

---

# Local Party Failure and Church-Based Black Nonparty Organizations

Michael Lee Owens

## Abstract

*Although attention has been focused on Black alternative party organizations and political activity, scant attention has been focused on Black alternative nonparty organizations, especially those linked with Black churches. This scholarly neglect is remarkable when one considers the extent to which Black churches and their clerics will, and do, engage in nonparty, political activity. This paper provides an analysis of the circumstances that led to the creation of a church-based, Black nonparty organization in New York City—the Southeast Queens Clergy for Community Empowerment. Detailing the organization's involvement in the electoral system, particularly its competitive relationship with the local Democratic party, the paper concludes that, in the case of local electoral politics, church-based, Black nonparty organizations can influence the electoral process, successfully challenge dominant political parties, and increase the sense of empowerment and efficacy among Black communities.*

*If a political machine is defined as a deliverable vote, the church is the only effective, disciplined machine that Negroes have developed.*

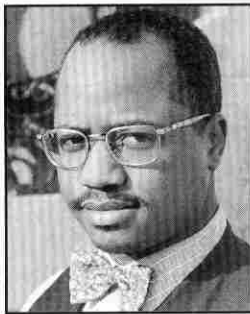
Ralph Bunche

## Introduction

The American two-party system, with its structural and cultural constraints, is designed to foster the hegemony of the nation's dominant political parties. However, despite the barriers posed by the system, other political organizations are part of the American two-party electoral system. Appearing alongside the dominant political parties in the electoral process are alternative political organizations seeking to influence partisan politics, as well as the pressure group system. These alternative political organizations may assume the form of either parties or nonparties. While some of their influence is felt at the federal level, much of it is directed at the subnational level of states and their localities. Theorists account for the presence of alternative political organizations by pointing

to major party failure, which may take different forms. In theory, as major political parties fail to meet certain objectives—e.g., interest aggregation, citizen exercise of control, and civic education—the influence of alternative political organizations in the electoral process can be expected to increase.

These increasingly influential alternative organizations span the spectrums of class, religion, ethnicity, issue, and race. In the case of blacks, the impetus for the formation of alternative organizations, particularly church-based political organizations, appears to be the same as for other groups—unresponsive political parties. Similar to their precursors in the post-Emancipation period, today's Black churches provide organizational, financial, and spiritual resources for collective political mobilization. According to social scientists Charles Green and Basil Wilson, rising church-based political activism within Black communities, along with the contemporary Black church's "demonstrated . . . willingness to experiment with new approaches to organization . . . could fundamentally alter the relationship



**Michael Lee Owens**, is presently a researcher for the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government's Urban Studies Group. He conducts primary and secondary research on minority middle-class and working-class neighborhoods, federal urban revitalization, nonprofit neighborhood preservation initiatives, and urban inequality. His research has appeared or been cited in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *The New York Times*, *City Limits*, *USA Today*, the *Albany Times-Union*, and *about...time*.

of the Black community to established power structures [e.g., the Democratic party]."<sup>1</sup>

However, while attention has been focused on Black alternative *party* organizations and political activity, i.e., third parties,<sup>2</sup> scant attention has been focused on Black alternative *nonparty* organizations, especially those linked with Black churches. This scholarly neglect is remarkable when one considers the extent to which Black churches and their clerics will, and do, engage in nonparty, political activity. Yet, as Alan J. Ware has observed: "While White liberal Democrats in the 1980s were becoming worried about the intertwining of politics and religion by right-wing fundamentalists, most forgot or ignored the fact that, for their Black allies also, the separation of religion and politics had rarely been sustained."<sup>3</sup>

Church-based, Black nonparty organizations are visible in the partisan politics of urban areas. As a consequence, the dominant political parties, as well as minor political parties and "others seeking to influence the Black community assume the Black church and its ministers to be the means to do so. In the absence of other viable institutions, the Black church has been assumed to be the principal focal point for political activity, both electoral and otherwise."<sup>4</sup> But how influential can church-based, Black nonparty organizations be in the electoral process? Can they successfully challenge political parties? Specifically, can church-based, Black nonparty organizations provide a means for Black empowerment, especially with regard to candidate selection and local party nominations? This paper attempts to answer these questions by an analysis of the circumstances that led to the creation of one church-based, Black nonparty organization in New York City—the Southeast Queens Clergy for Community Empowerment. Detailing the organization's involvement in the electoral system, particularly its competitive relationship with the Queens Democratic party, the paper concludes that, in the case of local electoral politics, church-based, Black nonparty organizations can influence the electoral process, successfully challenge dominant political parties, and increase the sense of empowerment and efficacy among Black communities.

