

## **Mississippi: An Emerging Democracy Creating a Culture of Civic Participation among Formerly Oppressed Peoples.**

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### **Abstract**

From the establishment of statehood in 1817 until the 1965 enactment and subsequent enforcement of the federal Voting Rights Act, African Americans were systematically excluded from any meaningful participation in civil society, except for a brief interregnum during the post-Civil War federal occupation of Mississippi (1866-1877). Persons of African descent were denied their rights as citizens, usually under color of the law, but often through means of quiet intimidation or brute force. This paper analyzes within an historical context, the recent efforts at inclusive democracy in Mississippi. Many Mississippians have worked to create a culture of participation and diversity, develop civic literacy and participate fully in civic life, in an often-hostile environment.

United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote in 1857 that no blacks, whether slave or free, were citizens and that they were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” (Shenkman, 168). A Civil War, two world wars and nearly a century later in 1949, Professor V.O. Key observed that blacks in Mississippi had “no hand in the voting, no part in factional maneuvers, no seats in the legislature” (229). Even in 2003, when highly qualified African American Democratic nominees sought the lieutenant governorship and the state treasurer's post, a newspaper analysis of their defeats headlined “Race Seen as Factor in Mississippi Elections” (Byrd, 2003; Adams, 2005). Such is the slow progress of the march toward full participatory citizenship for African Americans in Mississippi.

### **The Long March Towards Red**

Political scientists have produced mountains of data that indicate that political party identification is a major determining factor in voting behavior. In Mississippi, race and party have slowly become almost interchangeable over the last forty years (Adams, 2005). For most of Mississippi's history, Mississippians who were allowed to vote consistently, prior to the 1960s, (i.e., white male Mississippians who could afford to pay the poll tax) cast their votes overwhelmingly in favor of Democratic candidates for public

office. After Reconstruction, Mississippi was a part of the "Solid South," regularly sending Democratic electors to the Electoral College and Democratic senators and representatives to the Congress for nearly a century. As long as the Democrats at the national level did nothing to challenge racial discrimination in the South, they could depend upon the continued loyalty of the region (Lamis, 3-4). However, when Democratic President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he commented, "I am handing the South to the Republican Party for the next fifty years" (Reedy, 23).

White voters in Mississippi began to move away from their traditional loyalty to the Democratic Party with the presidential election of 1948, when the Mississippi delegation bolted the Democratic National Convention rather than going along with a mildly pro-civil rights plank in the platform introduced by Hubert Humphrey (Adams, 2005; Glaser, 1996; Lamis, 1984). In the 1948 general election, Mississippi gave its electoral votes to Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. Thurmond was the nominee of the States Rights or "Dixiecrat" Party, and chose as his Vice Presidential running mate, Mississippi's Governor Fielding Wright. Rather than support John Kennedy in 1960, the virtually all-white Mississippi electorate endorsed an unpledged slate of state electors who ultimately supported independent candidate Harry Byrd of Virginia (Chohodas, 1993; Lamis, 1984). In 1964, for the first time since Reconstruction, a large majority of Mississippi voters (87.1 percent) voted for Republican Barry Goldwater, over the pro-civil rights Lyndon Johnson. Although many Southerners voted for the Republican candidate, only 19 percent identified themselves as Republicans in 1964 (Glaser, 1996). In the following ten presidential elections, Mississippi has voted Democratic only once, in 1976 for fellow Southerner Jimmy Carter.

Federal registrars began the process of implementing the Voting Rights Act in Mississippi in time for African American voters to have some impact on the state and county elections held in 1967. Robert G. Clark, a teacher and civil rights worker in Holmes County, was elected as the first African American member of the Mississippi House of Representatives since Reconstruction (Andrews, 2004; Glaser, 1996). Like virtually all newly enfranchised African American Mississippians, Representative Clark was a Democrat. By the next election for state office in 1971, African Americans had

attained sufficient voting strength to play a key role in the election of a Democratic, racially moderate white governor, Bill Waller. A self-proclaimed populist, Waller, rewarded African American support by appointing persons of color to state positions (Adams, 2005; Lamis, 1984). In addition to being the first governor to appoint African Americans to key governmental positions, Waller was the first governor in living memory that did not run for office on a platform of segregation of the races. Waller's term was followed by the election of another governor by a bi-racial coalition. Cliff Finch and the bi-racial Democratic coalition delivered the states electors to Jimmy Carter in 1976, the first Democrat to receive electoral votes from Mississippi in twenty years (Lamis, 1984). It seemed to some observers at the time that Mississippi's newly-unified coalition of traditional white Democrats and pro-civil rights African American Democrats might be able to return Mississippi to the Democratic column and stunt the fledgling Mississippi Republican organization before it could become a threat.

