



**Ann D. Gordon et al., eds..** *African American Women and the Vote 1837-1965*.  
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This book is the product of a conference held more than a decade ago at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Aware that existing studies of the women's suffrage movement dealt very inadequately with African American women, the organizers wished to bring together researchers working independently on topics related to the political activities of African American women. The purpose was to lay a foundation for understanding these women in politics, viewed from their own perspective, rather than to fit them into existing generalizations about women and the vote. The dates, 1837 and 1965, symbolize this. For African American women, 1837, when some joined with white women in a separate national organization to combat slavery, was a truer beginning than 1848 (Seneca Falls). Likewise, the passage of the 19th Amendment was meaningless to African American women in the South. The passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 marked their access to the ballot. Thus, this is less a book about the pursuit of voting than the pursuit of justice by a variety of political means.

Because of the passage of time since the original conference, more up to date versions of the research presented often exist. The value of this collection lies in the diversity of its individual contributions and the implicit challenge to find core meanings in this diversity. The intended audience is apparently students, and they will be well served. The contributions are uniformly well-written, occasionally even eloquent. But are the visions of African American history, feminism, the class system or the political system that are presented consistent? What united these women and what divided them? What determined their strategies and defined their purposes? This book is destined to generate lively discussion.

There are eight core essays arranged chronologically. Willi Coleman in "Architects of a Vision: Black Women and Their Antebellum Quest for Political and Social Equality" differentiates male and female roles among urban northern African American activists. She finds women of this era more concerned with ways and means and men with articulating resistance. She believes marriage to activist men promoted greater activism in

women but that conflict between the sexes sometimes surfaced over women's roles in church. African American women, she suggests, preceded white women into antislavery and sought interracial alliances for their own purposes. In "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Abolitionist and Feminist Reformer, 1825-1911," Bettye Collier-Thomas argues that Harper, remembered chiefly as a poet, was equally important for her participation in temperance, abolitionist, women's rights, and other reform movements. Elsa Barkley Brown questions whether black women pursued liberal democratic goals during Reconstruction in "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865-1880." Her evidence suggests to her that black women understood the vote as a collective community possession. Hence, they could attend rallies, shout their opinions to legislators, and shun African American men who violated community norms by voting Democratic. The later exclusion of women from political participation she sees as flowing from the larger culture's demands, not ones indigenous to the African American community.

In contrast to Brown's community emphasis, Janice Sumler-Edmond examines lawsuits initiated by individual African American women between 1867-1920. Typically these dealt with exclusion from public transport, miscegenation laws, or questions of inheritance. Litigants worked within the legal system but rarely successfully. Cases frequently linked race, class, and gender as racial laws prevented the treatment of African American females as ladies. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton analyzes patterns of African American women's participation in organizations from 1895-1925, focusing on a comparison of Baltimore and rural Tuskegee. Helping the larger black community provided the primary impetus for organizations in both settings. In Baltimore a wider variety of community members found an outlet in clubs than in Tuskegee. Coalition building with

whites occurred but often at the price of addressing issues of most concern to black women.

Northern migration and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment enabled some African American women to vote in the 1920s. Rather than rejecting electoral politics as irrelevant, significant numbers of "clubwomen" embraced the ballot according to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her essay. While at first forming Republican organizations, they were perfectly willing to switch to the Democrats as political opportunities changed. Embracing new political prospects prepared women for the civil rights struggles to come. Not all routes to political activism began with clubwomen, however. Gerald R. Gill in "From Progressive Republican to Independent Progressive: The Political Career of Charlotta A. Bass" traces the political career of this California journalist who ran for vice president on the Progressive Party ticket in 1952. Gill searches for an explanation for Bass's differing political strategies over time in the evolution of her political thought. The final substantive essay is by Martha Prescod Norman, a former SNCC activist turned historian. Her eloquent evocation of the lives of Georgia Mae Turner and Fannie Lou Hamer as a means for understanding the civil rights movement of the South and her vigorous defense of SNCC against charges of chauvinism, racism, and impractical idealism will undoubtedly engage students. This and other essays could lead to fruitful discussions of the links between politics and history.

The three remaining essays confront the task of drawing larger meanings from the conference. Ann D. Gordon in her introduction posits an evolution through stages of protest. African American women first sought white allies to end slavery. When the Civil War amendments ended this alliance, southern freedwomen took center stage, seeking mechanisms to define their freedom. When this proved difficult, women moved in this century toward establishing political bases inside

their own communities and outside with whites. From these bases the civil rights movement was launched. By viewing the black woman's experience, Gordon believes, one can redefine the central thrust of politics in the U.S.; it involves not the exercise of rights but their pursuit. The other two essayists, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Bettina Aptheker, find synthesis more difficult. Both are sensitive to the pressures of the dominant culture both to influence (without completely controlling) African American women's behavior and to influence the perception of that behavior. Television footage, for example, reveals a more active participation by women in the civil rights movement than does newspaper reporting. African American women must struggle therefore to prevent their history from being mythologized or forced into preexisting theoretical frameworks. If in the end, the reader emerges unsatisfied that this book has neatly arranged and categorized the totality of black women's political experiences, that is to be expected. African American women lie at the center of the fault lines of race, gender, and often class in America. Ideals oppose reality along those fault lines and interpretive paradigms crumble as they all too often expose their inconsistencies.

This review was commissioned by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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