### **Alternative Political Organizations and Party Failure**

Increasingly, alternative political organizations are joining the dominant political parties in the electoral arena, sometimes contesting them for predominance.<sup>5</sup> In some instances, alternative political organizations have taken the form of parties. In other instances, they have taken the

form of nonparties. Both types of alternative political organizations have appeared in two-party and multi-party systems. In addition, depending upon the organization and the constraints faced by them, these alternative political organizations have achieved differing levels of electoral success.<sup>6</sup> In the specific case of the United States, some have even asserted that the proliferation of alternative political organizations has resulted in "a displacement of parties in the development of political issues."<sup>7</sup>

Theorists conclude that, as the dominant political parties fail to correspond to the wishes of citizens, alternative political organizations will be founded to supplement and, in some instances, supplant the dominant political parties within the electoral process. For example, Hanes Walton, Jr. remarks that "When parties fail, other organizations emerge, first to expose and propagandize the weakness of the major parties, second to attempt to place their own representatives in power."<sup>8</sup> In their research on electoral systems, Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl observe that, over the last couple of decades, "All over the world, single issue movements are forming, special interest groups are assuming party-like status, and minor parties are winning startling overnight victories as hitherto dominant parties lose the confidence of their electorates."<sup>9</sup> British political scientist Alan Ware comments that the formation of alternative political organizations is a consequence of the inability of political parties to be strong "agents of democracy" due to a set of identifiable and ever-present phenomena: social change, shrinking welfare states, population mobility, state intervention in political parties, campaign technology, corporatism, and single-issue groups.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Steven Rosenstone and his colleagues posit that citizen support for alternative political organizations, particularly those formed as third or minor parties, is influenced by the level of perceived "major party deterioration."<sup>11</sup> In short, a collection of scholars attribute the appearance and growing appeal of alternative political organizations among citizens to the failure of major political parties.

In the case of the American political system, it appears that the ability of the dominant political parties to operationalize a set of important—but wholly theoretical—functions has become impaired.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, political parties have fallen short of the standards democratic theorists set for them. According to the party failure theorists, the result of this impairment is the inability of both the Democratic and Republican parties to successfully fulfill their roles as generators of symbols of identification and loyalty, aggregators of interests, organizers of legitimate opposition and guiding dissent, recruiters of attractive candidates, and civic educators.<sup>13</sup> Party failure also is con-

ceived of as a byproduct of the unresponsiveness of the dominant political parties to policy issues; their poor organization and financial constraints; their nomination of unattractive candidates to high office; and poor handling of the economy when in office.<sup>14</sup>

At a minimum, three theories of party failure can be identified which offer varying insights into the establishment of alternative political organizations, both in the form of parties and nonparties. The first of these theories is the theory of linkage failure. This theory, advanced by Lawson, postulates that the rise in alternative political organizations is the result of the failure of contemporary dominant political parties to form and maintain "adequate linkages between the state and its citizens."<sup>15</sup> Because political parties are unable to unite the demands of citizens with the policy outcomes of their governments, citizens have looked to institutions other than political parties for pursuing their political objectives. Consequently, alternative political organizations have appeared to reconnect citizens to the state, and *vice versa*.

The second theory posits that party failure is a consequence of weak political competition, whereby there is a disjunction between parties and particular groups that comprise a portion of their membership.<sup>16</sup> History shows that in the presence of weak political competition among parties, one political party will eventually dominate. This domination leads to the development of a one-party system in which the options and alternatives available to voters are limited. It is the lack of competition and the prevention of citizens from fully participating in the electoral process which is said to give rise to alternative political organizations that eventually challenge the dominant political party and open the process to once-neglected interests.

The third theory holds that party failure results from a lack of understanding on the part of the party leadership concerning the trade-offs inherent in party politics.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, this theory states that alternative political organizations appear because party leaders, in attempting to respond to pressures external and internal to their parties, incorrectly choose to deal with one type of pressure over another. For example, when party leaders side with the particular interests within their party instead of pursuing a more general or societal interest, party failure may result because voters no longer identify the party as interest optimators.

As parties have failed to clear the theoreticians' and citizens' bars, new entities have been organized to take their place, or at least share their space, within the electoral system. Each of the three theories of party failure that have been highlighted are useful in the discourse on

the emergence of Black alternative political organizations, both in the form of parties and nonparties. In particular, these theories offer sound explanations for the appearance of church-based, Black nonparty organizations. Though the debate over party failure tends to focus on the national parties, most citizens and voters come in contact with subnational parties (state, county, and local). If party failure occurs, it is most obvious at these levels. As the following case study will demonstrate, the formation of church-based, Black nonparty organizations can be accounted for by the members, as well as nonmembers, of the Black electorate perceiving that local Democratic parties have failed at linking their concerns to government actions. Furthermore, the emergence of church-based, Black nonparty organizations can be attributed to an increasingly negative Black perception of local Democratic parties as inhibitors of input and competition. Moreover, when the leadership of local Democratic parties respond to internal party pressures instead of external party pressures, like endorsing and nominating party regulars with ties to the leadership over party insurgents supported by an important constituency that has broad-based appeal, one is likely to see alternative Black nonparty organizations appear.

