

News of the Profession

Reports

The National Conference of Black Political Scientists: Political, Professional and Organizational Institutionalization

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Introduction

The National Conference of Black Political Scientists (NCOBPS) held its fifteenth annual meeting in Washington, DC from April 18-21 at the Shoreham Hotel. If any theme summarizes the focus of this

year's convention, it is institutionalization, as reflected in the shift in interest toward elections and political office by the black population, toward political institutions in research by black political scientists, toward the internal, organizational and institutional development of NCOBPS, and finally toward the problems of individual members of the organization in terms of entry into and mobility within the profession. This paper examines some of the intellectual and organizational questions pursued at the annual meeting. I will review the most important issues discussed at the conference, note concerns about professional mobility and discuss efforts at organizational growth and development.

Presidential Politics

The Executive Council of NCOBPS had decided that 1984 would be an appropriate year to meet in Washington because of the importance of presidential politics this year. A forum published in this journal in the Summer 1983 issue (pp. 489-507), based on a roundtable from the 1983 NCOBPS convention, covered the main positions articulated by Lucius Barker, Marguerite Barnett, Paula McClain, Mack Jones and Ron Walters on the benefits and costs of a run for the presidency by a black candidate.

By spring of 1984 Jesse Jackson's candidacy had become a political reality



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which dominated the substantive themes of the conference. This event, namely the Jackson race, represents an increased focus on electoral politics and political institutions by black politicians and by black citizens.

There had been a great deal of disagreement among the members of the organization in the spring and summer of 1983 over the benefits of a presidential race by a black candidate, but by spring of 1984 much of that disagreement and ambivalence had been supplanted by the excitement of the race itself. A number of the members were involved in research projects on the campaign and/or were actively involved in the campaign. In Texas, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois and other states, NCOBPS members participated in the delegate selection process and won representation for Jackson in caucuses starting at the county level, or were involved in post-primary negotiations. Other members have been involved in briefing Jackson before his debates or in helping to formulate positions on which he might base his campaign speeches. Two members, Lucius Barker of Washington University and Lorn Foster of the Joint Center for Political Studies, are both conducting research on the Jackson campaign. Jackson dominated the imagination of a number of the organization's members, but others were involved in campaigns of other candidates as well.

These presidential interests were reflected in the formal program, as well as in the informal discussions outside the panels. There were two panels on presidential politics. The first, "Nationalist Politics and the Jackson Presidential Campaign," focused on the Jackson race, with Leslie McLemore, Lorenzo Morris, Ron Bailey, William Nelson and Linda Williams offering analyses and critiques of the organizational strategy and ideological content of Jackson's campaign and attempting to locate and categorize Jackson in comparison with other historical and contemporary black political leaders. In effect, they debated how Jackson's policy statements locate him as a black leader; is he a black nationalist, for example, and to whom do his policy statements appeal within the black population? If he is a black nationalist,

then how is this evidenced in the content of his speeches? Even if he is not, the panelists felt it would be difficult for black nationalists to resist a candidacy such as Jackson's. We have already seen some evidence of that with the support of Louis Farrakan, for example. In short, the analyses placed much greater emphasis on measuring Jackson by his faithfulness to specific ideological categories or his issue purity than would be expected in the broad, general arena of party or presidential politics.

The second panel, "Blacks and Presidential Election Participation: Towards In Depth Scholarly Participation," focused more generally on introducing and explaining the research goals of a new study on electoral participation by black voters. Directed by Shirley Hatchett and Ronald Brown at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, the study will be conducted under the guidance of NCOBPS members including Matthew Holden, Michael Preston, Charles V. Hamilton, Milton Morris and Jewel Prestage who are serving on a subcommittee on the national black election study. This is a study in which there will be a large number of black respondents who will be questioned in detail on their political attitudes and beliefs.

Outgoing president of NCOBPS, Lucius Barker, delivered the presidential address, "Realism Through Symbolism: Toward an Understanding of Jesse Jackson's Presidential Campaign," in which he argued for understanding the importance of symbols in American politics. The Jackson candidacy's significance lies not in the probability of victory, but in political symbolism; a black candidate can invigorate and stimulate the black electorate, resulting in increased identification of the group with political institutions. An indirect consequence of Jackson's candidacy, for example, might be increased registration and participation of black voters in congressional and senatorial or state legislative elections, according to Barker.

The theme of the Jackson candidacy was picked up again in the banquet address when attorney Thomas Todd, former acting president for Operation PUSH spoke about the difficulties Jackson has faced

in his campaign. He surprised and pleased the audience when he mentioned that Twiley Barker and Jewel Prestage had been his teachers when he was an undergraduate at Southern University.

Professional Mobility

A second area of institutionalization has been the growing concern about the difficulties which individual members of the organization are facing in entering and advancing within the profession. A universal topic in informal settings at the conference was the number of members who had been terminated or denied tenure or who were experiencing serious difficulties in their professional employment. In order to increase the number of entrants into the profession, NCOBPS created a Graduate Assistantship Program (GAP) some years ago. Under the direction of Shelia Harmon of the University of the District of Columbia, NCOBPS awards GAP fellowships to college graduates who are entering graduate programs in political science. William Daniels, NCOBPS, chairs the Promotion and Tenure Committee which is responsible for reporting any difficulties which the members have in their professional lives.

