

The politics of displacement: White mayors, black mayors

In 1964 there were only 70 elected black officials at all levels of government in the United States. Today there are over 4600. Given the inexorable logic of numbers and the pressures generated by the civil rights movement and affirmative action programs, the political power of blacks must continue to grow.

That power is perhaps most apparent in municipal government. Over 170 American cities, among them very large ones like Detroit and Los Angeles, have black mayors; in some of them, the passing of municipal power into black control appears likely to be long term, for blacks now constitute a majority of the urban population.

What are the implications of this transition, for both winners and losers? Will blacks find themselves in possession of a paper kingdom, or have they secured a commanding vantage point from which to affect the distribution of economic and political power in American society? Will whites, with all their economic assets, retreat behind the barricades of suburban autonomy, leaving the central cities to bankruptcy, decay, and violence?

In *The Politics of Displacement*, Peter Eisinger offers reasoned analysis, backed by hard evidence, of what is actually happening in two very different cities, Detroit and Atlanta. In their differences and their similarities, in the fact that black rule is likely, in both, to last a long time, they constitute cases of particular interest to the student of ethnic transition.¹

Through extensive personal interviews with prominent citizens, and careful study of media responses and of the actions of municipal governments and private interests, Eisinger offers a concrete portrayal of the evolving psychological, economic, and political response of two communities of white urban elites to the black accession to power, and of the real and symbolic gains of the black community.

In this article we will restrict consideration to the white response, about which there has been, perhaps, more mythmaking than analysis. As the first blacks began to win important mayoralities in the late 1960s, general expectations were that they would not have ready access to the resources that had enabled their white predecessors to govern effectively. A month before the breakthrough mayoral elections in Gary and Cleveland in 1967, informed commentators anticipated that in the event of black control of big cities, "Millions of whites unable or unwilling to leave will remain in the core cities, a fact of key political importance, since they will fiercely resist the exploitation of municipal power for black interests" (p. 9). Few, if any, considered that the advent of black mayors in big cities might hasten a return to social peace after the turbulence in the 1960s.

By all indications, the transition to black rule occurred under conditions of high racial polarization. Confronted with the acid test of voting for a black candidate, for example, no more than 22 percent and as few as 8 percent of the white electorates in Gary, Cleveland, Newark and Detroit did so. Moreover, interest was high; voters turned out in unusually large numbers. In each case, however, transition was peacefully accomplished.

In 1973 black mayors were elected in Detroit and Atlanta, two cities that are, in certain aspects at least, very different kinds of communities. Yet there were in 1973 some important similarities. Both had spectacular new downtown areas, developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Both had long traditions of civic reform that had, in the 1970s, resulted in a strengthening of the mayor's power vis-à-vis that of the city council. Both, more ominously, had histories of racial tension and violence, and in both, by 1973, blacks were on the verge of becoming a majority of the population, after periods of unprecedentedly rapid population growth. In both, furthermore, poverty and deprivation were disproportionately located within the black communities.

It is, then, of particular interest to examine what happened when in Detroit, Coleman Young, a former union organizer with a reputation for radicalism, and in Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, relatively young, inexperienced despite a term as vice mayor, defeated their white opponents for control of city government.

Losing

Eisinger slants much of his discussion of the events that followed these victories from an unexpected perspective—that of the losers.

The manner in which groups, classes, organizations and individuals deal with political defeat—particularly defeat that seems to mark the end of a long period of unques-

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THE POLITICS OF DISPLACEMENT: RACIAL AND ETHNIC TRANSITION IN THREE AMERICAN CITIES

by
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tioned dominance—is a subject that has received scant attention from social scientists, whose perspectives have been shaped more by questions about how winners handle their accession to power.

But what if the loss of power is to a group of a different ethnic background, or a different race? Ethnic boundaries frequently demarcate notable cultural differences, or ancient and deeply rooted animosities. Tension and violence may seem, from a historical perspective, to be inherent in American race relations; loss of political power by whites to blacks might well be expected to provoke hostile responses, all the way from withdrawal to active contestation and “sabotage.”

