

American Politics

AND THE

African American Quest

FOR

Universal Freedom

HANES WALTON, JR.

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American Politics and the African American Quest for Universal Freedom



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*To our great grandparents (whose names we do not know)
and their struggles in the African American quest for freedom*

*The Negro people have fought like tigers for freedom, and in doing so
have enhanced the freedom struggles of all other people.*

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PREFACE

This book examines the institutions and processes of American government and politics from the perspective of the African American presence and influence. We want to show how the presence of Africans in the United States affected the founding of the Republic and its political institutions and processes from the colonial era to the present. Blacks, for example, took no part in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence or the design of the Constitution; however, their presence exerted a profound influence on the shaping of both these seminal documents. And so it has been throughout American history.

The book in structure follows that of standard works in political science on American government and politics. It is unique, however, in three respects.

First, it is organized around two interrelated themes: the idea of universal freedom and the concept of minority-majority coalitions. In their quest for their own freedom in the United States, blacks have sought to universalize the idea of freedom. In their attack on slavery and racial subordination, black Americans and their leaders have embraced doctrines of universal freedom and equality. In doing so they have had an important influence on the shaping of democratic, constitutional government and on expanding or universalizing the idea of freedom not only for themselves but for all Americans.

But blacks have not acted alone. Indeed, given their status as a subordinate racial minority they could not act alone. Rather, in their quest for freedom blacks have sought to forge coalitions with whites—*minority-inspired majority coalitions*. Historically, however, because of the nation's ambivalence about race, these coalitions tend to be unstable and temporary, requiring that they be constantly rebuilt in what is an ongoing quest. These two themes, the quest for universal freedom and minority-majority coalitions, are pursued throughout much of the book.

The second distinctive aspect of this study is that it is historically informed. In each chapter we trace developments historically. Relevant historical background is critical to understanding the evolution of race and the American democracy. Such material also brings contemporary events into a sharper focus.

Third, in the political behavior chapters (3–6, 9–10), we try to provide students not only with the most current knowledge on the topics but also with information on how the discipline of political science has approached the study of the topics in general and with respect to blacks specifically. In several of these chapters we focus on Gunnar Myrdal and the powerful influence his *American Dilemma* has had on the study of black political behavior.

We first talked about writing this book nearly a decade ago. Our principal rationale for writing it is that we saw a void in the available literature. We believe that race is the most important cleavage in American life, with enormous impact on the nation's society, culture, and politics. Indeed, as we show throughout this book, race has always been the enduring fault line in American society and politics—thus, the need for a volume that treats this important topic with the seriousness it deserves. This is what we seek to accomplish in a

study that has historical sweep and depth and is comprehensive in its coverage of the subject. Although this book is written so as to be readable and interesting to undergraduate students, we have sought to maintain the highest intellectual standards. We believe the study of the rich, varied, and critical presence of African Americans in *all* areas of the political system demands nothing less.

Before closing, we would like to say a word about the intellectual tradition on which this book is based. The scholars who are the founders and innovators in the study of African American politics literally created this scholarly subfield out of nothing. Working in small African American colleges, without major financial support or grants and with large numbers of classes and students, these scholars launched in small steps and limited ways a new area of academic study. They published in obscure and poorly diffused journals and little known presses, which resulted, in many instances, in their work being overlooked and undervalued. Racism's manifestations in the academy allowed much valuable work to remain unseen. Not only was the result of their research made invisible, but these scholars themselves became invisible in their profession. Of this unseen tradition it has been written:

The second research tradition in America's life is the unheralded, the unsung, unrecorded but not unnoticed one. Scholars belonging to this tradition literally make something out of nothing and typically produce scholarship at the less recognized institutions of higher learning. These are the places, to use Professor Aaron Wildavsky's apt phrase, where the schools "habitually run out of stamps" and where other sources of support are nonexistent. . . . [Yet] here . . . scholars . . . nevertheless scaled the heights, and produced stellar scholarship.¹

They persisted and persevered. And while their work is scattered and sometimes difficult to locate, it formed the basis for a new vision and perspective in political science. Beginning in 1885, the discipline of political science emerged during an era of concern about race relations and developed its study of race politics from this perspective. In essence, this race relations perspective on the study of African American politics focused on the concern of whites about stability and social peace rather than the concerns of blacks about freedom and social justice.²

This perspective by the 1960s had become the major consensus in the discipline on the study of race. It offered a different perspective on political reality from that of blacks who during this period were trying to empower themselves in American politics. Thus African American political scientists offered a different perspective, a challenge to the consensus. Instead of focusing on how the African American quest for freedom might distress whites and disrupt stability and social peace, this new perspective focused on how an oppressed group might achieve power so as to provide solutions to long-standing social and economic problems. This perspective deals with freedom and power rather than stability and social peace.

Our book is a part of this intellectual tradition. The purveyors of this tradition include Professors Robert Brisbane and Tobe Johnson of Morehouse College, the ever-erudite Samuel DuBois Cook at Atlanta University and Professors Emmett Dorsey, Bernard Fall, Harold Gosnell, Robert Martin, Vincent Browne, Nathaniel Tillman, Brian Wienstein, Morris Levitt, and Charles Harris at Howard University. Their insightful ideas, cogent theories, and brilliant teaching made this book possible. When we sat down at the Holiday Inn in Jackson, Mississippi, in March 1991 (at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists), to develop the theme for this book and lay out its goals and structure, we were standing on the shoulders of these pioneering political scientists. They

built the intellectual foundation. We hope this work makes them proud. We hope it will do the same for our children.

Finally, a note on style. We use the terms *black* and *African American* interchangeably, having no preference for either and viewing each as a legitimate and accurate name for persons of African descent in the United States.³

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HANES WALTON, JR.
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NOTES

1. Hanes Walton, Jr., "The Preeminent African American Legal Scholar: J. Clay Smith," *National Political Science Review* 6 (1997): 289.
2. Hanes Walton, Jr., Cheryl Miller, and Joseph P. McCormick, "Race and Political Science: The Dual Traditions of Race Relations Politics and African American Politics," in John Dryzek et al., eds, *Political Science and Its History: Research Programs and Political Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 145–74; Hanes Walton, Jr., and Joseph P. McCormick, "The Study of African American Politics as Social Danger: Clues from the Disciplinary Journals," *National Political Science Review* 6 (1997): 229–44.
3. For discussion of the various controversies about names in African American history—that is, what should persons of African origins in the United States call themselves—see W. E. B. Du Bois "The Name Negro," *The Crisis* 35 (March, 1928): 96–101; Lerone Bennett, "What's in a Name?" *Ebony*, November, 1967; Ben L. Martin, "From Negro to Black to African-American: The Power of Names and Naming," *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (1991): 83–107; Robert C. Smith, "Remaining Old Realities," *San Francisco Review of Books* 25 (Summer 1990): 16–19; Ruth Grant and Marion Orr, "Language, Race and Politics: From 'Black' to 'African American,'" *Politics & Society* 24 (1996): 137–52; and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Foundations of Nationalist Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): chap. 4, "Identity and Ideology: The Names Controversy."

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