Religious Institutions and Black Political Activism

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by Frederick C. Harris

During the modern Civil Rights Movement religious institutions provided critical organizational resources for protest mobilization.[1] As Aldon Morris' extensive study of the southern Civil Rights Movement noted, the Black Church served as the "organizational hub of Black life," providing the resources that fostered—along with other indigenous groups and institutions—collective protest against a system of white domination in the South.[2]

As an institution that is indigenous to African-American communities, Black churches are intricately connected to various kinds and sources of activism. Their communication networks capacity to promote social interaction, provide material resources, and give individuals the opportunity to learn organizing skills are critical elements for successful social movement or political mobilization. Perhaps most importantly, their sustainability over both time and physical space all combine to make churches the only Black institutions consistently promoting the collective resistance to social and economical inequalities by African Americans. Black churches have performed these functions throughout several historical periods, shifting political alliances and interests, and vastly differing social and economic contexts for activism. Despite the record of political achievement of the Black Church based on these kinds of resources, some scholars and activists have raised concerns about the influence of the clergy over the Black electorate and its involvement in politics. However, these concerns may be displaced as exaggerated at least based on the views of congregation members. Although a 1991 Chicago Area Survey showed that among Black church members more than half reported candidate visits at their churches, a 1980 NBC News/Associated Poll suggests that few ministers, Black or white, specifically endorse political candidates. Ninety-seven percent of whites (N=2098) and 92 percent of Blacks (N=178) reported that they had not been asked by a religious leader to vote for a specific candidate in that year's fall election. An overwhelming majority of respondents (more than 80 percent of both Blacks and whites) also felt that an endorsement of a candidate by a religious leader would have no effect on their choice of candidates.[3]

On the other hand, both Black parishioners and political entrepreneurs view Black clerics as indigenous leaders. A 1984 *USA Today* survey asked: "A variety of groups and people occupy leadership roles within the Black community. For each person or groups I mention, please tell me how effective you think [they] are as leaders—very effective, somewhat effective, or not very effective?" Figure 1 shows the "very effective" responses for six leadership categories mentioned in this order: local Black office holders, national political leaders, the NAACP, the Urban League, Black ministers and clergy, and Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson, a minister-politician, ranked first (65%), and Black ministers (40%) as a group ranked second to the NAACP (45%) as the most effective leaders. Black ministers were perceived more effective than national Black political leaders (33%), local Black elected officials (29%), and the National Urban League (26%), a civil rights organization. The clerical leadership category even rivals the oldest and most prominent civil rights organization for African Americans, the NAACP.

Figure 1
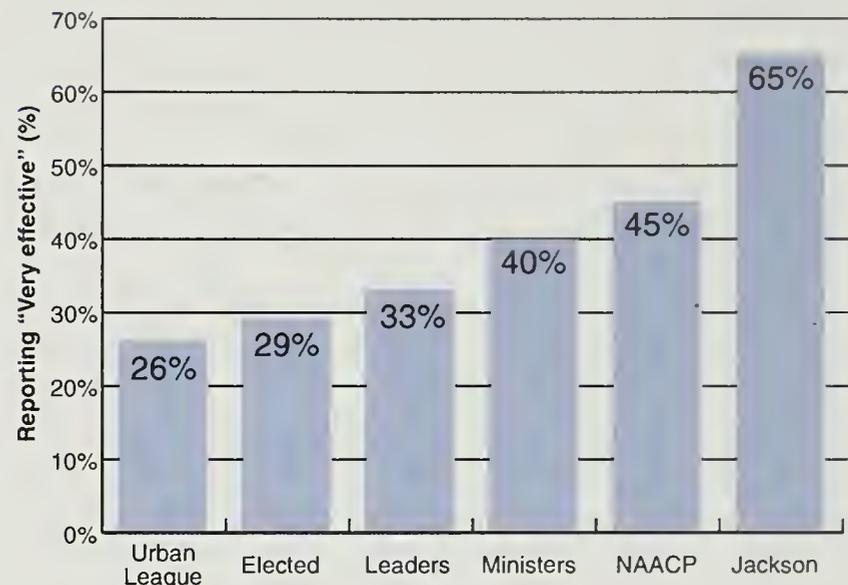
Perceived Efficacy of Black Leadership as Community Leaders: Groups and Individuals (*N=280*)