Finally, a special panel, "Pursuing an Academic Career," was held at the spring 1984 meeting. Morris Lounds, Michael Preston, Catherine Rudder and Maurice Woodard discussed the status of blacks in the profession and reported on the results of a meeting sponsored by the American Political Science Association's Committee on the Status of Blacks on the problems of entrance, promotion and tenure among black scholars. (This topic will be discussed in more detail in the fall issue of *PS*.) The overwhelming conclusion of informal discussion and of the formal panel sessions was that while there are very serious supply problems, there are even more serious demand problems for black scholars in the political science profession.

NCOBPS: Organizational Growth and Development

Finally, a third area involving institutionalization is NCOBPS itself. The organization is now 15 years old and has under-

gone considerable internal growth and development since its founding in Baton Rouge in 1969. The organization was founded amid a growing concern among black political scientists about barriers to professional growth and development. Provision of an outlet for the research, learning and teaching interests of its members was identified as a principal focus of the organization.¹

A series of presidents and its Executive Council have worked at developing strategies for organizational growth and development. These include journals and/or newsletters of which various forms have been published intermittently. A permanent method of communication with the members has not yet been settled upon, and is still a subject of discussion. Strategies for increasing membership are also subjects for discussion. If supply is a problem for departments which are searching for black political scientists, it is also a problem for NCOBPS. While the organization does not restrict its members by race, its intellectual and professional concerns mean that Afro-Americans constitute the majority of its card-carrying members.

The Executive Council of the organization inaugurated a new program during the 1984 meetings designed to provide specialized information in areas which would be of value to college, junior college and high school teachers. Carolyn Eaglin coordinated three workshops including American Politics and the 1984 Presidential Election, Computer Applications in the Social Sciences, and From Slavery to Bakke: The Constitution and Black Americans, run by Linda Williams, Wornie Reed and E. Walter Miles, respectively. These were designed to interest professionals in education who would include but not be limited to political scientists. These will become a continuing part of the annual program.

The organization found itself confronting something of a generation gap at the 1983 conference when some of the students attending announced their dis-

¹Jewel L. Prestage and Alex W. Willingham, "The National Conference of Black Political Scientists, 1969-1980," 1980.

comfort with their lack of opportunity for participation in the formal program. The 1984 program chair Huey Perry of Southern University scheduled a student section with three panels to allow for greater graduate and undergraduate participation. The student panels covered such topics as black students and the exercise of political power on and off campus, national politics and public policy, and urban governance.

Since presidential politics dominated the conference, this article would not be complete without a brief report on NCOBPS executive officers. The outgoing president of the organization, Lucius Barker was succeeded by Huey Perry of Southern University. The new president-elect is Michael Preston of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The local arrangements were handled by Elsie Scott of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives and Joseph McCormick of Howard University.

For more detailed information about NCOBPS, the organization, copies of the program or information about specific papers, contact Huey Perry, NCOBPS President, Department of Political Science, Southern University, Baton Rouge, LA, or the individual section chairs for 1984.

Program Committee

Political Theory: Charles Henry, University of California, Berkeley.

Comparative Politics: Gloria Braxton, Southern University.

International Relations: Patrick Bellgarde-Smith, Bradley University.

Political Parties, Elections and Political Parties: James C. Smith, Jackson State University.

Race in the American Political Process: Government and Politics at the National Level: Dianne Pinderhughes.

Public Administration, Public Policy and Black Americans: Mitchell Rice, Southwest Texas State University.

The Uncertain Path of Law: Courts, Race and Politics: Michael Combs, Louisiana State University.

Urban Politics, Public Policy: William Nelson, Ohio State University.

State and Local Politics: Franklin Jones, Texas Southern University.

Career Professional Development and Black Political Scientists: P. Bai Akridge, International Business Machines.

Students and the Profession: Sybil LeDuff and Blanche Smith, Southern University; Meredith Neilson, Howard University; Curtina Moreland-Young, Jackson State University.

Local Area Participation: Fred Hutchinson, Atlanta University.

The Scholar's Roundtable in the Electronic Age*

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Social science and its practitioners have much to gain from moving scientific communication more rapidly into the electronic age. Clearly we benefit from the fullest direct personal contact with all it implies in human terms, at national, regional, and other types of meetings. But there are limitations: we can't all get there; it's very expensive; time and resources constrain us once we're there (even "drifters" can still only be in one panel room at one time); formal panels are just that, and the choice of papers is blighted by career pressures to produce or publish; informal roundtables and workshops lack written record, and so on.

Nor is the long-distance conference call an alternative. To "reach out and touch" them all is much too expensive, requires simultaneous availability of all participants regardless of time zones, and creates an atmosphere of pressure which

*This proposal owes much in stimulus and data to Michael Pearson, Computer Services, Plymouth State College, NH.

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