### ***The Development of a Church-based, Black Nonparty Organization***

Historically, Black Americans have found it difficult to extricate themselves from their contemporary political position in the U.S. In particular, when it has come to bargaining with the Democratic party over political concessions such as endorsements, appointments, and funds, Black "leaders" have found themselves faced with the reality that bolting to the Republicans is not a plausible alternative. Nevertheless, Black Americans have discovered options for exercising their political influence as an interest group in the electoral system. As Hardy T. Frye noted in his research on Black political participation in the southern region of the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s, in those places where "the Democratic party remains the dominant political organization, blacks are trying new strategies both within and *outside* the party to increase their political strength" (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup> These internal and external activities also occur in parts of the North, where blacks are relying on innovative methods and new types of organizations for achieving empowerment within the Democratic party. Much of the attention on these options, however, has been on alternative

party organizations in the form of independent Black political parties.

Throughout their history in America, blacks have been involved, directly and indirectly, in third-party politics. Blacks have often joined with other racial and ethnic groups in forming third parties.<sup>19</sup> Yet they also have founded all Black political parties, primarily in deep southern states like Mississippi and Alabama.<sup>20</sup> These independent Black political parties have been formed for two reasons. One, Black participation has been denied within one or the other major party. Two, blacks decided that aspects of their political and socioeconomic concerns could not, or would not, be met by the established majority parties. However, the formation of alternative political organizations in the form of Black third parties has proven difficult to start and sustain over time. For like other third-parties, independent Black political parties have been constrained by cultural barriers. In particular, they have had limited electoral success in the American political process due to Black voter values and political socialization that manifests itself as allegiance to the two major parties and the two-party system. Furthermore, Black third parties have been handicapped by systemic constraints, especially single-member plurality districts and ballot access laws.

There is, however, another option that blacks have chosen beside direct participation in the activities of the established majority or the formation of minor parties. Specifically, some blacks have elected to form alternative *nonparty* political organizations. The subsequent sections of this paper discuss church-based, nonparty organizations, which constitute a particular type of alternative nonparty organization that has been used by blacks seeking new opportunities for exercising their political influence in pursuit of empowerment in the 6th Congressional District in New York City. As the paper documents, the formation of, and participation in, an alternative organization by the Black clergy in the 6th Congressional District, which is financially and organizationally supported by their congregants, was in response to the local Democratic party's unresponsiveness to Black concerns, which is considered by some theorists to be a strong form of party failure.

### ***The 6th Congressional District and the Black Clergy***

In *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City*, Green and Wilson contend that the "rising of political activism of the Black church have increased the political power of the church in the Black community."<sup>21</sup> Emanating from places like Manhattan's Abyssinia to

Brooklyn's St. Paul's to The Bronx's Walker-Memorial, Black church-based politics is thriving in New York City. But political activity on the part of Black churches has not been lost on Black congregations in Queens. Specifically, since the middle part of the 1980s, a network of Black clergy have attempted to exercise political influence in southeast Queens, particularly within the 6th Congressional District (abbreviated here as CD). This Black church-based political activism has brought new actors into the political process. It has also led to the creation and endurance of an alternative political organization that has continually prodded the local Democratic party to remain responsive to the needs, grievances, and desires of a considerable segment of its membership.

The 6th CD is located in the southeastern section of Queens County. Like the county in which it is contained, the 6th CD is mostly middle-class, but it is also predominantly Black. In large measure, the residents of the 6th CD live in cross-class communities in which the Black middle-class and its institutions, particularly Black churches, serve the district through organizational development, political leadership, and entrepreneurship. Up through the middle 1980s, when blacks comprised a minority of the district's constituents, the involvement of the Black clergy in the electoral politics of the 6th CD was confined to a supporting role in relation to the Democratic party. In short, the Black clergy was responsible for channelling Black political participation into the activities of the Democrats. However, midway through the 1980s, when blacks came to numerical predominance in the district, the Black clergy became politically radicalized. This resulted in the transference of a considerable amount of Black political participation to extraparty political activity.

### ***The Southeast Queens Clergy for Community Empowerment***

In 1984, a cadre of Black clergy joined together to assist Jesse Jackson's effort to win the New York Democratic Presidential primary election. While Jackson did not win the primary, this collection of Black clergy, acting through their churches and their congregants, mobilized a considerable number of Black voters and, most importantly, delegates for the Jackson campaign. The results of the election show that Jackson received 40,000-plus votes in the 6th CD, which was more than half the number of votes received by Walter Mondale and Gary Hart combined. This successful mobilization of the Black communities found among the election districts of Southeast Queens impressed upon this informal group of Black clergy that, one, they could be influential in local Democratic party politics and,

two, they needed to organize themselves as an institution.<sup>22</sup> The product of their institutionalization was the Southeast Queens Clergy for Community Empowerment (abbreviated here as SQCCE).

