

7-1-1985

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Staff, Editorial (1985) "Book Reviews," *New Directions*: Vol. 12: Iss. 4, Article 8.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol12/iss4/8>

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THE ARTS

Books

Minority Vote Dilution

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Edited by Chandler Davidson, under the auspices of the Joint Center for Political Studies, Washington, D.C. Howard University Press, 298 pp.

Reviewed by Linda F. Williams

In commemorating the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson observed that "the vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls that imprison men because they are different from other men."

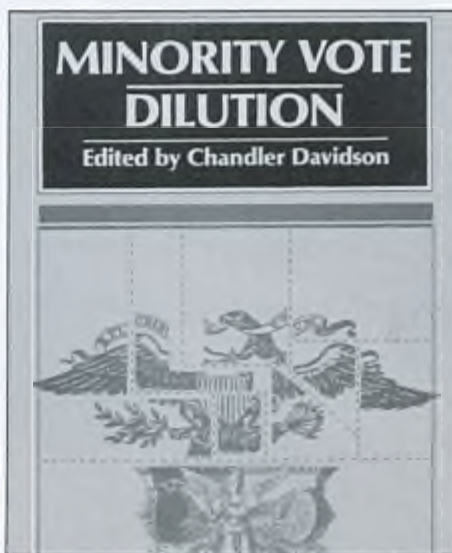
The 1965 Voting Rights Act forbade the use of any test or device to deny or abridge voting rights in any state or political subdivision in which more than 50 percent of the eligible voters had not voted in the 1964 presidential election or had not been registered to vote. It allowed federal registrars to be sent to any county where the United States Attorney General found voter registration to be unduly restrictive. Since 1965, the Act has been renewed three times—1970, 1975, 1982—and expanded to cover not only the original six southern states but an additional eighteen states, including parts of New York and California as well.

In the last 20 years, the Act has been cited frequently as one of the most significant and effective pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. Yet questions remain in many circles regarding the degree of its effectiveness. For example, in 1984, one of presidential candidate Jesse Jackson's principal campaign issues was the perversion of the 1965 Voting Rights Act by sophisticated tactics of minority vote dilution, such as the second primary.

Was Jackson correct? What has been the effect of the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Has it been perverted by ingenious tactics of vote dilution? If so, what are these tactics, and how do they work? What can be done to fully implement the

Voting Rights Act? What is the importance of voting per se? What impact does voting have on the distribution of advantages and benefits in American society?

Minority Vote Dilution, a collection of 12 essays commissioned by the Joint Center for Political Studies and written by practicing attorneys, historians, and social scientists, addresses these questions. The essays shed light on four intertwined topics: the history of minority voting, current aspects of vote dilution, remedies



for vote dilution, and the impact of minority voting on the distribution of public benefits.

In the process of analyzing these topics, the authors, who have been by and large consultants and expert witnesses in central lawsuits involving allegations of racial discrimination in voting, support Jackson's contention that the United States has yet to realize "one-man, one-vote" and that instead minority vote dilution has persisted.

In the introductory essay, Chandler Davidson provides an overview of the themes that follow—i.e., defining vote dilution; the disparate types of vote dilution processes; the history of vote dilution; the importance of the 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act; the difficulty in current standards of proof of vote dilution; the continuing need for much narrower evidentiary standards of dilution; the role of the Justice Department and the courts in determining the future of vote dilution; and the measurable results to minority groups of voting and having their own representatives in electoral office.

(Vote dilution is a process whereby election laws or practices, either singly or in concert, combine with systematic bloc voting among an identifiable group to diminish the voting strength of at least one other group. Davidson points out that ethnic/racial minority vote dilution is a special case in which the voting strength of the ethnic or racial minority group is diminished or cancelled out by the bloc vote of the majority.)

The types of dilutionary mechanisms used by majority groups, versus minority groups, cited by Davidson in the introductory essay are discussed in detail throughout this study.

Consider the mechanism of gerrymandering, for example, Frank R. Parker argues in chapter five: "Gerrymandering covers any redistricting practice which maximizes the political advantage or votes of one group and minimizes the same of another." Also, he examines at-large voting and other techniques such as cracking, (breaking up minority population concentrations by district lines and fragmenting and dispersing minorities throughout two or more district with white voting majorities); stacking (putting a large minority population concentration together with a larger white population with the purpose or effect of depriving minority voters of a voting majority); and packing (overconcentrating a minority population in a single district in excess of the percentage needed for minority voters to elect candidates of their choice.)

