

JACKSON, RACE, AND THE DEMOCRATS

by

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and

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Jesse Jackson has not been treated fairly by the Democratic Party. That, at least, was the burden of his complaints about the delegate selection process. Jackson, it seems, thinks that the slim nine percentage point differential between himself and Michael Dukakis ought to have been reflected in the delegate count as well. Instead, Dukakis held fifty percent more delegate strength than Jackson going in, and the disparity predictably grew larger as the “super delegates” completed their declarations, overwhelmingly in favor of Dukakis.

Is there any truth in this claim? It is certainly accurate that Jackson has been something of a toy for the Democratic Party the past five years, in spite of mounting a campaign which has more resonantly invoked standard Democratic shibboleths than any other candidate. While there may never have materialized the much heralded “stop Jackson movement,” it may fairly be argued that Jackson’s visibility in the campaign has not met with the kind of response one would have expected from a party deeply in need of energizing regeneration. That alone would suggest some element of reality for the persistent fears that the leadership of the Democratic Party is inhospitable to Jackson, avowedly or not. It further raises the question of whether Jackson’s race is regarded by Democratic leaders as an albatross, a factor they would well wish to exploit but never to be governed by.

If these charges are correct, it will be necessary for Jackson to prove them with reference to something other than the numbers from the primary process. Besides the fact that Jackson, himself, contributed much to the present Party rules for the selection of delegates, his argument seems to miss the point. The focus on the distance between himself and Michael Dukakis was a subtle sleight of hand, by which Jackson in fact disenfranchised the remaining 35% of the Democrats who participated in the primaries and caucuses and who voted neither for Jackson nor Dukakis. The “super delegates” were no less obliged to show respect for the views of supporters of the defeated candidates than for the candidates remaining in the race. The sundry Gore, Simon, Gephardt, et. al. delegates also had a choice to make. The question was, who was their second choice, and

* On Friday, June 3, Chairman Pendleton completed his revision of the draft of this essay, which had been sent to him by Chairman Allen earlier. It was ready to go to press. On Sunday, June 5, Chairman Pendleton died of a sudden heart attack. In the aftermath, we neglected to complete this discussion of race and politics in America. Nevertheless, it remains a significant discussion, as well as the last piece on which the former Chairman labored. Accordingly, it has been revised to make it current.

wasn't it disproportionately Michael Dukakis rather than Jesse Jackson? Because that was so, then it follows that Jackson had nothing to complain about. He received exactly what the voters intended.

How did this scenario finally become so visible? Jackson was in the rare position of having the vast majority of votes for his candidacy identifiable by voters. Since blacks accounted for the overwhelming share of that vote, his proportion of the total vote of the primary process was only slightly greater than the proportion of blacks within the Democratic Party. It turns out, then, that the problem Jackson complained about is largely the ironic result of his having isolated the votes of blacks within the Democratic Party.

This phenomenon has been too little noted by commentators. It represents a historic change in the operation of American electoral politics. Heretofore the votes of blacks have been isolated, but only as between Democrats and Republicans. In that context, one could always imagine that, within the Democratic Party, the votes of blacks were as diverse (represented equally diverse opinions) as those of most other Democrats. Now, for the first time, it is apparent that black Democrats do not vote so-called Democratic views so much as they vote race, at least in this election cycle. Because of that they stand out, are isolated within the Democratic Party—a significant minority but nonetheless a minority. In earlier times it was said that Republicans could ignore American blacks because they never count on receiving their votes. In this election that shibboleth has proved true for the non-black candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination.

What this change means is that, in some manner, the votes of blacks are up for grabs. Those are non-ideological votes and therefore cannot be considered as entirely reliable in terms of party identification. This is far more important than the platitudes which filled the press about Jackson “proving” that a black person can mount a serious campaign, or, again, the national eye wink which takes his strident strummings as eloquent and articulate political speech. Instead, Jackson has succeeded where even Jim Crow failed, isolating blacks not merely within American politics at large but within the Democratic Party in particular. So long as the Democratic Party remained heterogeneous, and the votes of blacks within the party could be viewed as reflecting the party generally, blacks were seen as politically coherent but not politically isolated. This was all the more true because they were found in the majority party, and could therefore be identified with a national consensus—the mainstream of American opinion. Jackson has put an end to that forever.

This result could offer enormous promise for the future, were it sensitively understood by political schemers. Or, it could produce the kind of result which occurred in 1860, when Democrat slaveholders refused to vote for Stephen A. Douglas, split the Democratic Party, and assured the election of Abraham Lincoln.