Cognizant that a single church could not affect the overall conditions of blacks and that political parties tend to be responsive to those interests that are organized, the pastors of the largest Black churches in Southeast Queens joined together to create an organization that would pursue Black political empowerment through party and extraparty channels. Comprised of pastors from approximately 70 churches, the SQCCE was founded in 1984 with the specific aim of enhancing the participation and influence of blacks within the Queens Democratic party. The SQCCE, however, is not a mass organization. Membership in the organization is limited to the Black clergy, with each member-pastor required to contribute monthly to the organization. In addition, the membership's churches are annually assessed a fee for support of the SQCCE's political mobilization and community development activities. The executive committee of the SQCCE is democratically elected, with provisions for term limits among the leadership positions of the organization. Moreover, the SQCCE tends towards professional rather than protest politics. Whereas other Black church-based nonparty organizations may engage in confrontational acts along the lines of the Alinsky school of community politics, the SQCCE, with its middle-class organizational base, prefers to engage in the politics of bargaining, compromise, and reconciliation. However, it has maintained an oppositional stance towards the local Democratic party.

### ***Church-Based, Black Political Activism in Local Electoral Politics***

The summer of 1984 witnessed the SQCCE insinuate itself in the local electoral politics of Southeast Queens. In the months leading up to the Democratic primary for the 6th CD, the SQCCE became a pivotal actor in the election's outcome. Having served the 6th CD for twenty-four years, Joseph Addabbo, the White incumbent Congressman, sought re-election to a thirteenth term. However, Addabbo, despite his tenure in the district and seniority in Congress, was not guaranteed victory in the autumn primary. For unlike prior elections, in 1984 he ran for Congress in a majority-Black 6th CD. The new 6th CD in which Addabbo had to conduct his 1984 Congressional campaign was the product of redistricting by the New York State Legislature following the 1980 Census of Population and Housing.<sup>23</sup> As *The New York Times* reported at the time, the new 6th CD provided "certainty

among people in New York politics that . . . a Black politician [soon would] represent the district in Congress."<sup>24</sup> In the 1982 Democratic primary election, a Black candidate did oppose Addabbo. Simeon Golar, a former New York City Housing Commissioner during the Lindsay Administration and a prosperous real estate developer, ran strong against Addabbo in the primary, capturing 43 percent of the votes cast. Two years later, Golar again challenged Addabbo for his Congressional seat.

Speaking on the relationship between politicians and the Black clergy, Harris notes that "although some commentators criticize the appropriateness of Black clerics as representatives of Black interests in the American polity, political entrepreneurs certainly woo the activist clergy within Black communities as a means to legitimize and garner support for their political goals."<sup>25</sup> As the Black population of southeast Queens multiplied during the 1970s, Addabbo formed ties with the Black clergy. Acknowledging the significant role Black churches have often played in partisan politics in New York City, Addabbo rightly believed the SQCCE's endorsement would be critical to his reelection bid in the new majority-minority district. For he could not win in the 6th CD in 1984 against Golar without the support of Black voters. Therefore, he actively sought the backing of the SQCCE in order to legitimize his candidacy and energize Black support for his re-election bid. Golar, on the other hand, neglected to pursue the support of the Black clergy, or a grassroots campaign, in the district. Instead, he focused his efforts on the professionalization of his campaign via phone banks, polling, fundraising, and speaking engagements before local business interests.

In the end, the SQCCE gave Addabbo their support. Their rationale was straightforward; Golar was, figuratively and literally, an outsider to the district and Addabbo was a close ally of the clergy and their communities. As one member of the SQCCE stated: "This is not a Black issue; we're going by performance and Mr. Addabbo has been very representative of the community... It would serve no purpose to have Congressman Addabbo replaced by a freshman representative."<sup>26</sup> With the endorsement of the SQCCE, Addabbo won the election by more than 17,000 votes.<sup>27</sup> Of the nearly 50,000 ballots cast between the two candidates, Golar received only one-third of the votes. But into the second year of his term in Congress, Addabbo died and a special election was called for the early summer of 1986.

The research of Thomas Kazee and Mary Thornberry on Congressional candidate recruitment informs us that in many congressional districts local political parties play both direct and indirect roles in determining who the candi-

dates will be in congressional elections.<sup>28</sup> In the special election to replace Addabbo, four candidates actively sought the nomination of the Democratic party. In south-east Queens, as is the case in other Democratic strongholds throughout New York City, the endorsement of the Democratic party is tantamount to victory in almost any election, especially a Congressional election. Among the candidates seeking the party's formal recognition and support were State Assemblyman Alton Waldon, State Senator Andrew Jenkins, and Assistant New York City Health Commissioner Kevin McCabe. Another candidate vying for the office was the Reverend Floyd Flake. Flake, pastor of the Allen A.M.E. Church, where two-thirds of its 4,000 members were registered Democrats, was active in the Black clerical community and had lived in the district since 1976.

