attributable to the Jackson candidacy. Rather, as Ronald Walters points out, "except for the election of 1964 whites have not voted in a majority for a Democratic presidential candidate going all the way back to 1944. In addition, since 1968, the average white vote for a Democratic presidential candidate has been 38%, but the black vote has averaged 89% for the Democratic candidate."<sup>42</sup> The key to understanding the source and depth of this partisan racial cleavage is the 1964 presidential election.

In 1964 the Republican Party nominated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater as its presidential candidate. Goldwater, a vigorous opponent of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the New Deal-Great Society social and economic reforms, was opposed by President Lyndon Johnson, the champion of civil rights and the Great Society. Beginning with the election of 1964, there has been a gradual but steady realignment of voter support for the major parties on

the basis of race. (As late as 1960 Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, received approximately one-third of the Black vote in his race against President Kennedy.) Thus, present day racial polarization in the electorate emerged in 1964 as a result of the Democratic Party's implementation of the civil rights acts of the 1960s.

Edward Carmines and James Stimson, leading authorities on the survey data dealing with the racial orientation of the electorate put it this way:

*"It was arguably the case that issues of race were not partisan issues as recently as 1960. Advocates of racial liberalism were to be found about equally among northern Democrats and Republicans. . . . Neither party found it advantageous to stake out distinctive positions on the potentially volatile issue and citizens responded accordingly. [But] after at least a decade of similarity to the Democrats, Republican identifiers moved to the racial 'right' in 1964. . . . Those who report first identifying with the GOP in that year are strikingly more segregationist than any other group of identifiers. . . . The 1964 election thus appeared to mark a sharp and durable change in the racial policy preferences of party supporters, leaving Democrats more supportive of using the federal government to ensure the rights of blacks. This is preliminary evidence that the 1964 election was a 'critical' election, reorienting the attitudinal base of the two major parties."<sup>43</sup>*

This shift in the segregationist or racist vote from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party was not simply a reaction to the perceived liberalism of the Johnson Administration, rather it was a rational response to the right wing Republican strategy of, "going hunting where the ducks are," to use Senator Goldwater's phrase.

The initial assumption of conservative Republican strategists was that most of the "ducks" (anti-Black voters) were to be found in the South, since Goldwater carried the Deep South states in 1964. How-

ever, the success of Alabama Governor George Wallace's several presidential candidacies demonstrated that there was a significant anti-Black vote to be found outside the South. The historical significance, therefore, of the Wallace campaigns was their demonstration of the size and demography of the racist vote and the nature of the strategy necessary to obtain it.<sup>44</sup>

The 1968 Nixon campaign, with its anti-busing, anti-Great Society and "law and order" rhetoric, represented the beginnings of the successful conservative Republican effort to eliminate the Wallace phenomenon by drawing his constituency of traditional Democrats into the Republican electoral base. Since 1968, every Republican presidential candidate has pursued this strategy, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly. As a result, racial polarization in the electorate has remained fairly constant.

In the early 1970s, political scientist Matthew Holden, Jr., analyzed the strategic basis of the phenomenon the following way:

*"... the chances are that the Republican Party will [choose] to consolidate a national majority on an anti-black basis. ... We may believe that the party would become the center of resistance born of a generalized unease about 'things going sour,' that this generalized unease is anti-reform and would under some circumstances be functionally equivalent to 'anti-black.' To capitalize upon such an unease would simply become the most economical way for the party to take care of its own organizational interests."*<sup>45</sup>

Edward Carmines and James Stimson in their work make clear that it is not accurate to describe one party as racist and the other as anti-racist, but the data they suggest do indicate that "racial attitudes are not only performing the structuring functions associated with the liberalism-conservatism dimension but much of the meaning of this ideological dimension is also racial in nature." In other words, to many Americans, conservatism is the functional equivalent of racism. Black Americans intuitively understand this and it is for this reason that conservative administrations are widely viewed in the Black community as racist. And it is for this reason, too, that a large segment of the white electorate (perhaps as large as 20%) continues to resent the 1960s civil rights revolution and turns, except during times of serious economic dislocations, to

conservative Republican candidates. This, sadly, is the real meaning of the racial polarization "discovered" in the 1984 election.

