

Ten Years Later:

How's Jesse's Rainbow Coalition?

By Patrick Reddy

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's first run for president. At the start of his campaign, Jackson evoked a "Rainbow Coalition" of women, blacks and other minorities that would turn out *en masse* and sweep Ronald Reagan, Jesse Helms and other conservative Republicans out of office. Obviously, it didn't happen that way in either 1984 or 1988. Given the conservative nature of the 1980s and Democratic gains from minorities being negated by defections of moderate white "Reagan Democrats," one does not have to look far for answers to this shortcoming. However, Jackson's campaigns did succeed in one respect: increasing black political participation with an especially large increase in registration among younger blacks in the South.

Although Jackson's own career appears dormant now, many of his followers have remained active in local campaigns. While Coalition politics have not succeeded at the national level (where white voters make up over 80% of the electorate), it has worked in numerous big cities and is now beginning to break through in statewide elections for governor and senator.

Shades of the Rainbow

The basic concept of the Rainbow as outlined by Jackson and other liberal politicians is to combine virtually all the black vote with a large bloc of the Latino vote (at least 70%), the overwhelming majority of white liberals and gays, plus substantial support from white middle class feminists (exit polls show that working women are much more Democratic than women who do not work outside the home). Union members, particularly those on strike or facing layoffs, are also courted to join the Rainbow.

The Rainbow has worked best in big cities. Since 1965, virtually every major city outside the South—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit,

Baltimore, Washington, Cleveland, Seattle, St. Louis, Denver—has elected, at least once, a black mayor with this coalition of minorities and white liberals. The typical black mayor wins by combining most of the black and Latin community vote with about 20-25% of the white vote, mainly from the well-educated yuppie neighborhoods. (It should be noted that Rainbow politics in the big cities are far from invincible, as witness the success of Republican mayors in New York and Los Angeles last year.)

Black candidates are also starting to win statewide elections. In 1989 Doug Wilder of Virginia became the nation's first black governor, and in 1992 Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois became the first black

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woman Senator. Overall, seven black candidates have been nominated for governor or senator (six Democrats, one Republican: William Lucas of Michigan) in the last 15 years. Just two won statewide, but both wins have come recently. Blacks are now more competitive than ever for statewide office due to the registration efforts of Jackson's campaigns, a more affluent and more mobilized black electorate, and greater racial tolerance among white voters. At this writing, Ron Simms in Washington State has a decent shot at a US senate seat, and Alan Wheat in Missouri has an outside chance to win a seat as well.

While white male Democrats have long been winning with a coalition of whites and minorities, the most successful practitioners of Rainbow politics in recent years have been women candidates. California and Washington elected three women

Democratic senators in 1992 with heavy support from white suburban women and minorities. Even in supposedly ultra-macho Texas, Ann Richards was elected governor in 1990 by combining GOP women with blacks and Latinos. This year, Democrats nominated women for governor in Illinois (Dawn Clark Neutch), Texas (Gov. Richards) and California (Kathleen Brown)—their aspirations riding on the Rainbow vote. In 1992 the female-based Rainbow Coalition provided evidence that it could be quite formidable: if a candidate carries the white women's vote along with bloc votes from blacks and Latinos, then she will only need about a third of the white male vote to win. That is certainly an attainable goal for most women candidates. And as Carol Moseley-Braun showed in Illinois, black women can win over white suburban women too. In fact, 1992 was a banner year for black women; they won half of the new black-majority Congressional seats created by redistricting. One often-overlooked reason for this pattern is the black electorate is now almost two-thirds *female* in many urban areas.

The Diversified Latino Voter

With a successful Rainbow Coalition needing a large bloc of the Latino vote, one must realize that Latinos are not a monolith. There are three distinct Latino subgroups—Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans—and they react to black candidates and potential coalitions quite differently.

Puerto Ricans are concentrated in the cities of the Northeast and the north side of Chicago. They are the most liberal Latin constituency and are staunch Democrats. An analysis of Puerto Ricans in New York City shows that they have voted Democratic in *every* election for president and governor since 1950.¹ In recent contests for mayor of New York and Chicago, the Puerto Rican vote has twice gone for black Democrats—Harold Washington and David Dinkins—over white Democrats—Jane

Byrne and Ed Koch. Jesse Jackson carried the Puerto Rican vote of both New York and Chicago in his 1988 presidential bid. About one fourth of Puerto Ricans have an African heritage and they are the Latino group most willing to enter into coalitions with blacks.