Though Flake was a novice to electoral politics, the SQCCE chose him as its candidate of choice to complete Addabbo's term in office. It recruited him, financed and staffed his campaign, and lobbied the Queens Democratic party leadership to consider him for the nomination. The SQCCE predicted, along with other political actors in the district, that Flake would receive the party's endorsement. This expectation was driven by three specific factors. First, Addabbo had maintained an attentive relationship with the membership of the SQCCE, especially Flake. For example, while in Congress, Addabbo provided Flake with funds that underwrote many of the Allen A.M.E. Church's community and economic development activities. In particular, Addabbo secured federal funding for the church's development of an \$11 million senior citizens complex and the construction of its private elementary school. Second, the SQCCE had proven itself a serious political actor in the 1984 Democratic Presidential primary. In general, the SQCCE was credited with ensuring Jackson's victory in the 6th CD. Specifically, the SQCCE was acknowledged as the primary reason Jackson carried the district by almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the vote.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, up to this point, the SQCCE's influence in local Democratic politics was, like the Jackson campaign and the Democratic National Committee, dependent on the fear that if the leaders of the Queens Democratic party did not negotiate, Black voters would lose faith with the party and resort to extraparty activities. And third, the SQCCE banked on the legacy of the Black church and its connection with Black voters and their subsequent support for candidates endorsed by the Black clergy. Despite the strong relationship between Addabbo and the SQCCE, the leadership of the Queens Democratic party endorsed State Assemblyman Waldon over Flake for the 6th CD.

Ware, in his research on the demise of the Democratic party organization, observed that one of the successes of Black churches over time has been their ability to be "a major power base *independent* of the parties in many cities" (emphasis added).<sup>30</sup> The Queens Democratic party, however, overlooked this observation, probably because of the truism of nomination politics: Unless they have enough members to control a majority party, "an interest group seeking to determine the outcome of a nomination must either run its own candidate as an independent, as a candidate among a host of others in a primary battle, or seek to establish a party in its own name,"<sup>31</sup> all of which are difficult tasks to achieve. Yet the SQCCE opted for the first alternative. In turn, Flake, backed by a successful petition campaign conducted by the SQCCE, acquired enough signatures from the district to secure a place on the ballot as an independent candidate under the Unity Party banner. And in the initial counting of the June 10th special election ballots, Flake was declared the winner. But, a recount, inclusive of absentee ballots that did not include Flake's name, resulted in the election of the Democratic party nominee by less than 300 votes.<sup>32</sup>

Waldon's victory in the special election ultimately proved illusory. For instead of uniting behind him and the Democratic party, the SQCCE filed a new set of petitions for Flake to run in the September 9th primary for a full term as U.S. Representative from the 6th CD. Six weeks later in the fall primary election, Waldon, who was supported by then Governor Mario Cuomo and a host of other party regulars, again faced Flake, who by the time of the election was endorsed by *The New York Times* and then Mayor Edward I. Koch. In the weeks leading up to this contest, the SQCCE mobilized the congregations of their member churches, which provided resources to Flake that rivaled or surpassed the resources available to Waldon from the Queens Democratic party. In particular, Flake's church-based candidacy allowed for him to directly tap into the most visible and influential institutions in the 6th Congressional District—the Black churches. The resources the SQCCE and its member-churches provided to Flake were those which politically active Black churches have often provided to political candidates: group endorsements by ministers and religious groups, clerical appeals, church-sponsored political forums and rallies, candidate contacts at religious services, and fund-raising for political candidates.

Responding to the leadership of their churches, the individual congregations of the SQCCE turned out in large numbers to volunteer for Flake's campaign. Similar to Harold Washington's mayoral campaign in Chicago, the people who joined Flake's campaign, both registered and

unregistered voters, "performed all of the conventional activities: distributing literature, putting up posters, and knocking on doors to target voters for election day.<sup>33</sup> Church congregants also raised campaign funds, carried his petitions, and extended invitations to Flake to appear before them during their Sunday services. In the end, like Washington's "church connection", Flake's affiliation with SQCCE was "instrumental in transforming the political campaign into a civil rights movement, a politico-religious crusade."<sup>34</sup> The result of this crusade in the 6th CD was a 3,000 vote margin of victory for Flake and the SQCCE over Waldon and the Queens Democratic party in the fall primary election. Soon after, Flake and the SQCCE went on to win the General Election. This victory was achieved under the banner of the Democratic party.