Even if the more dramatic manifestations of hostility are absent, there are good reasons to study the losers in electoral contests. In Detroit and Atlanta, for instance, the politically displaced white community was still thoroughly dominant in commerce, banking, industry, real estate, law, and the press. Thus the response of the displaced bears upon the ability of the victors to govern, and upon the economic, cultural, and psychological state of the community. By denying, removing, or diverting these resources, displaced elites can effectively block the ability of the victors to govern. It is of immense importance for a newly victorious municipal government to be able to tap the same wells of prestige and influence to which those whom it displaced had access, for lobbying trips to the state and national capitals, the appointment of panels and commissions, the launching of development projects, the recruiting of high-level bureaucrats from the outside, or the attraction of investments, conventions, and business to the city to enhance employment opportunities and the tax base.

The psychology of adjustment

The first triumph of a black mayoral candidate is no ordinary event in urban politics. Media attention—and consequently public awareness—are high; attitudes and perceptions will be sharper, more focused than normal. In both Atlanta and Detroit white elites were acutely aware of racial transition, although in Atlanta the phenomenon was invested with a dramatic intensity lacking in Detroit. Atlanta had for decades been governed by a relatively small group of white businessmen, with close social ties, who formed a cohesive power structure within which decisions were often made out of the public eye. The Detroit political scene had represented, rather, a balance among bitterly antagonistic interests where organized labor, local business, blacks, white ethnic groups, and city employees struggled to maintain their group within shifting coalitions.

Thus the differing responses of whites in Detroit and Atlanta need evoke little surprise. In Atlanta, elite evaluations of the transition process were extremely tentative

compared to those in Detroit. The fact that the shift was peaceful—that “the lid has been kept on”—was frequently heard enough to suggest, perhaps, how limited white expectations were before the transition and how simple it was to fulfill them. Others noted how difficult it was to lose power “to people you don’t know,” a plaint of people accustomed, surely, to Atlanta’s genteel tradition of a limited and intimate ruling class. But a Detroit man who once sought the mayoralty himself remarked: “People have come to understand that black rule doesn’t make any difference The problems still exist. Nothing is so different. Government is government with all its limitations” (p. 78).

Any newly elected mayor will, of course, evoke different responses depending on his past career, his style, and his personality. To what extent did the fact of the mayor’s blackness shape people’s responses? In both cities, Eisinger argues, blackness was perceived as an inescapable and dominating characteristic, but reactions again differed. Young, indeed, was rather admired for his mastery of what were seen as peculiarly black gifts. Said a white city councilman, “He has some tough union problems but he can get by with it because he’s black . . . he gets along with militant blacks.” Some argued that the mayor’s blackness gave him greater latitude in dealing with state and national governments: “White pols are a bit scared of dealing with and shouting at black politicians” (p. 80).

For white Atlantans, however, the race of their mayor presented problems. He was “touchy” and arrogant—“Every time he gets criticized, he thinks it’s racist” (p. 81). He was indicted for a perceived failure to bridge the gap between two constituencies with radically opposed interests—the black community and the white business community—and for choosing to be a “black man’s mayor.” In so criticizing Jackson, Eisinger notes, white elites were setting his mayoralty against a higher standard of impartiality than they themselves had practiced; clearly, they were reluctant to accept as legitimate a black mayor’s belief that he may be obliged first to address issues of special significance to those chiefly responsible for his election.

In both cities, there was a notable absence of overtly racist analysis of the mayor’s performance. Explanations for this are multiple—that these elites were not, in general, a blatantly racist group; that their members viewed racist language as imprudent, given the new realities of black power; that racist language was merely replaced by neutral-sounding code words such as “inefficient,” or “unbusinesslike.” Whatever the reasons, the absence of overt racism certainly opened the way to acceptance of the legitimacy of the principle of black rule as well as future black mayors.

Let us look more closely at two areas of the mayor’s performance that drew particular attention: their dealings

with the city police force and their efforts to stimulate the local economy in recessionary times.