Assuredly some commentators do criticize the appropriateness of Black clergy as representatives of Black interests in the American polity; on the other hand, many politicians certainly woo the activist clergy within Black communities as a means to legitimize and garner support for their political goals. Moreover, scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's survey of over 2,000 Black clergy between 1978 and 1984 reveals that Black ministers of the various mainstream denominations overwhelmingly approve of an activist ministry.[4]

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Over 90 percent of Black ministers, independent of age, education, and denominational affiliation, supported cleric involvement in civil rights demonstrations, and religious leaders expressing their views on social and political issues.[5] Lincoln and Mamiya also cite a Gallup survey on a similar question in 1968 that showed nonwhites more supportive than whites of ministers speaking out on social and political issues. Finally, they

found in a 1986 survey of African Methodist Episcopal Church leaders that nearly 90 percent supported cleric involvement in social issues, while only 3 percent agreed that churches should keep out of political matters altogether.[6] Lincoln and Mamiya conclude from these surveys that "there is broad support and consensus in the Black community, both within and without the church, among clergy and laity, for a social prophecy role for Black churches. The attitude is pervasive that churches should be involved in and express their views on everyday social and political issues." They further conclude, "It is also clear that Black people generally support a much more activist role for their churches than do whites."[7]

Although Lincoln and Mamiya's extensive survey reveals a consensus among Black clerics in the post-civil rights period, they may overstate the case by extending this consensus to African Americans as a whole. Two surveys at approximately this time measured popular attitudes toward church-based political activism. The NBC/Associated Press survey previously-mentioned asked two questions: "Should the churches and members of the clergy express their views on day-to-day social questions, or should they keep out of social matters?" and "What about politics? Do you think the churches and members of clergy should be involved in politics, like backing a candidate for public office, or don't you think so?"[8] The September 1984 *USA Today* Poll of over 1,200 registered voters also posed: "In general, do you think it is right or wrong for religious leaders to promote a particular political point of view during religious services?"

Figure 2 shows affirmative responses to all three questions by race. Blacks and whites equally approved of churches and clergy expressing their views on social issues, although Blacks approved slightly more than whites (57% compared to 55%, with about a third of both Black and white respondents stating that churches and clergy should not express their views on social issues). However, Blacks and whites differed more dramatically in regard to the explicit involvement of religious institutions in politics. While less than a third of whites thought that churches or clergy should be able to back political candidates (28%) and that religious leaders had a right to promote a particular point of view during religious services (29%), more than two-fifths (43%) of Blacks approved of such involvement and half (50%) approved of clerics promoting a political point of view during religious services.

## The Effects of Black Churches on Direct Mobilization

The Black-white differences in approval of church-based political activism may simply reflect racial differences in the incidence of that activism. Those differences in approval may also reflect racial differences in the actual effect of church-based stimuli on political participation. The 1984 *USA Today* Poll asked about the frequency of political discussions during religious services: "How often does your (minister/priest/rabbi) discuss political issues as part of the service?" Figure 3 reveals striking racial variations among churchgoers. Blacks were three times more likely (28%) than whites (8%) to report that their religious leaders discussed politics all the time or frequently. They were also more likely than whites (31% compared to 21%) to report that such discussions took place "sometimes." Nearly three-fourths, or 71%, of whites reported that their clerics seldom or never discussed political issues during religious services compared to only two-fifths (40%) of Black respondents.