### *Alternative Black Political Organizations and Activism: A Few Insights*

Since Reconstruction, blacks have been active participants in the political process. The most noted illustration of this participation has been their involvement with the major political parties as voters, activists, and candidates. The enduring involvement of blacks within both the Republican and Democratic parties has been fostered by a mix of civic duty and political and economic expediency. But blacks have been drawn to partisan politics mostly out of a belief that partisan politics would allow them to achieve that which other racial and ethnic groups are believed to already possess—empowerment. Consequently, blacks have used partisan politics to pursue two complimentary objectives. The first goal of Black partisan participation has been to insinuate themselves fully into the processes of public decision making. The second aim of Black involvement with the dominant political parties has been to share political power with other groups. In short, Black politics, as Mary D. Coleman has observed, constitutes nothing short of "a systematic struggle to acquire equal formal and informal access to, and effective control of, the available political, economic, and institutional resources of this country."<sup>35</sup>

Most students of Black empowerment and Black partisan politics tend to focus their attention at the national level. But some of the most important struggles for Black political advancement have or are occurring at the municipal level of politics. While not as strong as they used to be, local parties are still influential in structuring the politics of cities, especially in those places where political machines endure. In many instances, these local parties have served as agents for Black advancement. That is to say, they have been open to Black participation at all levels and they have been responsive to Black concerns, especially with regard to descriptive representation among

the personnel of parties and municipal government. Nevertheless, there have been those instances where local parties have imposed barriers to the full political incorporation and advancement of blacks. In these situations, local parties have been successful at limiting the participation of blacks in party decision making; they have overlooked the desires of Black constituents with regard to policy outcomes; and they have generally taken the Black vote for granted. All of these actions have been made possible by the fact that one-party systems dominate most election districts,<sup>36</sup> if not all majority-Black election districts.

Yet history provides examples where, faced with barriers to participation and influence over, for example, the selection of candidates for local office, blacks have formed alternative organizations and challenged the hegemony of dominant local parties. In these instances, it has often been Black churches which have afforded blacks critical organizational resources for the mobilization of protest "through clerical leadership and through formal and informal networks of communication."<sup>37</sup> Consequently, throughout the history of blacks in America, churches have been recognized as the traditional bases of political power within Black communities. Most scholars and commentators on the Black political experience agree that the church has served as the foundation for political mobilization and participation among Black Americans.<sup>38</sup> Some, however, have viewed the institution of the Black church as negligible, even oppositional to the mobilization and participation of blacks in the political system.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, many Black churches in the contemporary period, as the survey research of Fredrick Harris attests, "have a strong commitment to political activism, and Black churchgoers generally approve of that commitment."<sup>40</sup>

To date, the most visible demonstrations of church-based, Black political organization and activism were the involvement of Black clerics and their congregations in the 1988 and 1984 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson and the 1983 Chicago mayoral campaign of the late Harold Washington. In these instances, politically active Black clergy and their institutions basically functioned as nonparty bosses and ward organizations, who skillfully conducted voter registration drives, canvassed registered voters, organized get-out-the-vote events, raised campaign funds, and transported voters to the polls. In the case of Queens County and the SQCCE, the primary objective behind the creation of an alternative Black political organization, which manifested itself in the form of church-based, Black political activism, was to enhance the influence of blacks within the local Democratic party.

As a consequence of its activism over the last twelve years, the SQCCE has become a significant force in the local politics of southeast Queens. Its visibility and ac-

ceptance as an elemental unit in the politics of the 6th Congressional District is largely the result of one of its members—Floyd Flake, pastor of the Allen A.M.E. church and a member of the U.S. Congress. Taken together, as Green and Wilson note, “the election of the Rev. Floyd Flake to Congress and the emergence of the [SQCCE] have created new opportunities for blacks to exercise power in the borough of Queens.”<sup>41</sup> By successfully operating beyond the confines of party organizations, the SQCCE has not only furthered the reputation of politically active Black churches as important conduits for Black political participation, but has provided Black voters in the district with an instrument for responding to various levels of failure on the part of the Queens County Democratic party. This is not to say that blacks in Southeast Queens have dealigned from the Democratic party and realigned with the SQCCE. On the contrary, blacks in the 6th CD solidly remain Democratic. It is to admit, however, that blacks in Southeast Queens have identified a supplemental means of participating in the electoral process, one that holds out the possibility for the achievement of greater influence over the outcomes of local electoral politics.

Recognizing that at the level of the states and counties, local parties truly are “the weakest link in the party organizational chain” due to their limited influence and scant resources,<sup>42</sup> it seems plausible that blacks seeking to be more influential in the local politics of other majority-Black and urban places will, in the face of party failure, form alternative nonparty organizations. If so local Democratic parties, which are often *the* political institutions dominating the electoral systems of majority-Black districts, may face increasing challenges from alternative Black political organizations seeking to provide Black voters and nonvoters alike with opportunities for participation, input, and empowerment, especially with regard to candidate

selection and party nominations. Due to their ability to provide critical organizational resources for protest mobilization and political organizing in urban Black communities, it seems highly likely that future pursuits of Black empowerment with regard to local Democratic parties, and urban politics in general, will be led by church-based, Black nonparty organizations along the lines of the Southeast Queens Clergy for Community Empowerment.