A final point on the general election, the question of realignment: Does the 1984 election represent the displacement of the dominant New Deal-based Democratic governing majority by a new Republican political majority? This question, since 1964, has been the "external question" for students of American national elections.<sup>47</sup> Although it will take another year or so to analyze the surveys and other data on the ideological meaning of the 1984 election, it is probable that Warren Miller, principal investigator for the 1984 National Election Study, will be found correct in his prediction that:

**Given the margin of Reagan's victory, the Black vote's impact on the outcome of the election was negligible.**

*"... We will find that very little has changed in the basic contours of Democratic and Republican partisanship. There may be a one or two point gain for the Republicans, just as the Democrats gained one or two points after the 1964 elections. But this will probably disappear by 1986, and we will then conclude that this election did not change us from a nation that is fundamentally Democratic to one that is Republican. Because the data indicate that the President simply won a popularity contest on November 6, it is a mistake to draw inferences about the policy preferences of the Nation from this. The new Congress, I believe, will reflect the fact that policy preferences of the American people have not changed markedly."*<sup>48</sup>

It is likely that for the next several elections neither of the two major parties will command a stable and enduring national political majority at the presidential level. Thus, rather than realignment, we are likely to see the continued decomposition

of both the Republican and Democratic Parties.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

In this report we have attempted, on the basis of the available data, to present a preliminary assessment of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. Because of the nature of the process of political inquiry, our assessment is tentative and we make no claims to having presented here the last word on the phenomenon. Rather, in the months and years ahead there are likely to be scores of conferences, symposia, articles, essays and books that will place the Jackson campaign and related Black electoral activity in a historical and conceptual framework that will yield more definitive insight on what the Jackson challenge might mean for American politics generally.

Now, we offer some final generalizations and a hypothesis about the long-term effects of the campaign on Afro-American politics and on the American party system.

First, Jesse Jackson's very entry into the race is of great long-term symbolic significance, altering in an important way the symbolic understanding of the "place of Blacks" in American society. This is especially important for young people of both races because no longer are successful Black symbols and images limited to Reggie [Jackson] and Michael Jackson but instead there is Jesse Jackson and the image of a Black man competing with competence and style for the highest office in the land, not merely on the athletic field or the entertainment stage.

Second, there is preliminary evidence from the University of Michigan's National Black Election Study that the Jackson campaign increased grassroots race consciousness and solidarity and encouraged large numbers of heretofore uninvolved Blacks to become politically active.<sup>50</sup> This political involvement went beyond the simple act of voting to include canvassing, fund raising, scheduling and other routines of campaign organization.

Related to this increased consciousness and activism, the unprecedented experience of planning and staffing a national presidential campaign yielded a new cadre of experienced political operatives possessing a valuable body of expertise and a nationwide network that might be activated in future local, state and national campaigns. As a result of these developments, scholars and journalists are already reporting increased Black political

movement and influence in a number of local and state jurisdictions.<sup>51</sup>

Third, the experience gained in 1984 in campaign organization, financing, media relations and strategy development and day-to-day campaign management should prove valuable in the future. The Rainbow Coalition has become a permanent organization headquartered in Washington and Jackson has indicated that he is "keeping his options open" for the 1988 election. The precedent of the Jackson campaign is also likely to encourage other Black politicians to seek their parties' presidential nominations.

Finally, the Jackson insurgency in 1984 represents the emergence of a potentially viable independent Black power base inside the Democratic Party and that potential suggests that the Democratic Party coalition, as it is presently constituted, is in serious trouble. If Blacks in the party insist (as they ought) in 1988 and thereafter on their fair share of party patronage and decision-making positions (roughly 20 percent) and on respect and due consideration for their predominantly liberal ideological policy perspectives,<sup>52</sup> it is not likely that the current tenuous coalition of trade unions, Blacks, Jews, liberals and white southern conservative "boll-weevils" can survive. Rather, the prospects may be for either the reconstitution of the Democratic Party as a genuine progressive party of the left (as the Republican Party, since 1964, is being reconstituted as a party of the hard right) with a significant Black base but without the "boll-weevils,"<sup>53</sup> or alternatively the emergence of a new third party of the progressive left — again with a significant Black base.<sup>54</sup>

Recent developments in the British party system may portend the future in the United States: relatively pure parties of the left and right and a moderate party of the center.<sup>55</sup> It is our hypothesis that the most basic long-term implication of Jesse Jackson's campaign is that it may give additional impetus to the long anticipated fundamental transformation and realignment of the American party system. The challenge of a Black presidential candidacy of 1984, therefore, represents the beginning of a new direction for Blacks in presidential politics. But it is only a beginning. □

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert Smith and Joseph McCormick, "The Challenge of A Black Presidential Candidacy," *New Directions* (April 1984), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Walters, "A Black Presidential Strategy for 1984" — unpublished manuscript cited in Smith and McCormick, "The Challenge of A Black Presidential Candidacy," p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>James S. Jackson, Shirley Hatchett and Ronald Brown, "Racial Consciousness and Electoral Choice Among Black Voters," Paper in preparation for the 15th annual meeting of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, Columbus, Ohio, April 9-13, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>William Raspberry, "Jesse Jackson, Independent?" *Washington Post*, August 2, 1983, p. A19.

<sup>7</sup>Fay S. Joyce, "Leaders of Blacks Debate Conditions on Aid to Mondale," *New York Times*, August 29, 1984, p. A21.

