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The Influence Of Rev. Jesse Jackson's
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Implications For Community Action

By

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INTRODUCTION

This essay addresses the significant changes in power relationships brought about by the candidacy of the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson for President of the United States. Specifically, it will attempt to focus on themes or issues reflecting the impact of his entry into the contest for the Democratic nomination as a viable Black candidate in November 1983, and the consequent re-definition of power relationships which occurred not only within the Democratic Party, but between Blacks and Whites, Blacks and Jews, Black elected and appointed officials, and his effort on relative deprivation among the people in the Rainbow coalition that he represented. Therefore, issues of racism, coalition building, networking (specifically, within the Black church), leverage, pluralistic politics, and the role of the media in image-making and image-breaking will be touched upon.

Jesse Jackson is a unique catalyst for change, alternately viewed as "the Savior" by some and by others as "the Devil." He is viewed with both admiration and fear. Nevertheless, as a political figure he could not and cannot be ignored. During the 1984 campaign, Jackson was considered "the embodiment of Black pride, an incandescent force glowing beside dull white politicians, demanding respect and "our fair share." He was the power broker who was ignored or patronized at great risk" (Thomas, 1985: 30).

His transition from an outsider seeking to influence policy and politics through advocacy and other normative reeducative approaches, to an "insider" seeking to utilize power-coercive strategies to influence policy and politics through the political electoral process is a major developmental step. The differences between these strategies represents a significant break through in community organization and mobilization, which could modify not only the character of power forces operating for change, but the empowerment of the Black and other exploited communities. The resultant pride, involvement and investment of a broad range of constituencies has demonstrated what can be done, and what must be done, what additionally must be taught and incorporated into community organization courses and self-determination activities.

Jackson's candidacy thus went beyond symbolism to represent a real and emerging power base or critical mass in the United States that has significant implications for community organization theory and practice. At a conference on "Black and Presidential Politics," held at Howard University, November 17, 1983, Smith and McCormick presented a paper entitled, "The Challenge of a Black Presidential Candidacy." They analyzed Jackson's bid for the Democratic nomination from a systemic perspective which defined success,

not on the number of delegates obtained nor on whether Mondale, Glenn, (Hart), or Reagan are helped or hurt but instead on the nature of his definition of the black predicament and the consequent ideology and policies he argues are necessary to address that predicament. And on the extent to which he is willing to challenge the Democratic party in order to build on independent base of Black power in the party

system (Smith and McCormich,
1983: p. 3).

Jackson's Platform

Jackson announced his candidacy in Washington, D.C. on November 4, 1983, a year before the Presidential election, three months before the first primary, and in most instances, a year or more after six other candidates (with the exception of McGovern) had announced their candidacies. Through his campaign, he sought to create a norm that would

overcome the historic and current flaws in our democracy..., put a floor under the neediest and most vulnerable ... and remove the artificial ceilings imposed..., initiate the quest for a more just society and peaceful world, ... make the enforcement of the Voting Rights Act a national issue, ... to inspire hope in our young people and let them know that America can offer them more than unemployment, dope, jail, and the military ..., to change the present course of our nation, ... to help build a rainbow coalition of the rejection, ... to offer our nation a new leadership option, ... and to reach out and serve the people of this country and the world in a more humane and just manner (Jackson, 1983: 30).

He viewed his candidacy as "the opportunity to ... allow America and the world to see us at our best." His platform spelled out a Black agenda that would provide for an institutional policy conception (main-line functions) of social welfare needs rather than the prevailing residual model of meeting social welfare needs (safety net function) (Gilbert/Speccht, 1974: 8). Emphasis was on social values of equality of results, not just

equality of opportunity; equity or our fair share; adequacy of programs rather than incremental changes.

William Raspberry, columnist with the Washington Post, viewed Jackson's entry into the primaries as a major challenge to the Democratic Party as well as to the media. He predicted that the media would launch a political and personal attack on Jackson as his candidacy became more serious. Raspberry labeled this approach "media opportunism" (Raspberry, 1983).

Strategic Conception of the Campaign

Goldenbert (1978: 24) describes four approaches to change and dimensions of social intervention: social technician, traditional social reformer, social interventionist, and social revolutionary. Jackson's campaign operated from a social interventionist model. He opposed existing elitist values, such as the sanctity of the profit motive, class differences and the unequal allocation of opportunity, goods, and power, and the consequences of those values on the lives most directly and adversely affected by the social practices which emanate from such values (Goldenberg, 1978: 24).

Within this model of change, conflict is viewed as inevitable. In fact, Jackson has never sought to avoid basic conflicts whether within the Civil Rights movement, with politicians, such as former Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, or the Black politicians who are more closely linked to the Democratic Party. The acceptance of conflict implies that those who possess power and have benefitted most from the exploitation of others, should not be expected to begin to share that power willingly or easily.

Jackson's campaign forced these issues out onto the open. He developed what some people called a "crusade" instead of a political organization. Yet, it was an organization that sought change for those that had been systematically denied access to goods, services and power. Towards this end, Jackson's campaign tried to promote collective community action through the synthesis of Black clergy, middle class Blacks (some with prior political experience), academics, and other interest groups under the umbrella called the Rainbow Coalition. Like most social interventionists, Jackson believed in the potential of the existing political system and hoped that in response to the appropriate

strategy the elite would surrender some of its power in order for the system to survive. Elements of the advocate role and the organizer roles are evident in this model of change (Spergel, 1969). The objective of the Jackson campaign was, therefore, power, in order to control or influence, directly or indirectly, the conditions under which his constituents lived (Goldberg, 1978: 59).

