

# Editor's Corner

## The Power to Mobilize

In the future, 1983 may be cited as a watershed year for black electoral politics in the U.S. The election in April of Harold Washington as the first black mayor of Chicago may galvanize blacks throughout the country in a way not dissimilar to the effects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Washington's election demonstrated the potential political strength of blacks under circumstances of geographical concentration and near-unanimity. His candidacy served to mobilize previously politically inactive blacks, many of whom apparently saw for the first time a connection between an election and their lives. His ability to spark this interest stemmed from the fact that he is black.

As Twiley Barker and Michael Preston point out, black activists felt they had been taken for granted, mistreated and undermined by the Democratic machine and saw Washington's candidacy as a chance to rectify this situation. Politically inactive blacks took Washington's candidacy personally: it was time for a black mayor; it was a chance for self-respect.

The articles in this issue of *PS*, under the guest editorship of Lucius J. Barker, examine this phenomenon and its extension to the 1984 presidential primaries. Those who advocate offering a black candidate for the Democratic party's nomination seem to be saying that a white liberal candidate cannot convincingly express concerns of blacks and mobilize the black electorate.

Not all the authors agree, however, that blacks would benefit from having a black presidential contender for the Democratic nomination. Paula McClain offers a series of possible scenarios, several of which, she contends, could prove harmful to black interests. Because blacks have

been closed out of the Republican party, they should ally themselves with the Democratic candidate most likely to win the nomination if they want to maximize their influence in the policy process, according to McClain.

Mack Jones also argues that a black candidacy for the Democratic party's nomination is inadvisable, but he reaches this conclusion by a different route. Almost regardless of the outcome, a black candidacy, he says, will in no way alter the condition of blacks as an underclass in this society.

Those who favor a black candidacy all do so within the context of the Democratic party. Ronald Walters and Lucius Barker raise the question of practicality. The United States is not Chicago. The minority status of blacks is much more pronounced. There are only 65 congressional districts that have a substantial number of blacks (20 percent black) and only 18 that have a black majority.

For a black candidacy not to fizzle, previous non-voters will have to be induced to vote in great numbers and alliances will have to be forged with other groups like Hispanics and women. An alliance with Hispanics is certainly possible, as Preston demonstrates in the case of Chicago, and alliance with feminists is not as improbable as some casual observers may think.

In fact, according to one report in *The Washington Post*, the Reagan administration is working to prevent such a voting alliance. The *Post* reported that the recent administration initiatives in the area of black civil rights have been undertaken less to attract blacks to the Republican party than to stem the defection of white women from Reagan's ranks, as Reagan aides believe that women especially tend to be concerned about the disadvantaged.

Even more illuminating is a recent report by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, a respected private research group in Washington, D.C. directed by Tom Joe. According to the report, despite rapid gains in the level of education of blacks and in the incomes of some blacks, the median income of black families is 56 percent that of whites, the same as it was in 1960.

The primary sources of the overall lack of progress in lessening the income disparity between blacks and whites are two. First, "only 55 percent of black men over the age of 16 are employed today, as against 74 percent in 1960," according to *The New York Times*. Second, 47 percent of black families are headed by women (compared to eight percent in 1950 and 21 percent in 1960). These households headed by black women are almost twice as likely as all families to be poor. It is here that the interests between feminist and black leaders could be united.

Specifically, Lucius Barker argues that a black candidacy must be based on more than getting a proportionate share of the political and economic pie. To be convincing and to build an electoral majority, black leaders will have to articulate a "politics of inclusion" based on principles of justice. Such principles could form the basis of a majority coalition within the Democratic party under the banner of a black candidate.

### **But Can He or She Win?**

Even if such a majority coalition is not created, a black candidacy must be measured against more than whether such a

candidate can win or can decisively influence the nomination, according to several of the authors. As Marguerite Ross Barnett points out, voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives stimulated by a black candidacy could influence the outcome of national, state and local elections. Such a candidacy could also force white candidates to address more directly concerns of blacks.

Democratic strategists for Walter Mondale and others are weighing the relative merits of a black candidacy. Jesse Jackson, mentioned most frequently as a black contender, could potentially attract several hundred thousand new Democratic voters to the polls. Even if Jackson were to receive but a handful of delegates, voters who registered because of his candidacy might change the outcome of the general election in November. At the same time, a Jackson candidacy in the primaries might draw enough support away from Mondale or others with strong civil rights records to deny them the nomination.

Much of the discussion here implies that the black community is a monolith, that there are universal black concerns and that blacks will vote in a bloc under certain conditions. While this assumption may underlie some of the articles, Barnett shows the deep division within the black community over the question of whether there should be a black candidate, and she examines the sources of that division.

This lively and provocative debate takes place in the pages of this issue of *PS*. We invite you in for a visit and welcome your response.

Catherine Rudder