### **Wink, Nod and Win**

It had long been an established practice of segregationist Democratic politicians in Mississippi and elsewhere to pander to white racism to win an election. The notorious racist Theodore Bilbo rose to the governorship of Mississippi and was elected to serve in the United States Senate by "spreading nigger dust," as he put it. After losing his first run for high office in Alabama in the 1950's to a more vocal segregationist, George Wallace vowed never to be "out-niggered" again (Cohodas, 1993; Goldfield, 1990; Lamis, 1984). Throughout the 1970's most of the segregationist diehards in Mississippi remained at least nominal Democrats, under the leadership of longtime (1941-1978) segregationist Democrat Senator James O. Eastland. As the Mississippi Republican Party began to organize and field candidates in the 1970's, it appeared for a time that they might build a bi-racial coalition committed to racial cooperation. Eastland was challenged for his last re-election bid in 1972 by a racially moderate Republican, Gil Carmichael (Adams, 2005). Carmichael worked to build a bi-racial coalition behind his candidacy, and despite active opposition from his fellow Republicans in the Nixon White House, Carmichael gained nearly 42% of the vote against the legendarily powerful Eastland. Carmichael was the Republican nominee for Governor in 1975, gaining 45.1% of the vote in that

outing (Lamis, 1984). After losing twice with the moderate Carmichael, Mississippi Republicans began an active effort to reach out to "conservatives" (i.e. segregationists and white supremacists) who were still clinging to the old Democratic label. These efforts accelerated after Eastland's retirement in 1978 and Carmichael's third statewide defeat as Republican nominee for Governor in 1979. Carmichael garnered a mere 39.1% of the vote against the Democratic nominee, former segregationist-turned-racial moderate William Winter (Adams, 2005; Lamis, 1984). By 1983, the former segregationist Democrats who had switched parties to become Republicans were able to nominate one of their own, Leon Brantlett, a former chairman of the lily-white Democratic faction of the 1960's. The ex-Dixiecrats had eclipsed the racial moderates among Mississippi Republicans for good, and they knew exactly what it would take to win in Mississippi...Bilbo and Eastland had taught them well (Lamis, 1984).

On a sweltering summer day in 1980, Republican Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan chose a symbolic venue for an early foray into the Southerner Jimmy Carter's home turf. Reagan chose the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a site within a few miles of an infamous happening of only sixteen years before. In 1964, three civil rights workers named Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney had been murdered and buried in the red clay mud of Neshoba County (Crespina, 2007; Cohodas, 1993; Goldfield, 1990; Lamis, 1984). They were murdered for having the temerity to work to register African Americans to vote. They were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. They were murdered by a key element of the voting constituency of Bilbo and Eastland. With Eastland retired to his plantation and the Democratic Party in the hands of the hated "blacks", this constituency was up for grabs. Lyndon Johnson had signed away their loyalty when he signed the Civil Rights Act the same year that Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney were murdered. Reagan and his Mississippi minions reached out and grabbed that constituency as Reagan uttered a subtle phrase that sent up rebel yells that shook the red clay dust: "The South shall rise again!" Reagan's 1980 campaign was laced with references to "welfare queens" in Chicago who drove Cadillacs paid for with undeserved and overly generous welfare checks (Crespino, 2007; Zucchini, 1997; Lamis, 1984). In Mississippi, that was like throwing red meat to starving wolves.

White racism had found a home in the Republican Party, especially the Mississippi Republican Party.

The partisan shift moved slowly, but steadily. In 1981, forty-six percent (46%) of white Mississippians identified themselves as Democrats. By 1998, that number had declined to thirty-one percent (31%). In 1998, twenty-seven percent (27%) of white Mississippians believed that the Democratic Party was protecting their interests, while seventy-three percent (73%) of African Americans believed that Democrats were protecting their interests. By 2003, only eighteen percent (18%) of white Mississippians identified with the Democratic Party (Morgan, 2004). Exit polls indicated that seventy-seven percent (77%) of white voters voted for Republican Haley Barbour in the 2003 gubernatorial election, while ninety-four percent (94%) of African American voters voted for Democrat Ronnie Musgrove (Morgan, 2004).

