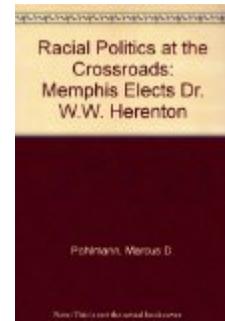


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marcus D. Pohlmann, Michael P. Kirby. *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W.W. Herenton*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. xxiv + 269 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87049-927-2; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-926-5.

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Published on H-Urban (February, 1998)



Memphis' Election of Mayor W.W. Herenton:

The subject of Marcus Pohlmann and Michael Kirby's *Racial Politics at the Crossroads* is a promising one: the election of the first African American mayor in Memphis. As the authors point out, Memphis along with St. Louis was one of the last major American cities with a significant black population to have not passed this milestone by 1990. Pohlmann and Kirby, political science professors at Memphis' Rhodes College, capably lay out the traditional path to such electoral success, which include: two or more strong white candidates to split the white vote, at least ten percent of the white vote going to the black candidate (often made possible by the strongest white candidate waving "the bloody shirt far too prominently" [p. xix]), and a black candidate who could garner white liberal favor with a crime control and pro-business growth agenda.

However, in the Memphis mayoral race of 1991 Pohlmann and Kirby note Herenton's divergence from the standard route of African-American candidates to the mayor's chair. First, Herenton's single white opponent, Richard Hackett, avoided directly confronting Herenton for fear that it might antagonize potential African-American supporters and/or white racial moderates. Second, rather than taking office with the aid of a significant minority of white votes, Herenton won the election with a highly racially polarized vote. Indeed, by the end of the campaign, Herenton had settled into an almost exclusive appeal to the city's African-American community.

Herenton's non-traditional approach to the election

was made necessary, the authors contend, by the unique political and racial landscape of Memphis. The chapters examining the history of Memphis' politics are among the most valuable of the book. Pohlmann and Kirby argue that the city's lack of a viable community of white liberals stems from the yellow fever epidemics of the late 1870s and 1880s, when the mortality rate chased many prosperous citizens to more healthy locales. Their departure also made possible a greater influence by the rural populations flooding into the city from the surrounding countryside—a phenomenon which further undermined the building of a significant white liberal minority. The authors maintain that these factors have had a long-range impact on the city's political character.

One stimulating aspect of the book is its study of the city's penchant for annexing outlying white suburbs. While other American cities in recent decades have experienced a rapid decline in white population through "white flight" to suburban counties, Memphis has regularly absorbed affluent white populations in surrounding unincorporated areas. What angered many black Memphian leaders was the apparent targeting for annexation of largely white communities to maintain an electoral white majority. Furthermore, many African American leaders asserted that those black neighborhoods the city annexed received a significantly lower commitment of city resources than their white counterparts. Pohlmann and Kirby point to a February, 1991 U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit blocking the city of Memphis from further annexation (on the grounds of alleged black voter

discrimination) as a turning point for Herenton's subsequent election.

Racial Politics at the Crossroads may be especially useful to local scholars of Memphis and Tennessee, but Pohlmann and Kirby missed a valuable opportunity to relate Herenton's election to a broader, regional context. Certainly some effort is made to do this. A central focus of the book is to point to Herenton's victory as an exception to the standard formula for electing a city's first black mayor. The analysis of why this happened falls short of this reader's curiosity, however. To choose but one example: Reverend Jesse Jackson came to Memphis during the latter stages of the campaign to lend support to Herenton's candidacy. This reader would like to know more about the context for that visit. How did Jackson come to visit Memphis? Was the idea initiated by Herenton, or had Jackson been deliberately monitoring this election and offered his help? Martin Luther King III also joined both men on election eve. Does this signify, despite some of the lost hopes for placing black progress in the hands of electoral politics in the late 1970s and 1980s, that national African American leadership still views a mayoral race in a large southern city as a critical battleground for civil rights? After all, Julian Bond had lamented in the mid-1970s that "many of the region's black elected officials have turned out to be only slightly better than the white officials whose place they took." [1] Pohlmann and Kirby quote Jackson as evoking the high rhetoric and stakes of the civil rights movement when he tells a gathered crowd in Memphis, "This is a religious pilgrimage, not a political campaign" (p. 161). Jackson portrayed a potential Herenton victory as a resurrection from the "crucifixion" of Dr. King's 1968 Memphis assassination. Herenton, in fact, had compared himself to Moses during the campaign, fighting "modern day Pharaohs" and "evil in the land." (pp. 156-57) Are such elevated views of the election's importance representative of other national or regional African American leaders? Did the black Memphian electorate view this election as a "religious pilgrimage," or was this simply Jack-

son's savvy use of rhetoric for a political cause?

The book is, at times, overly burdened with detail, which caused this reader to occasionally lose the analytical forest for the trees. The chapter on the 1991 electoral results, in which Pohlmann and Kirby scrutinize the dearth of racial crossover voting, is perhaps the most conspicuous example. Certainly, some in-depth analysis of the voting patterns for the mayoral election is expected, given the book's focus, but the authors then proceed through a lengthy candidate by candidate study of the city council, school board, and city court elections as well. Their point—that other city elections reflected a similar voting pattern of racial polarization, although to a lesser degree than the mayoral race—is obscured by the minutia of individual electoral statistics.

Racial Politics at the Crossroads, then, has much to tell local historians of the Memphis area. Taken with Kenneth Goings and Gerald Smith's fine 1995 *Journal of Urban History* article on the atypical qualities of black resistance in turn-of-the-century Memphis, Pohlmann and Kirby further point to Memphis as a potentially fascinating exception to traditional interpretations of black-white relations in the urban New South. [2] For larger regional issues, however, the book raises more intriguing questions than it answers.

Notes:

[1]. As quoted in David Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1990), 192.

[2]. Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, "Unhidden Transcripts': Memphis and African Agency, 1862-1920," *Journal of Urban History* 21(March 1995): 372-394.

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Citation: J. Christopher Schutz. Review of Pohlmann, Marcus D.; Kirby, Michael P., *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W.W. Herenton*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

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