Cubans, on the other hand, represent the right end of the Latin spectrum. Heavily concentrated in Florida, where they dominate Miami politics, they have become about the most Republican group in the nation. In 1992, George Bush received 72% of the vote in Miami's Cuban-American precincts compared with about 20% of the Mexican and Puerto Rican vote. Since most Cubans are Republicans and most black politicians are Democrats, there is often conflict between the two communities. However, in 1993, a black Dade County Commissioner switched parties to become a "Jack Kemp-style" Republican: Arthur Teale then swept the Cuban vote against a black Democrat. The key variable for Cubans potentially supporting black candidates is Republican party ties or conservative issues, not multi-cultural alliances.

With a population over 13 million, Mexican-Americans are easily the most numerous Latin subgroup in the US. They are also somewhere in between Cubans and Puerto Ricans in terms of ideology and partisanship. Voting data in Texas and Illinois seem to suggest that in contests between black and white Democrats (e.g., Eugene Sawyer vs. Rich Daley in Chicago and Sylvester Turner vs. Bob Lanier in Houston), Mexicans will usually support the white Democrat. But in general election choices between a white Republican and a black Democrat, they consistently vote Democratic. Just as Cubans have voted Republican since 1980, Mexicans have been Democrats since the Depression. Despite infamous neighborhood tensions between the black and Latin communities, Mexicans are still roughly twice as likely as white voters to support a black candidate.

A Black President

As for when there will be a black president, which after all was the goal of the Coalition, in the short run depends partly on Colin Powell's choices. He is the one black

politician who could (a) draw significant white support; and (b) have a spot on the Republican ticket in 1996 or 2000 for the asking. He is a legitimate candidate for national office by virtue of his military record and charismatic bearing. Powell could also dramatically and permanently realign national politics by pulling a third of the black vote to the Republican ticket. Blacks have voted 90% Democratic since Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

In a recent survey done by Princeton Survey Research for Times Mirror, General Powell led President Clinton in a trial heat 51-41%, receiving 54% of the white vote, 38% among Latinos and 29% from his fellow African-Americans. Mr. Powell's showing among blacks is about triple the normal GOP level of support. (Bob Dole received 11% of the black vote in the same

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survey.) This is certainly in line with the performances of black Republicans in the past: Ed Brooke won over 80% of the black vote in his successful runs for the Senate in Massachusetts; and 1986 Michigan Republican gubernatorial nominee William Lucas received twice as much support in Detroit's black wards as conservative white Republicans usually do, despite the fact that local black leaders, like Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and Rep. John Conyers, led the anti-Lucas campaign. The evidence is strong—racial pride works for black Republicans in high profile elections.

The election of a black Democrat as president or vice president is much more problematic. White working class voters (particularly men) are hesitant to support black candidates in contests for executive offices like governor and mayor. Mayors Harold Washington in Chicago and Wilson Goode in Philadelphia lost over 75% of the white blue-collar vote in their successful citywide campaigns. Crucial defections

among white workers kept California's Tom Bradley from becoming the nation's first black governor in 1982. And in his presidential bids, Jesse Jackson averaged less than a fourth of the blue-collar vote. It appears we are at least a generation away from the time when a black Democratic presidential candidate can win over enough white workers to be truly competitive in a national election. But as more minority candidates run for statewide office, potential white fear of them will subside and expanded minority populations will provide a stronger electoral base.

Rainbow Coalition politics have won a permanent place in urban politics and can manage an occasional breakthrough victory for statewide office. It is highly unlikely, however, that a Rainbow Coalition liberal Democrat can be elected president in this decade. After Bill Clinton, Al Gore will surely be the next Democratic nominee, and he is no one's idea of a Jesse Jackson Democrat. But with the number of working women and minorities steadily increasing—the electorate could be one-fourth minority by 2010—the potential growth of the Rainbow will have a major impact on national politics in the second decade of the 21st century and beyond. Of course, if Jesse Jackson follows up on his recent threat to run as an independent in 1996, he will immediately shake up national politics. Since most of his votes will be coming from Bill Clinton's base, a Jackson candidacy would go a long way toward defeating Clinton.

After the Democrats' Clinton/Gore experiment plays itself out, women candidates will most likely be next to move up in national politics. But the potential for an attractive black candidate is there. In the second decade of the next century—not that far off—a black candidate will be nominated for president on the Democratic side.

Endnote:

¹ Unpublished research project done at Harvard University by Dennis Saffrin for Professor William Schneider.

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