In 2003, the Mississippi Democratic Party nominated, in the primary elections, a well-qualified and experienced African American candidate for lieutenant governor and another well-qualified African American candidate for state treasurer (Mitchell, 2003). While many factors affect any election campaign, state pundits and election observers agreed that the race of these nominees did play a role in their defeats. The treasurer-nominee, Gary Anderson, stood in stark contrast with his under-qualified Republican opponent. With more than a decade of experience in state government, including service as chief financial officer for the state, Anderson stood head-and-shoulders above the young Republican candidate, who had never had any involvement with state finances (Mitchell, 2003). The Republicans featured photographs of the Democratic nominee in their negative television advertisements in the last days of the campaign, making sure that the die-hard racist element in the Mississippi electorate remembered that Anderson was black when they went to the polls (Salter, 2002). Anderson garnered forty-five percent (45%) of the vote, more than any African American candidate has received statewide since Reconstruction, but the under-qualified Republican won the election. Republican gubernatorial nominee Haley Barbour made his subtle appeals to racism, first by equating the homes of Head Start children to something worse than a "whorehouse", by sporting the confederate flag on his lapel throughout the campaign, and by allowing his

photograph to remain featured on the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens website. The Reagan-style "wink and nod" strategy was still working in 2003.

### **A House Divided**

Partisanship is not the only measure of the gulf between white and African American attitudes in Mississippi. A 1998 social research report conducted by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University showed that sixty percent (60%) of African Americans in Mississippi supported preferences for African Americans in hiring and promotion due to past discrimination, while only eleven percent (11%) of white Mississippians held that view. In the same survey, ninety-two percent (92%) of African Americans believed that the federal government should make every effort to improve the black socio-economic position, while forty-six percent (46%) of whites held that view (Shaffer, Jackreece, and Horne, 1999).

In 1987, an amendment to the state constitution repealing a ban on interracial marriage (a law previously nullified by federal action) was approved by popular vote in a general election by a slim majority of only fifty-two percent (52%). In March of 1995, at the urging of African American legislators, the Mississippi Legislature ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the amendment outlawing slavery in the United States. Mississippi was the final state to do so, but of course the state's ratification was merely a symbolic action by 1995. In 2001, a popular referendum on the design of the state flag resulted in a sixty-four percent (64%) popular endorsement for the continuation of the current state flag, which prominently features the Confederate battle flag (Orey, 2004).

Mississippi has more African American elected officials per capita than does any state in the Union. With the highest African American percentage of population, nearly forty percent (40%), the high number of African American elected officials is appropriate, and can be found remarkable only in the recognition that these numbers are a recent development (Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 2004-2008). When Robert Clark made history as the first African American member of the House of Representatives in 1968, he was the sole African American among 122 members. Today, thirty-five members of the state house of representatives are African Americans, as are

eleven of the fifty-two state senators. Mississippi has been represented by an African American in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1987 when voters of the Mississippi Delta elected Mike Espy to represent them in Washington. In 1993, Bennie G. Thompson was elected to represent the Delta district which comprises of one-fourth of the state's total population (Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 2004-2008).

### **Together Forward**

"Together forward" was ironically the campaign slogan of Mississippi's first Republican Governor since Reconstruction, the reactionary Kirk Fordice, who was elected in 1991. Fordice was a master at the subtle Reagan technique of making a wink and a nod at racism. When asked about racism in Mississippi, he huffed "We don't do race anymore." He threatened to call on the National Guard rather than raise taxes if ordered to do so under the terms of a federal case brought to correct under-funding at state historically black universities (Eubank, 1991). Governor Fordice did little to foster "togetherness" or to embrace the concept of moving forward during his eight-year tenure.

"Together forward" can be a sincere rallying cry for Mississippi's future. There is an old saying by the late Dr. Booker T. Washington, that is often repeated by civil rights workers in Mississippi that "one man cannot hold another man down in the ditch without remaining down in the ditch with him" (Harlan and Smock, 1981). As the poorest state in the Union, Mississippians have held each other in the proverbial ditch since the founding of the state (Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 2004-2008). A wide range of institutions have begun to devote time and resources to finding racial common ground.