The Police. Both mayors had campaigned heavily against the shortcomings of the police service; once in office each sought to assert control over the police. Each had to perform a delicate balancing act: He had to obtain the confidence of the black community that blacks would be adequately represented on the police force and that administration of justice would be impartial; he had to convince the nervous white community that violence and street crime would not proliferate; and he had to win the support and loyalty of largely white police forces. Confronted virtually simultaneously with riots and budget crises, Young nevertheless managed to accomplish, more or less, these three objectives; Jackson's attempt to dismiss or remove from actual authority a white police chief who, he considered, ran a racist force was in the end successful, but involved him in a personnel crisis that over-drew his rather modest credit with the white elite.

The Local Economy. Given the economic recession under which the cities were then suffering, the efforts of local government to promote business in general and employment in particular had high visibility. Both mayors were very active, frequently participating in out-of-town trade missions with local businessmen under the aegis of the Chamber of Commerce. A black mayor who appears to hobnob with the "Chamber of Commerce crowd" runs considerable political risk of alienating his black constituency, and it is clear that by so doing both Young and Jackson were making a substantial gesture to white business. Again, recognition of the significance of this gesture was more positive and generous in Detroit. The business community in Atlanta by no means blamed on Jackson the city's economic stagnation after a period of booming expansion, but they remained cool or neutral in their assessment of his efforts to get things moving again. In his first two years at least, Mayor Young enjoyed clear latitude for action. Jackson, however, was expected to conform to a more narrowly defined standard of mayoral behavior, did not meet it, and was thus judged more harshly.

In both cities there very quickly emerged a pattern of practical cooperation with the new leadership. Instead of withdrawing in frustration or anger, the most powerful economic and social actors in both cities sought to establish or maintain access to and cooperation with city hall and to find a political role for themselves. To some degree, they were successful; both administrations were, also to some degree, receptive of these overtures.

The adjustment of major economic actors

The availability of credit, the production of jobs and tax revenues, and the ability to lend a city a reputation for economic vitality through development activities are fac-

tors controlled largely by private economic actors, but upon them the fortunes of a municipal government often depend.

Especially since the civil disorders of the 1960s, urban-based firms and banks have developed a sharper sense of civic responsibility, expressed through cash grants or donations of staff time and facilities, often to social action programs. Eisinger demonstrates convincingly that this commitment did not change with the advent of black rule. In particular, he looks at the activities of a number of business coalitions and of the Chambers of Commerce in both cities, and finds that all not only reaffirmed, but demonstrated their commitment to cooperate with the municipal government. For instance, Central Atlanta Progress, a group of downtown Atlanta merchants, real estate developers, and financial and corporate institutions dedicated to the revitalization of the downtown as a marketplace, organized a consortium among its members to undertake a \$250 million housing and commercial development of a large urban renewal tract in the downtown. The plan was conceived and developed with the cooperation and encouragement of the mayor, the Atlanta Housing Authority, and neighborhood groups. Oriented heavily toward middle- and upper-income housing, the development was designed to be a profit-making venture. At the same time, it represented a statement of business faith in the essential economic health of the city.

Operating within a different context, without the focus on the marketplace, was New Detroit, a nonprofit organization founded after the hot, violent summer of 1967, to consolidate and bring to bear the varied resources of the private sector upon urban problems, and to provide a forum for public discussion. New Detroit was funded by private corporations, unions, and foundations; its aim was to enhance economic, health, and social opportunities for poor and minority groups. Neither the funding levels, the corporate commitment of personnel, nor the prestige of New Detroit diminished with the advent of black rule, as its activities make clear: for instance, it assisted in the decentralization of the school system and mounted a public relations campaign to ensure peaceful implementation of busing; it aided in recruiting and testing reforms designed to bring more blacks into the police department, initiated hiring programs for the hardcore unemployed, and provided venture capital for minority businesses.

The politics of adjustment

Economic cooperation of displaced elites with the new powers may be dictated by self-interest, or the need to survive. But if a measure of economic cooperation were to be offset by intransigent political opposition, then the resulting stalemate would benefit neither the city nor its citizens, whatever their race or income.

Displaced elites could take one or both of two routes in opposition: straightforward political contestation directed

to regaining the mayoralty in the next election; and a more indirect approach—"reform" by redistricting (at its worst, plain gerrymandering) to reverse the demographic trend that led to black victory.