## Conclusion

The appearance—or disappearance—of alternative Black political organizations is tied to the opportunity structures local political parties provide for Black participation and political advancement. If the dominant political parties are open to Black participation and receptive to calls for Black empowerment, blacks will channel all of their political activity through them. In the absence of openness and responsiveness, blacks can be expected to channel much, but not all, of their political activity into alternative political organizations formed by blacks. However, due to the constraints that alternative party organizations can expect to face, along with the fact that Black clerics are increasingly involving themselves and their churches in urban electoral politics today, the type of alternative Black political organization that will tend to predominate will be the church-based, Black nonparty organization. For in the face of local party failure, Black churches, with their “communication networks, their capacity to stimulate social interaction, provide material resources, and give individuals the opportunity to learn organizing skills, and, perhaps most importantly, their sustainability over time and physical space,”<sup>43</sup> offer the best hope for blacks to correct local Democratic party failure when it occurs.

## Notes

1. Charles Green and Basil Wilson, *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City: Beyond the Politics of Pigmentation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 59.
2. For examples, see Hardy T. Frye, *Black Parties and Political Power: A Case Study* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1980) and Hanes Walton, Jr., *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis* (New York: The Free Press, 1975, 1972).
3. Alan Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization: 1940-1980* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 212.
4. Allison Calhoun-Brown, “African American Churches and Political Mobilization: The Psychological Impact of Organizational Resources.” *The Journal of Politics* 58 (4) (November 1996), p. 936.
5. See Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.), *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), particularly chs. 7, 11, and 14.
6. The “success” of these alternative organizations is often defined by typical standards of political success, i.e., the election of candidates, the defeat of opponent’s candidates, increased membership, acceptance of promoted issues, etc.



7. Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization*, pp. 237-238.
8. Hanes Walton, Jr., "The National Democratic Party of Alabama and Party Failure in America," in Lawson and Merkl (eds.), *When Parties Fail*, p. 377.
9. Lawson and Merkl, *When Parties Fail*, p. 3.
10. Alan Ware, *Citizens, Parties, and the State: A Reappraisal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 215-242.
11. Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
12. See Lawson and Merkl, *When Parties Fail*; Rosenstone et al., *Third Parties in America*; Walter Dean Burnham, "Beyond Party," in William Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds.), *The American Party System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Gerald Pomper (ed.), *Party Renewal* (New York: Praeger, 1980).
13. See Ware, *Citizens, Parties and the State*.
14. See Lawson and Merkl, *When Parties Fail*; Rosenstone et al., *Third Parties in America*; and J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).
15. See Kay Lawson, "When Linkage Fails," in Lawson and Merkl (eds.), *When Parties Fail*, pp. 13-38.
16. See Peter H. Merkl, "Challengers and Party Systems," in Lawson and Merkl (eds.), *When Parties Fail*, pp. 574-78.
17. See Richard Rose and Thomas T. Mackie, "Do Parties Persist or Fail? The Big Trade-off Facing Organizations," in Lawson and Merkl (eds.), *When Parties Fail*, pp. 533-558.
18. Frye, *Black Parties and Political Power*, p. xv.
19. See Walton, Jr., "Blacks and the 1968 Third Parties," *Negro Educational Review* (January 1970), pp. 19-23; *The Negro in Third Party Politics* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Co., 1969) and "The Negro in Early Third Party Movements," *Negro Educational Review* (April-July 1968), pp. 73-82.
20. Walton, Jr., *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis*; "The National Democratic Party of Alabama and Party Failure in America"; *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975); and Frye, *Black Parties and Political Power*.
21. Green and Wilson, *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City*, p. 59.
22. Ibid.
23. Addabbo was offered an opportunity to run in a majority-White district. The party leadership afforded Addabbo the option of running for the Congressional seat vacated by Geraldine Ferraro. Had he accepted, the Queens Democratic party could have nominated a Black candidate for the 6th CD. Addabbo, however, declined the offer. See *The New York Times*, "Addabbo Staying Put," July 28, 1984, B3.
24. *The New York Times*, "Addabbo's Seat Focus of New Black Hopes," May 2, 1984, B1.
25. Harris, "Religious Institutions and African American Political Mobilization," p. 295.
26. *The New York Times*, "Group of Black Clergymen Backs The Re-election of Rep. Addabbo," July 4, 1984, B2.
27. Queens County Board of Elections, *Statement and Return of Primary and General Elections* (Queens, NY: Queens County Board of Elections, 1984).
28. Thomas Kazee and Mary Thornberry, "Where's The Party? Congressional Candidate Recruitment and American Party Organizations," *Western Political Quarterly* (198?), p. 77.
29. Adolph L. Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 23.
30. Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization*, p. 210
31. Xandra Kayden and Eddie Mahe, Jr., *The Party Goes On: The Persistence of the Two-Party System in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 145.
32. Flake's name was omitted from the ballot by the Board of Elections due to a technicality in his petition filings. His name was reinstated by the State Supreme Court after the mail ballots had been sent out.