Figure 2
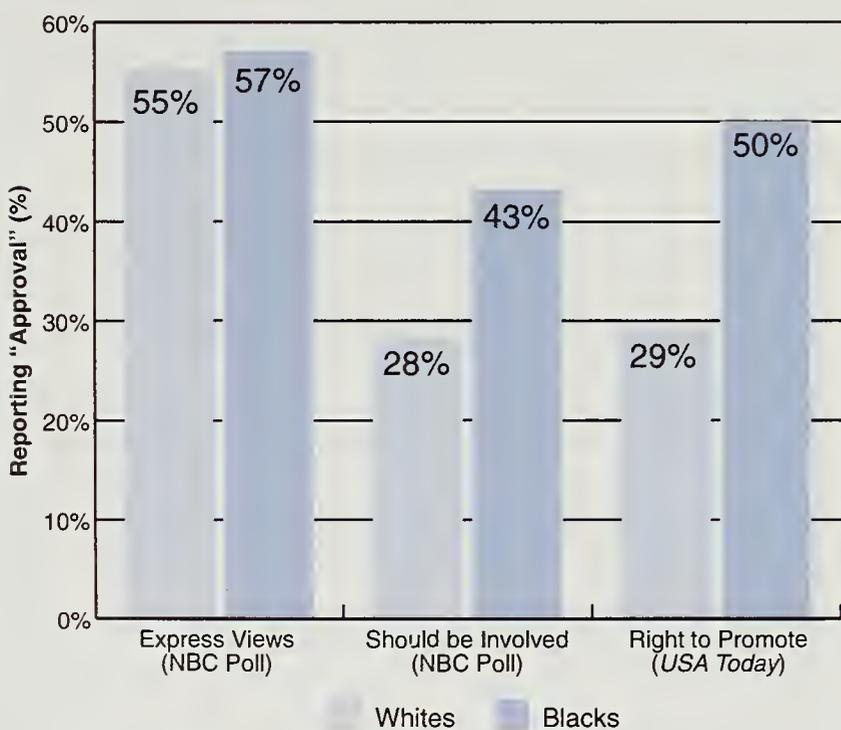
Public Opinion on Religious Leaders Becoming Directly Involved in Political Matter, by Race

Figure 3
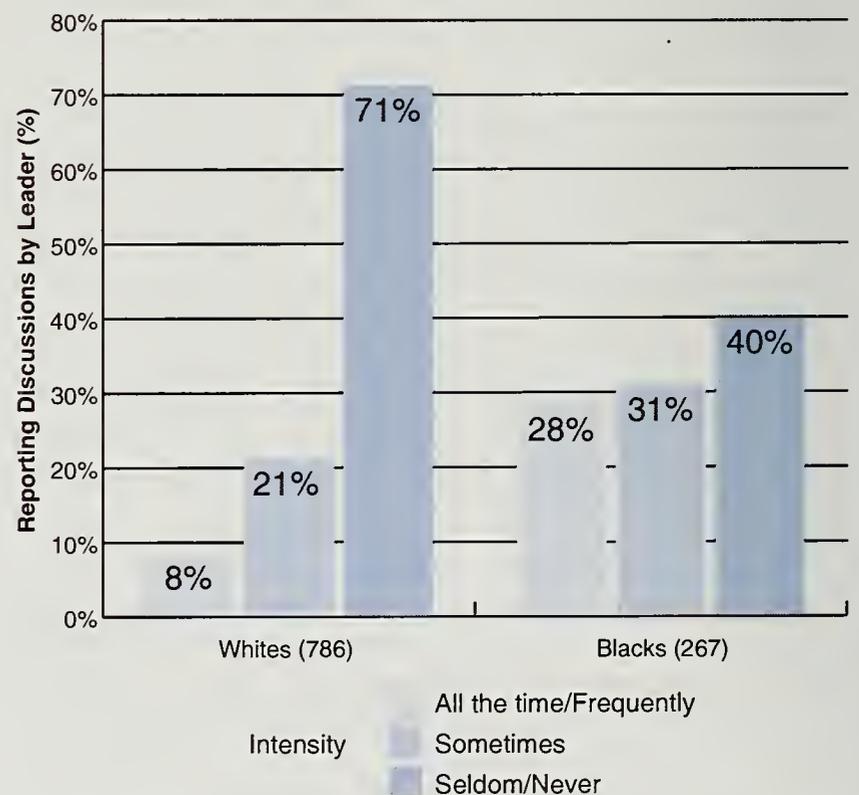
Frequency of Clerical Discussion of Politics, by Race 1984

Conclusion

Religious institutions within African-American communities are important resources for Black political mobilization. These resources include cleric appeals, candidate contacts at religious services, church-sponsored political forums and rallies, group endorsements by ministers and religious groups, and fundraising for political candidates. These sources of information and activism have deep historical roots. Black religious institutions also serve as resources for political entrepreneurs by providing campaign funds and workers and a mobilizing source of voters. Although the direct involvement of Black religious institutions produces some ambivalence in the Black population, by and large, Black clerics have a strong commitment to political activism and Black churchgoers generally approve of that commitment.

Notes

[1] Douglas McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency: 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[2] Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

[3] NBC News/Associated Press National Poll (October 1980).

[4] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).

[5] Ibid., 225.

[6] Ibid., 226.

[7] Ibid., 226.

[8] NBC News/Associated Press National Poll (October 1980).

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