Parker demonstrates that these gerrymandering schemes remain prime weapons for minimizing and cancelling out the voting strength of minority voters. Like many other authors in this book, Parker concludes, however, that by extending the Voting Rights Act and by enacting the new Section Two "results" test, Congress has preserved and expanded the statutory protections against dilution of minority voting strength through gerrymandering and other dilutionary schemes.

The enforcement of these protections, however, remains a problem, especially given the Reagan administration's retreats from active enforcement of voting rights guarantees. Parker concludes that this means most lawsuits to enforce these protections will have to be brought by disadvantaged minority voters. Yet these voters frequently are not able to bear the

cost of expensive voting rights litigation.

In the book's final chapter, Milton Morris reviews the state of knowledge concerning the effectiveness of Black electoral participation in influencing the distribution of public benefits—goods, services, and opportunities at the disposal of the government. He points out that Blacks make up approximately 11 percent of the national electorate and are the most cohesive of the ethnic groups in electoral politics. Thus, he concludes, Blacks have potential for formidable political power. This potential is far from being realized, however, given minority vote dilution tactics and the underutilization of the franchise by Blacks. Since most Black candidates still depend on Black votes for their election, vote dilution and non-voting Blacks remain devastating problems.

Reviewing evidence from case studies, Morris points out that even when Blacks do vote in significant numbers and even when some are elected to office, the impact of the Black vote on the distribution of the public benefits is at best uncertain and at worst negligible.

As with most collaborative work, some technical problems surface in this collection. The essays tend to be repetitive. They also tend to focus exclusively on court actions as a way to solve the problem of vote dilution. Little attention is given to possible independent actions on the part of state and local governments to end tactics of dilution and create more demographically and substantively representative systems and/or to the nature and extent of mobilization required on the part of minority groups to pressure state and local governments to transform their systems.

Even the historical mobilization of Black interest groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which fought for the passage of the Voting Rights Act and all of its extensions, is given short shrift. Indeed the book might have been more accurately titled "Minority Vote Dilution and the Courts."

The essays are of uneven quality, ranging from first-rate analyses on at-large elections to relatively weak renditions of facts about 19th century vote dilution.

On balance, though, this book is impressively readable and the authors employ illustrative materials that require only modest background knowledge on the part of the reader. Ordinarily, collec-

tions of scholarly papers (especially papers written by lawyers, as many of the chapters in this book are) do not lend themselves to use by laymen, but this book does.

Minority Vote Dilution is a timely and welcome scholarly contribution to the voting rights literature and can be very useful to students and researchers of voting rights law.

One point made in the final chapter deserves more attention. The struggle to achieve equal voting rights is often placed in the context of conventional wisdom that serves democratic theory. For example, the vote is said to be basic to all other rights and is perhaps the most precious right in any democracy. Such statements, however, are rarely based on systematic empirical research. They are usually calculated to encourage action, but the role of the vote in helping citizens secure concessions from their government must still be one of the crucial questions for the study of democratic politics.

Do we know that the vote gets to the "real conflicts" in America's political economy? Are there prerequisite conditions of a democratic order other than the wide distribution of the vote that must be met before voting becomes an effective resource for deprived groups? Does the vote have an influence over the distribution of advantages that is separate from the influence of those social, economic, and political factors that are associated with minorities getting the vote in the first place? How does the vote compare to non-electoral mechanisms of political participation such as demonstrations, disruptions, and confrontations in achieving major social and economic gains for disadvantaged groups?

As Milton Morris acknowledges, these are not easy questions to answer empirically. But there is a pressing need for some sober analysis that will place in sharper relief the prospects that significant improvements in minority status will result from voting.

The Joint Center for Political Studies should make the question of the impact of voting on the socio-economic life changes and present conditions of minority Americans its next successful project on voting rights. □

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Islam, Christianity, and African Identity

By Sulayman S. Nyang
Amana Books, Brattleboro, Vermont.
106 pp.

Reviewed by Mohamed A. El-Khawaz

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Over the past two decades, African scholars have written numerous books on Africa in an effort to tell their own history and to counter the often distorted accounts written from a European perspective. Some have painstakingly sifted through historical records to shed new light on the past from an African perspective, and, thereby, have contributed to the growing body of literature on Africa.