33. William J. Grimshaw, "Unraveling the Enigma: Mayor Harold Washington and the Black Political Tradition," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 23(2) (1987): p. 203.
34. Ibid.
35. Mary D. Coleman, "The Black Elected Elites in Mississippi: The Post-Civil Rights Apportionment Era, in Hanes Walton, Jr. (ed.). *Black Politics and Political Behavior: A Linkage Analysis* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994). p. 69.
36. According to Theodore J. Lowi, "two-party systems have prevailed in only a minority of all electoral districts in the United States since 1896. Most of the districts, from those that elect members of state legislatures up to the state as a whole in presidential elections, have in fact been dominated by one-party systems." See Theodore J. Lowi, "Toward a Responsible Three-Party System," in Daniel M. Shea and John C. Green (eds.). *The State of the Parties*, p. 46.
37. Harris, "Religious Institutions and African American Political Mobilization," p. 278.
38. For examples, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); Benjamin E. Mays and James Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933); and W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Publications, 1968).
39. For examples, see Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, particularly ch. 4 and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1964).
40. Harris, "Religious Institutions and African American Political Mobilization," p. 307.
41. Green and Wilson, *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City*, p. 75.
42. Kayden and Mahe, Jr., *The Party Goes On*, p. 105.
43. Harris, "Religious Institutions and African American Political Mobilization," p. 279.

## References

- Broder, David S. (1972). *The Party's Over: The Failure of politics in America*, New York: Harper Torchbook.
- Burnham, Walter Dean (1975). "Beyond Party?," in William N. Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun-Brown, Allison (1996) "African American Churches and Political Mobilization: The Psychological Impact of Organizational Resources," *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 58 Number 4 (November). 935-953.
- Coleman, Mary D. (1994). "The Black Elected Elites in Mississippi: The Post-Civil Rights Apportionment Era," in Hanes Walton, Jr. (ed.). *Black Politics and Political Behavior: A Linkage Analysis*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- DuBois, W.E.B. (1961). *The Souls of Black Folk*, Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Publications.
- Frazier, E. Franklin (1964). *The Negro Church in America*, New York: Schocken.
- Frye, Hardy T. (1980). *Black Parties and Political Power: A Case Study*, Boston: G.K. Hall & Company.
- Gillespie, J. David (1993). *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Green, Charles and Basil Wilson (1992). *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City: Beyond the Politics of Pigmentation*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Grimshaw, William J. (1987). "Unraveling the Enigma: Mayor Harold Washington and the Black Political Tradition," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 23 Number 2, 187-206.
- Harris, Fredrick C. (1995). "Religious Institutions and African American Political Mobilization," in ed. Paul E. Peterson (ed.). *Classifying By Race*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kayden, Xandra and Eddie Mahe, Jr. (1985). *The Party Goes On: The Persistence of the Two-Party System in the United States*, New York: Basic Books.
- Kazee, Thomas A. and Mary C. Thornberry (199?). "Where's the Party? Congressional Candidate Recruitment and American Party Organizations," *Western Political Quarterly*, 61-80.

- Lawson, Kay (1988). "When Linkage Fails," in Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lawson, Kay and Peter H. Merkl (1988). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence Mamiya (1990). *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lowi, Theodore J. (1993). "Toward a Responsible Three-Party System," in Daniel M. Shea and John C. Green (eds.). *The State of the Parties*.
- Mays, Benjamin E. and James Nicholson (1933). *The Negro's Church*, New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research.
- Merkel, Peter H. (1988). "Challengers and Party Systems," in Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pomper, Gerald (1980). *Party Renewal in America*, New York: Praeger.
- Queens County Board of Elections (1984). *Statement and Return of Primary and General Elections*.
- Rose, Richard and Thomas T. Mackie (1988). "Do Parties Persist or Fail? The Big Trade-off Facing Organizations," in Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus (1984). *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- The New York Times* (1984). "Addabbo Staying Put," July 28, B3.
- The New York Times* (1984). "Group of Black Clergymen Backs The Re-election of Rep. Addabbo," July 4, B2.
- The New York Times* (1984). "Addabbo's Seat Focus of New Black Hopes," May 2, B1.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1988). "The National Democratic Party of Alabama and Party Failure in America." In Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1975). *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans*, Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1972). *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis*, New York: The Free Press.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1970). "Blacks and the 1968 Third Parties," *Negro Educational Review*, (January), 19-23.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1969). *The Negro in Third Party Politics*, Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. (1968). "The Negro in Early Third Party Movements," *Negro Educational Review*, (April-July), 73-82.
- Ware, Alan (1985). *The Breakdown of the Democratic Party Organization: 1940-1980*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ware, Alan (1988). *Citizens, Parties and the State: A Reappraisal*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilmore, Gayraud (1985). *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Wilson, Frank (1988). "When Parties Refuse to Fail: The Case of France," in Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (eds.). *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Copyright of Western Journal of Black Studies is the property of Washington State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.