One of the most striking aspects of transition, Eisinger notes, was the attenuation and disorganization of potential political opposition to the new regime. Among white elites in both cities, the assumption developed very rapidly that the personal political strength of both mayors was so great as virtually to ensure them second terms. Demographic factors were acknowledged to favor blacks, and none of the most vocal opponents of the mayor in either city was thought to possess the strength or the means to mount a challenge. Within two years after the election, no suitably qualified white candidate for mayor could be found in Detroit or Atlanta.

With direct contestation dismissed, displaced elites intent upon subverting the new rulers might have recourse to the state government, in hopes that mainly white, suburban, and rural-dominated legislatures would be sympathetic to white urban minorities; indeed, the prospect that legislatures would abandon black-dominated cities entirely was a matter of serious speculation by contemporary observers. Or they might look to a metropolitanization of city government that would, in reality, cloak an effort to swamp the urban black vote with the voting power of suburban whites.

Of the former there is no evidence—nothing to suggest that the Georgia or Michigan legislatures sought to restrict black power or to abandon their major cities, or that whites within those cities viewed the state as a source of relief from their minority status. After 1973, in fact, both states enhanced the fiscal capabilities of their local governments, Georgia by authorizing local option sales and income taxes in 1975, and Michigan by increasing the amount of money available for state shared revenues for local governments in 1976. In both cases, indeed, state contributions to city revenues actually increased slightly during the black mayors' first terms.

What of the movement to impose a single governmental structure on an expanding metropolitan area? Motives for urban reform are complex. Reformers have viewed metropolitan government as a device for expanding the central city tax base, for drawing middle class civic and political talent from the suburban fringes, for rationalizing public services, and for diluting the power of those groups that remain in the central city, bound in place by poverty or color but growing in local political strength by dint of numbers.

The last motive has clearly been strong. The view that a number of efforts at "reform" have been racially motivated finds at least circumstantial support in the strong

resistance such efforts evoked during the 1950s and 1960s in cities such as Cleveland, St. Louis, or Tampa. And four out of the five most recent city-county mergers occurred in Southern cities where the black population was approaching a critical political mass.

In any metropolitan reform blacks may well face a trade-off. Legitimate benefits accruing from tax and revenue equity and service rationality may come at the expense of black chances to control the top political office. When the black mayor is very recently installed, as in Detroit and Atlanta, the issue becomes one of extreme sensitivity. In Atlanta, study commissions had proliferated in the ten years before Maynard Jackson's election, and they were very active in the early years of his mayoralty. Central city whites almost universally agreed on the need for some type of metropolitan solution to Atlanta's various problems of planning, financing, and coordination; all save one of the plans being discussed would have reduced black voters to a minority in the reconstituted city. Metropolitan initiatives were much more limited in Detroit during Young's first term, but they met with virtually the same pattern of responses as in Atlanta. Suburban fears of school integration constituted perhaps the major roadblock to regional government, but black opposition was almost equally forceful. Thus, if metropolitan reform can be viewed, in part, as an elite attempt to subvert black governments, that attempt is very far from being successfully consummated.

What may we conclude from Eisinger's study about the response of the losers to electoral defeat? Victory for the blacks was not accompanied by intransigence or by a desire to turn the tables on the former ruling group; neither did defeat lead that group to bitterness and withdrawal, nor to efforts to sabotage the new rules. Instead, a politics of accommodation prevailed, enabling new partnerships and channels of communication and action to be forged between the holders of economic and of political power. In cities like Detroit and Atlanta, black mayor government has been built on a coalition of business and blacks, and both have clearly much to gain from it.

For members of the middle class, the incentives to stay in the cities or engage in civic activities may not be so readily obvious; how they will react to their relative exclusion, Eisinger comments, is not yet clear. But for the future, he believes, urban mayors—black or white—will have little choice but to rely on coalitions between local business and the central city poor, held together by a system of subsidies, to attempt to rebuild their cities and employ their jobless. Given this necessity, the mostly positive response of displaced white elites to the new governments provides a note of optimism in an often depressing prospect. ■

¹For comparative purposes, Eisinger also considers the Yankee loss of power to the much feared and despised Irish in turn-of-the-century Boston. For reasons of space that analysis is omitted here.