Sulayman S. Nyang's *Islam, Christianity, and African Identity* raises some tantalizing questions about African identity and non-African religions—a subject debated by African intellectuals since the 1960s. His study, which he cautions is "an exploratory and not a very exhaustive one" (p. 7), is the tale of two religions—Islam and Christianity—in Africa as well as "their individual and collective challenges to African man" (p. 7). It offers the reader a new opportunity to assess the impact of Islam and Christianity on the African cultures.

Nyang, an associate professor of government and public administration at Howard University, is well-qualified to examine these issues because of his broad knowledge of the subject and his first-hand experience in African culture. His confidence has led him to disagree openly with other writers' interpretations and to be direct about his own observations and comments. He thus leaves himself open to criticism, of course, because the impact of the non-traditional religions on Africa is open to a variety of conflicting interpretations.

The book, based on previously published articles, is clearly written; the material is mostly drawn from secondary analyses published by Africans and Africanists. Nyang treats his subject with compassion and with an open mind. The

volume is divided into four chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. These chapters vary in size and in depth of treatment. Needless to say, the size of the work precludes any detailed examination of the issues under consideration.

Nyang begins by providing an account of the traditional African cosmological understanding of man, his nature and destiny in the cosmos. His account is influenced by the writings of the Rev. John S. Mbiti, the Rev. Vincent Mulago, Father Tempels and Janheinz Jahn, among others. He analyzes the traditional African view of life and of mankind's role, but somewhat understates the ethnic diversity within the African context. The essence of the argument is that "there are sufficient (common) elements of belief which make it possible . . . to discuss African concepts of God as a unity and on a continental scale" (p. 11). This assumption plays a key role in the ongoing analysis.

Nyang argues: "(1) that the traditional African man sees himself in a hierarchy of cosmic beings; (2) that his status and position in such a scheme is one of privilege, although he is still open to danger from both the spirit and physical worlds; (3) that his existence is dependent on the process of vital participation in the communion of the living and non-living; (4) that his life is a marriage between spirit and matter; and that he must always remember that the demarcation line between the visible and the invisible world is a very thin one" (p. 16).

In Nyang's view, "the key concept in traditional African thought is the cosmic schizophrenic tendencies of man. . . . Traditional African man sees himself as a citizen of three different worlds at the same time. . . . He lives in (a) the world of concrete reality (man, trees, stars, inanimate objects and phenomena); (b) the world of social values (governing the mental and spiritual processes of man and his community); and (c) the world of ineffable self-consciousness (the world of unreachable and inexpressible spiritual powers)" (p. 20).

Nyang argues that "the need for harmony between man and God, man and man, and man and the non-human elements in the universe has led to an ontological emphasis on the world of social values. As a result of such an overemphasis, traditional Africa held supreme the traditions of the ancients (ancestors). It is

this overemphasis on the source of traditions and customs that misled [John S.] Mbiti to deny the African a sense of indefinite future" (p. 21). (See *New Directions*, October 1980, p. 28).

Nyang claims that "African traditional man indeed has a sense of the definite future, but his ontological focus has been not (on) revolutionizing the physical landscape around him, but on socializing the new members of society to anticipate their successful accession to fatherhood . . . and to refresh their memory of past events" (p. 21).

Unlike Mbiti, Nyang believes that "the traditional African man's concept of time is three-dimensional. This is to say that he believes in a past, a present, and a future" (p. 22). His argument will not put an end to the controversy surrounding the concepts of time and history in African tradition. However, it adds another chapter to the ongoing debate over the issue.

In this discussion of Islam, Nyang provides a brief view of Islamic life and a review of Islam's penetration into Africa, region by region, as well as the resulting tension between Africans and Muslims. His exposition about Islam is informative, reducing a voluminous history to a condensed, readable account of wars, conflicts, and commerce. His account reveals that the dissemination of Islam differed from one region to another, depending on who was propagating the religion and what means were used. For example, Muslim merchants who were motivated by commercial profit more than by Islam were largely "responsible for the spread of Islam in the Sahara because it was through their constant peddling of goods from both (the) Maghrib and the Sudan that they succeeded in impressing upon the Africans the beauty and simplicity of their faith" (p. 31).

Another example is the rise of the Almoravids, which "did not only mean the fanatical propagation of Islam in the Sahara, but also opened the door to greater contact between the Berbers and the Africans to the south" (p. 32). According to Nyang, the Almoravids embarked on a military campaign to win converts—a campaign that culminated in the conquest of the Kingdom of Ghana in 1076. Although the Almoravids hegemony ended a decade later, "the process of propagation continued and Islam began to penetrate more and more into the western Sudan" (p. 33).