<sup>8</sup>Jackson, Hatchett and Brown, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>A Louis Harris post-election poll found that 26% of the Democratic Party identifiers nationally were Black, compared to 3% of Republican identifiers. The

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electorate as a whole was 42% Democratic, 34% Republican and 20% independent. In 1980, the electorate was 41% Democratic, 26% Republican and 28% independent. See "Dramatic Shifts Found in Voter Party Ties," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1984, p. A6.

<sup>10</sup>*New York Times*, "Portrait of the Electorate," November 8, 1984, p. A19. There is evidence that Jackson's candidacy may have contributed modestly to the Reagan landslide by causing white disaffection from the Democratic Party. In the Gallup Poll for the Joint Center for Political Studies, 17% of whites said they were less likely to vote for Mondale because of Jackson, compared to 10% who said they were more likely to vote Democratic because of Jackson. This phenomenon was more dramatic in the South where 19% of the white respondents said they were less likely to vote Democratic because of Jackson, compared to 8% who said they were more likely to vote Democratic because of his candidacy. See Thomas Cavanagh, *Inside Black America*.

<sup>11</sup>Ronald Walters, "Racial Polarization in the Election of 1984," (manuscript, Department of Political Science, Howard University, 1985).

<sup>12</sup>Edward Carmines and James Stimson, "The Racial Orientation of the American Electorate" in James Pierce and John Sullivan (eds.), *The Electorate Reconsidered*, (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980): 199, 205-07. See also Carmines and Stimson, "Racial Issues and the Structure of Mass Beliefs," *Journal of Politics* 44 (August 1982): 2-20.

<sup>13</sup>In 1970 Kevin Phillips, a principal analyst in the 1968 Nixon campaign organization, argued in a book described by *Newsweek* as the "political bible of the Nixon era," that the Black vote was almost entirely Democratic and beyond the influence of Republican political strategists but that the Wallace vote was between parties and available to form a core constituency for what he called an "emerging Republican majority." See *The Emerging Republican Majority*, (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>14</sup>Matthew Holden, Jr., *The Politics of the Black "Nation"*, (New York: Chandler, 1973): 139.

<sup>15</sup>Carmines and Stimson, "The Racial Orientation of the American Electorate," p. 216.

<sup>16</sup>William Schneider, "Realignment: The External Question," *PS* 15 (Summer 1982): 449-56.

<sup>17</sup>Warren Miller, "What Realignment?" *Focus* 12 (November-December 1984): 6.

<sup>18</sup>On the decomposition of the post-New Deal party system, see Walter D. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), especially chap. 5, "The Onward March of Party Decomposition," and "The End of American Party Politics," *TransAction* 18 (December 1969): 12-22. See also Bruce Campbell, "Realignment, Party Decomposition and Issue Voting" in Bruce A. Campbell and Richard J. Trillings (eds.) *Realignment in American Politics: Toward a Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), and David Broder, *The Party is Over*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>19</sup>Jackson, Hatchett and Brown, *op. cit.* Increased race consciousness has been shown to be an important corrective to lower rates of political participation generated by low socio-economic characteristics. See Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), chap. 10 and Richard Shingles, "Black Consciousness and Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 75 (March 1981): 76-91.

<sup>20</sup>For examples, see Gwen Ifill, "Black Voters in Prince George's Gain Clout," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1984, p. A1, and Thomas Handy, "Mississippi Political Parties, 1984 and After," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Savannah, Georgia, November 1-3, 1984.

<sup>21</sup>For an analysis of the historical and structural basis of the dominance of the liberal ideology in the Afro-American community, see Robert C. Smith, "The Place of Liberalism in Afro-American Thought," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D. C., September 3-6, 1984.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore White, the popular historian of modern presidential elections, argues that ironically and contrary to Jackson's assumptions, abolition of the second primary would hasten the disaffection of conservative southern whites from the Democratic Party. See White's "Jackson: Democratic Revolutionary," *New York Times*, April 5, 1984, p. A23.

<sup>23</sup>In an interview on "This Week with David Brinkley" (ABC Television, September 2, 1984), Jackson indicated that the Rainbow Coalition would be organized in each of the 50 states and that it would negotiate on party rules, patronage and policies with each of the state Democratic Party chairs. He also said that if the party was not forthcoming in these negotiations by "making room for his ideas and constituencies" then a third or fourth party was indeed a possibility. On the prospects of a third party, given the ongoing decay of both major parties, see Steven Rosenstone, Roy Behr and Edward Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Responses to Major Party Failure* (Princeton: University Press, 1983).

<sup>24</sup>On the collapse of the British two-party system and the emergence of a third competitive party, see Donley T. Studlar and Jerold Wallman (eds.) *Dilemmas of Change in British Politics*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984). □