

## RACE CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN URBAN POLITICS

*Patterns of Interracial Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the City.* Peter K. Eisinger. Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph Series. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

It is difficult to remember that just twelve years ago Harrington could classify black ghetto dwellers as "politically invisible," and Banfield and Wilson could describe black elected officials as "politicians first and Negroes second." By the end of the sixties, racial considerations had become probably the most important element structuring urban politics.

Because of this dramatic change, the time is obviously ripe to reassess the place of race in American urban politics and to take a hard new look at interracial political relationships. Peter Eisinger's recent research contributes to such a reevaluation.

From the vast range of issues relevant to this complex subject, Eisinger has chosen as his focus the effect of behavior and belief patterns of both races on the political strategy and relationships chosen by their respective leaders. It is not only a theme that cuts across the whole subject of race in urban politics; it is also of theoretical interest to political scientists concerned with intergroup political relationships in general.

Eisinger's major contribution to the reassessment is his use of survey data on mass opinions and behavior to establish the constraints and opportunities facing the elites—the "would-be leaders"—who confront each other in the political arena. His work is one of the first to argue that the political-participation preferences and belief patterns of the masses are relevant to the strategy of the elites. His study is the most developed attempt to trace which patterns lead to coalition or other forms of cooperation and which ones lead to conflict. And it is a comprehensive effort to contrast the different attitudes toward various forms of political participation held by blacks and whites.

### Protest vs. Politics As Usual

Political protests have been studied through surveys before, of course. The traditional approach has been to ask about particular protests—*antiwar* picketing, *civil rights* demonstrations, *student* protest, *black* protest movement. Political protest as a tool and racial differences in attitude toward it have not been studied as intensively. Eisinger's survey—a sample survey of adults living in the city of Milwaukee—asked both blacks and whites about protest itself; sharp (and statistically very significant) racial differences emerged.

A majority of the blacks (56 percent) held protest to be a device to gain certain ends rather than simple troublemaking or expression of anger. Only 36 percent of whites held this view. Again, 43 percent of blacks thought it should be used more often, as compared with only 7 percent of whites. When asked whether they thought demonstrations were actually *better* than voting, 24 percent of blacks and only 4 percent of whites answered yes.

Not only did more blacks than whites in the Milwaukee sample approve of protest, but more blacks actually took part in protests than whites. For both races, those who had themselves taken part in protest were more likely to approve its use. But even for this group, racial differences emerged. A large majority (71 percent) of black protesters thought there should be more protest. Only one-quarter (26 percent) of white protesters agreed. And this one-quarter was also lower than the proportion of black *nonprotesters* (36 percent) who thought there should be more.

And what did the masses in this study think and do about conventional politics? The whites in the Milwaukee study were generally confident as *individuals* that their voice was important to public decision-makers; blacks were not. Blacks and whites shared the view that the political process was murky. They also shared the view that voting was the only way to wield influence within the political system. But they diverged in their commitment to solving political differences within conventional political rules—a divergence that cannot be explained by controlling for differences in social status. Eisinger suggests,

At the mass level among blacks, many of the standards that help to regulate the conflict process are absent as is basic support for government as an institution for conflict management.

In light of this it is no surprise that blacks were found to vote less, campaign less, and contact officials less.

Why the difference, in Eisinger's view?

A significant and vocal portion of the white community has [throughout U.S. history] rejected the norms of accommodation and peaceful politics on those occasions when racial questions have been at issue. . . . It seems entirely reasonable to conclude that the black disaffection observable in the data . . . is a *product* of the failure of whites to act on the basis of their stated normative pretensions.

### Mass Opinion and Behavior: A Survey

As a by-product of his central objective, Eisinger has some new insights into the problems—and opportunities—of surveying in the ghetto, concluding that previous warnings about the problems (particularly as contrasted with interviewing in white areas) have been overdrawn. Concrete evidence that his optimism was justified is his 80 percent completion rate for blacks (compared, interestingly, with only 70 percent for whites). *(continued on page 13)*

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Further evidence that confidence can be placed in the representativeness of his data comes from the fact that on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics the final sample for each group matched the universe from which it was drawn quite satisfactorily (as measured by 1970 Census figures for Milwaukee), with the single exception of high-income whites, who were undersampled.

Can the results be generalized to other cities? Eisinger points out that in racial composition Milwaukee (one of the ten second-largest American cities) closely resembles other northern cities of its size—which makes it comparable to cities like Boston, San Francisco, Indianapolis. Like most cities of comparable size, it is heavily residentially segregated. In such other characteristics as average education level, median family income, unemployment, and occupational structure, it can also be considered representative.

Certain characteristics and traditions, of course, belong particularly to Milwaukee. But, as Eisinger puts it:

What is important is . . . Milwaukee cannot be distinguished *systematically* from other cities. If it does not "stand for" other cities or all cities neither does it stand alone. What we find here, then, is surely suggestive, substantively as well as theoretically, for the politics of other big cities in other parts of the country.

### Black-White Coalition: Prospects for the Future

In Milwaukee, as in numerous other cities that share its social structure, blacks do not play a balance of power role. White elites have not had to rely on black votes to win. Decisions concerning cooperation can therefore be taken on other grounds. Eisinger has formulated a simple framework that enables him to assess, in the light of his data on mass attitudes and behavior, the likelihood of racial coalitions in such circumstances.

The picture he draws is of a continually unstable situation. Would-be leaders face different dictates from their potential followers.

Blacks who seek a political following must take black community support for protest, with its tone of intransigence, seriously. Even if they themselves favor cooperation, their dependence on mass attitudes for continuing political power presents a clear constraint.

White leaders are under mass pressure to espouse conventional politics. From this perspective, black politicians are not ideal partners.

The two races do not differ in amount and style of political activity as much as they do in attitudes. For certain specific goals they are willing to cooperate. Coalitions thus formed, however, are dictated by conditions of the moment. They are unlikely to be stable or enduring.

And Eisinger ends on a slightly ominous note concerning prospects for increased black political participation at the local level:

The routinization of protest implies that the more it is used the less effective it will be. This means that black urban communities that have relied on protest as an important means of wielding influence in the city may [in the longer run] strip themselves of power by their own efforts to gain it through protest. To weaken oneself despite the intensification or persistence of one's own struggle is perhaps both the irony and the true meaning of powerlessness.

### Postscripts for Political Scientists

- Eisinger finds no support for the view that "failure of community" lies at the heart of the urban crisis—as thought by some. Neither race showed any particular concern about it.
- Individual protest participation cannot be explained by low status—"lack of conventional resources on the part of the protesters themselves." The notion that protest is a political tool of the powerless can only be retained if powerlessness is not regarded as an individual attribute, but one that applies to a group.
- Black urban populations can be considered as racial political communities capable of independent and cohesive action. To understand the implications of this, one must "break away from the conventional historical interpretation of the black role in urban politics, and . . . overcome the resistance of those who insist on stressing [the black community's] inability to resolve internal tensions."

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