Jackson had been previously involved in the use of non-violent strategies based on the examples of Mohandas Gandhi and Jackson's mentor, Dr. Martin Luther King. While these strategies were also power-coercive, they used civil disobedience to demonstrate the injustice, unfairness, or cruelty of institutional racism. The intent was to arouse the guilt of the oppressor in order to gain sufficient leverage to force them to act more humanely. In the South, this strategy was effective in getting state and local laws changed to conform with the U.S. Constitution. This strategy, however, had little impact in the North where de facto discrimination was the rule.

Direct intervention in the political system and the explicit use of political power were, therefore, new tactics designed to influence the means by which societal resources are allocated. This tactic is based on the assumption that while elites dominate the political process, there is still the potential for low power groups to exploit existing socioeconomic cleavages (Dye, 1981: 365) and compel elites to engage in the process of negotiation (Schatzki, 1981: 27).

Jackson's purpose was to gain sufficient leverage through the mobilization of Blacks, poor whites, Hispanics, women and other oppressed groups to vote in sufficient numbers in the primaries and caucuses to demonstrate their latent political power as a coalition. He hoped this demonstration would force elites to the negotiating table where compromises could be worked out and a commitment could be made by all parties.

Jackson was able to demonstrate his ability to get out Black votes and to create enthusiasm within the Black community. People ran for office, people registered to vote, the status quo was challenged, and he became a credible candidate. The original group of eight candidates became a group of three, significantly increasing Jackson's leverage in the campaign.

Jackson's Accomplishments

Above all, Jackson was able to mobilize the Black community. All generations responded -- from the oldest to the youngest. Jackson appealed to all segments of the Black electorate, winning roughly 70-80% of the Black vote outside of the South, and up to 90% of the Black vote in the South. This had both a positive and negative effect because it raised Black hopes, while it simultaneously aroused white fears. Many Black mayors, such as Coleman Young, Andrew Young and Wilson Goode, viewed Jackson as a threat to their power bases. The mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, took a neutral stand on his candidacy. Jackson's off the record remarks spurred Jews to attack him as "anti-Semitic," and his protege, Muslim Minister, Louis Farrakhan, became a "lightning rod" of controversy that began to erode his credibility and limit his ability to attract significant numbers of white voters. In fact, Jackson obtained only 10% of white votes during the primaries.

The controversy surrounding Jackson's campaign significantly benefitted political conservatives. Senator Jesse Helms sent out mailings to white voters in North Carolina and across the nation asking for their financial support to help to defeat his opponent, James Hunt, who, it was alleged, supported Jackson's "radical" positions. Helms raised millions of dollars and ultimately defeated his opponent. The Moral Majority mounted voter registration drives to register the "silent white majority" to defeat Jackson and the policies he pursued. These tactics demonstrated the latent racism which was endemic in the campaign once Jackson became the first serious Black candidate for President.

While Raspberry accurately predicted the media would engage in character assassination once Jackson began to deliver votes, free hostages, visit foreign countries, outshine his opponents during political debates, develop grassroots political organizations, win the D.C. and Virginia Primaries, and win the vote in numerous major cities across the country, it became necessary for the Democratic Party to cut him in or cut him out. Jackson had thus demonstrated the ability to mobilize one segment of the Democrats natural constituency -- poor and working class people.

The party needed to keep this group's allegiance to win the general election but sought to do so without unduly rewarding Jackson. The strategy which emerged was to give Jackson prime

time at the Convention, while denying him and his supporters leverage on major platform issues. In other words, the Democrats gave Jackson a symbolic victory but not the substantive change he demanded. The results are well-known: Jackson's plank on Civil Rights was "watered down" and passed at the convention, Black delegates failed to form a united front on the first ballot, and Mondale forces dominated the Convention.

During the remaining weeks of the campaign, Jackson let his constituents know he was not satisfied with the deal. Although he did not leave the Democratic Party, his support for the Mondale-Ferraro ticket was less than enthusiastic. This schism became more evident as Mondale played down the issues that Jackson had raised and appeared to ignore Black voters on the premise that they had no one else to vote for.

The major electoral result was that the number of Blacks who supported the Democratic ticket did not increase significantly. 90% of Black voters voted for Mondale, 9% for Reagan; Jackson supporters voted for Mondale 93% of the time, while 6% of those who voted for Jackson in the primaries voted for Reagan.

Conclusion

Despite this unhappy denouement, Jackson's campaign gained far more than it lost. He was able to create a sense of worth and pride all across the nation, particularly within the Black community. Old and young, poor, working poor, and middle class took pride in participating at many levels, often for the first time, and in helping Jackson to develop credibility as a national Black political leader.

Hodding Carter gave him credit for another achievement. He said that "his candidacy has helped to put race and things racial back in public view where they belong" (Thomas, 1985: 31). The differences and similarities between Blacks and Jews were also put back on the table for future negotiations.

A cadre of community organizers was trained during this campaign and learned how to raise community consciousness, get out the vote, and articulate the needs of the unrepresented constituencies. The Black underclass (Glasgow) is no longer invisible. The Rainbow Coalition has become a new interest group

with Jackson as its convenor and leader. He has outgrown his role in PUSH and is likely to remain on permanent sabbatical. He will join the pluralistic elements seeking to wield power and influence in the halls and smoke filled rooms of America. He has made the transition from the politics of guilt to the politics of power.

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