To avoid a detailed chronological account, Nyang focuses on major events and examines selected individual leaders and groups, including the Zawayas clerisy, the Mende Islamic clerisy, the Torodbe clerisy, the Turuq (Sufi brotherhoods), and others, all of whom played major roles in the propagation of Islam. His examination is analytical, discussing both the means used to spread the religion and the impact of Islamization and/or Arabization on African peoples.

Nyang contends that "the successes of Muslims in many areas of the West Sudan led to the gradual destruction of traditional cults and the emasculation of the old aristocracy" (p. 40). He also believes that this "de-traditionalization" was accompanied by a process of Islamization, both of which took place at the time "the West was beginning to seize African territories for the expansion of capitalism" (p. 40).

In his discussion of Christianity in Africa, Nyang concentrates especially on the role of missionaries in proselytizing, region by region. Christianity, according to Nyang, came to Africa in two stages, the first of which was undertaken by Catholic missionaries following the Portuguese exploration of the African coast beginning in the 15th century. He correctly points out that "they failed to consolidate their gains in Africa after the decline and fall of Portuguese and Spanish powers, and consequently much of what they arduously tried to build in Africa fell to the ground" (p. 65). It was not until the early 1800s that "things began to change for the Catholic missionaries" (p. 65).

The second stage was mainly the labor of the Protestant churches, which took place in the aftermath of the European colonization of Africa. Christian proselytization was conducted by missionaries from colonial countries as well as by "non-white settlers from the ex-slaves of the New World" (p. 62). He notes that "the fold of Christianity increased when, in 1822, Liberia was offered to liberated blacks in America as a haven." This historical incident "led to the arrival and establishment of many different churches." Thus, "the founding of Monrovia proved useful in the expansion of Christianity in West Africa" (p. 62).

Nyang believes that "modern Christianity did not gain ground until the beginning of the 19th century" (p. 62), largely "because of its status as the conqueror's

religion" (p. 53). In his view, "the advent of European colonialism provided the non-Islamized Africans with the unsolicited opportunity to partake in a civilization that was abroad to promote itself and to demonstrate its overall superiority with science and technology that are reducible to writing" (p. 53.).

Nyang writes that Christianity had "a wide ranging effect on African life and culture" and that "African life has undergone some changes as a result of missionary labor," especially in the field of education (p. 69). In his view, "the missions were solely responsible for the intellectual conservation of many African languages and folklores" (p. 72). In addition, their influence was evident in the domain of intellectual life, in the cultural homogeneity of its converts, and in technological and ontological thought (pp. 72-73).

It should be noted that these points are highly controversial; there is sharp disagreement among Africans on whether missionaries were instrumental in paving the road toward modernization or westernization. Some Africans argue that missionaries were responsible for holding Africans back, causing the state of underdevelopment that African countries found themselves in on the eve of independence.

To sum up, Nyang tackles the issue of contemporary African thought on African identity. For his discussion, he selected two renowned African statesmen — Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Senegal's Leopold Sedar Senghor — who were "worlds apart" in their search for an ideological remedy for the identity crisis (p. 81). Nkrumah, a Pan-Africanist leader, acknowledges in *Consciencism* that "African society today is not the old one, but a new society enlarged by Islamic and Euro-Christian influences" (p. 76). His solution "rests upon his belief that African man will be able to assimilate successfully all the borrowed values and patterns of thought from outside, and then weave a new cultural and civilizational garment that will bear, not only the trademark of African ingenuity, but also the best things in the baggage of scientific analysis and of cultural borrowing" (p. 77). This would be accomplished within a socialist framework in order for Africa to take its proper place in the international community and for the African personality to be felt in world history.

On the other hand, Senghor, a leader in the Negritude Movement, argues that the solution lies in the development of Africa's culture by cultivating and asserting "Africa's unique gift" (p. 80). In his view, "this gift . . . is the African emotionality as opposed to the European's rationality" (p. 80). He adds that "Europe and Africa has her own tradition of civilization development and each must make the contribution for which she is best equipped" (p. 82).

All in all, Nyang's book is important both for the issues it raises, and the answers, however tentative, it gives. His analysis of the problems besetting the African identity is commendable. His synthesis of a range of information, much of it from works produced by Africans and Africanists, contributes to our understanding of how Islam and Christianity penetrated Africa and how Africans responded to their individual and collective challenges.

This brief volume makes a valuable contribution, and should be of interest to students of African studies and others who are seeking a new perspective on Africa's past and present. □

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