At the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in 1963, efforts to integrate the student body were met with official resistance and white violence, but in 1999, the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation was established on that same campus. The life of its namesake, former governor William Winter, is an instructive example of both the progress Mississippi has made in race relations and also how far the state has yet to go. Winter began his career in the late 1940's as a segregationist, though never of the race-baiting ilk of Bilbo or Eastland. In the 1960's Winter moderated his views on race, and was attacked as being an "integrationist" during his unsuccessful bid for governor in

1967 (Lamis, 1994; Goldfield, 1990). Winter enjoyed near-unanimous African American support in his successful bid for governor in 1979. Since his term as governor, Winter has become a leading force for racial and social justice in Mississippi, and was appointed in 1997 to serve on President Bill Clinton's Commission on Race in America. The William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation builds more inclusive communities by promoting diversity and citizenship, and by supporting projects that help communities solve local challenges (William Winter Institute for Racial Conciliation Website).

At the University of Southern Mississippi, the Center for Community and Civic Engagement, formed in November 2000, is working to foster service learning in ways that value diverse partnerships between K-16 educational institutions and community-based organizations that focus on civic responsibility and community needs. The Center focuses particularly upon underserved communities where the at-risk youth populations are large. By building partnerships with existing institutions and community-based organizations, the Center seeks to help address community needs as defined by the communities themselves, rather than as an imposition of programs and techniques from outside the communities (Center for Community and Civic Engagement Website).

Tougaloo College, largely considered the historic heart of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, launched its Center for Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility, in 2003. Its mission is to serve as a catalyst, a forum, and an incubator of new ideas, creating a network of interaction between academia and the community at large. The Tougaloo Center is beginning to explore innovative ways to escape the "Ivory Tower" mentality of academia by engaging diverse communities at the grassroots through public forums on issues of local, state, national and international concerns (Center for Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility Website).

Mission Mississippi is an ecumenical Christian organization "founded to encourage and demonstrate unity in the Body of Christ across racial and denominational lines in Mississippi" (Mission Mississippi Website). The great common denominator between most white Mississippians and most African American Mississippians is a professed faith in Jesus Christ. The Mission has worked for more than a decade to bring perhaps the most powerful force in Mississippi society, the Christian faith, to bear upon the injustice of discrimination and the moral indefensibility of racial exclusion, hatred,

and violence. Racially-segregated church congregations across Mississippi are being led by Mission Mississippi to worship together in joint services, to visit congregations of different race or denomination, and to engage in religious study and discussion across racial boundaries in ways never before undertaken in Mississippi (Mission Mississippi Website).

Mississippi Policy Forum, a non-profit, nongovernmental organization founded in 2003, has a mission of enhancing civic literacy among adults and providing opportunities for middle school and high school students to develop their skill as citizens before they reach voting age (Mississippi Policy Forum Website). Given the long history of systematic exclusion in Mississippi, there is not a strong culture of civic participation in most Mississippi communities. Mississippi Policy Forum works to provide all Mississippians the means and skills essential for them to be able to exercise their full civil rights, interact with policymakers and influence policy outcomes. By providing practical civic education for both students and adults, the Forum will empower and equip the citizenry of Mississippi to develop a more vigorous, diverse, interactive and broad-based democracy (Mississippi Policy Forum Website).

## **Conclusion**

Each of the aforementioned foundations are new, having found their existence at a time when at least some Mississippians are learning that they must heed the words of the prophet, and come to reason together. These organizations represent a vanguard, but are only a part of the overall "homegrown" efforts to come to terms with Mississippi's history, embrace inclusion and diversity, and truly move "together forward".

The late Governor Fordice notwithstanding, Mississippi does still "do" race. Rev. Rims Barber, a committed civil rights activist who came to Mississippi for Freedom Summer and never left, describes himself as "a recovering racist." Mississippians who have committed themselves to furthering the goals of diversity know that the dark hatred of difference continue to dwell in the souls of many. Mississippi has long been a metaphor for racism in America, a powerful symbol for the unfulfilled promise of the Declaration of Independence. The fits, start, and detours Mississippi democracy has

endured, and continues to endure, can be instructive for others who grope for the rocks to cross the river towards inclusion.

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