

THE COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM: A STIMULUS TO BLACK POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

by

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The prime years of the Community Action Program (CAP) of the federal War on Poverty lasted less than half a decade, and assessments of its impact have been generally rather gloomy. Faced with a choice between two community action aims—ordinary (and politically safe) service delivery or institutional change and political mobilization (abrasive and challenging to established authorities)—most CAPs, it has been argued, opted for the former, and at best provided a few jobs in the ghetto. Those, perhaps the most visible and publicized, that sought political or institutional change all too often found themselves locked in contentions with local government agencies.

A number of commentators, including Daniel Patrick Moynihan, had speculated that CAP might have one enduring monument: its contribution to the dramatic emergence, in the late 60s and early 70s, of a corps of experienced, influential, black political leaders, particularly in the cities. Peter Eisinger, professor of political science and member of the Institute for Research on Poverty, set out to test this hypothesis. His findings make it clear that we must in some measure revise the pessimistic estimate of the Community Action Program.

The Community Action Program

The program was first established under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, basically as a “catch-all” for projects to combat poverty: All sorts of programs, ranging from birth control through day care and consumer education to community organizing, could be funded through it. In addition, many CAPs engaged in political activity, especially pressing local governments to take greater account of the needs and desires of minorities and the poor. At its peak, the program encompassed over a thousand community action agencies; 75% were located in predominantly rural areas, but two-thirds of the funding went to urban CAPs and in the public mind it was with the inner city that CAP programs became identified.

In 1967 CAPs were stripped of their independence from local government; when OEO was abolished in 1974 those that survived came under the Community Services Administration. Their role since that time has been minor.

CAP in the Careers of Black Elected Politicians

Elected politicians, to be sure, constitute only a portion of the leadership in the black community, but a focus on their careers offers a reasonable starting point in any investigation of the effects of CAP.

In the summer of 1977, telephone interviews were held with a national sample of 210 black elected officials, representing 9% of all black mayors, aldermen or city councilmen, and state representatives who held office in 1970 or in 1976. Eisinger sought answers to three main questions.

1. *Did significant numbers of black elected officials have experience in CAP before their first election?*

The data showed that some 20% of the entire sample had been involved with CAP in one way or another, and on average for nearly four years. Many others had had experience with Headstart or in various other federally funded programs. The incidence of prior community action experience among black elected officials had steadily increased over time, suggesting that the influence of CAP has been more than a short-run, superficial phenomenon.

2. *Do those who had CAP experience differ in any important ways from other black politicians?*

The chief difficulty in answering this question lies in the fact that most of the 210 respondents had a multiplicity of preelection experiences that might have provided political visibility, training, and support. Nearly three-quarters, for instance, were significantly involved in the civil rights movement, and about one-quarter had been members of local government commissions or boards. Despite these overlapping categories of experience, however, Eisinger was able to isolate certain differences: CAP-trained officials tended to come disproportionately from the urban segment of CAP, and were substantially more likely to enter politics at the state level. The data in general suggest that CAP provided an avenue to public service for a particular generation of young and relatively well-educated activists.

3. *Did CAP experience actually serve as a training ground for leadership?*

Eisinger points out that those who aspire to elective office face a number of preliminary tasks. They must establish a public identity; they must acquire skills that will carry over into elective office; and they must acquire support for their efforts—organizational resources and manpower. To a significant extent CAP seems to have performed all three functions. For instance, the overwhelming majority of those officials who had served in CAP did so in the same town in which they had later successfully run for office, and many former CAP board members believed they had gained both personal recognition and administrative or policy-making experience there. Elected officials formerly with CAP tended also to rely rather more on grass-roots organizations than on established party structures for political help.

Why are those black elected officials with CAP experience to be found disproportionately in state office? Eisinger

(continued on page 14)

Recently, in fact, the tax base has been steadily eroding. Participants remained divided as to whether a CIT with or without a comprehensive tax base would or could become more politically feasible in the future than it appeared at present.

Specific Cases

When the conference turned from consideration of income-testing in general to considering it in specific contexts, a much wider and more decisive consensus was reached. Three papers assessed the relative merits of income-testing in income support for the aged and for single-parent families, and in a national health insurance program.

The David Berry et al. paper on alternative methods of aiding the aged poor concluded that one cannot predict a priori which groups in the aged population will benefit from income-testing. As has already been mentioned, if guarantees are held constant, income-tested programs provide less income for the poor, and more for the rich, than do non-income-tested programs. But if earnings-replacement rates for the upper-income aged are held constant along with costs to the nonaged, income-tested programs bring about higher incomes for the poor.

One interesting aspect of the discussion which followed the paper is that many participants thought that, in contrast to the general credit income tax, a non-income-tested approach to aiding the elderly poor might now be politically feasible.

The paper by Watts et al. tackled head-on the vexing issue of income support for single-parent families. They argued convincingly that preferential treatment of the single-parent family by the tax-transfer system (whether within an income-tested or a non-income-tested framework) creates incentives for the parent who is not the primary caretaker to abandon responsibility, and that this is against society's interest. In this context, the income-testing/non-income-testing issue became translated into the need for a child support insurance program which reinforced the financial responsibilities of both parents (whatever their income level). A consensus appeared to develop that this was a promising way simultaneously to provide more support to children in single-parent families and minimize adverse incentives created by more generous treatment of single-parent families.

Stephen Long and John Palmer compared the current health care system with prototype reform proposals that focus on the income-testing issue. Their conclusion was that cost control as well as several other objectives would be better met by plans that provide coverage to all the population. It was more problematic whether benefits within a program with universal coverage should be income-tested. The formal discussants and the ensuing discussion from the floor found no quarrel with this assessment.

What did all this add up to? There are probably as many answers to this question as there were participants at the conference. One thing, however, was clear. Although conference participants were in general agreement that the short-run feasibility of grandiose reforms was slim, and that even presentation of them for public consideration might (recalling McGovern's \$1,000-a-person proposal in 1972) actually set back the cause of reform, they ended the conference much more willing to reexamine their basic assumptions on the income-testing issue than they had been when they arrived. The panelists charged with summing up the conference detected an emerging consensus that all the discussion taken together suggested that (1) income-testing in the current system may have assumed too prominent a place, (2) in future reforms the presumption should be in favor of reducing reliance on income-testing, and (3) the onus of proof to the contrary should lie with those on the income-testing side of the debate. ■



The Community Action Program

(continued from page 9)

speculates that urban CAP activists may have gained special insights during their involvement in the poverty program into the limitations of city government as an instrument for social change. The often deeply antagonistic relationship between local governments and CAP may have marked city government as a hostile environment in which to launch a career. Furthermore, although the poverty populations that were the target of CAP agencies may have been considered too narrow a base for city office, their residential concentration made them ideal constituencies for the support of legislative representatives.

Leadership development was not a planned function of the Community Action Program. It evolved over time, and could not have been evident at the point when the initial rather gloomy assessments of the program were made. But to the degree that CAP trained a significant portion of a generation of black political figures and provided them an entree into political life, its influence is likely to endure long after its modest service delivery innovations and community organizing efforts have been forgotten. ■

Peter Eisinger, "The Community Action Program and the Development of Black Political Leadership," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 493-78.