

EXHIBIT 15



Black political influence in Mississippi has slowed despite increase in elected officials

Jimmie E. Gates, The Clarion-Ledger Published 6:31 p.m. CT Aug. 19, 2017 | Updated 12:31 p.m. CT Aug. 21, 2017



(Photo: File photo/The Clarion-Ledger)

The year was 1971, six years after the 1965 Voting Rights Act was signed into law, and Charles Evers, the first black man elected mayor in the state since Reconstruction, became the first African American to run for statewide office in Mississippi since Reconstruction.

Evers, then mayor of Fayette and brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, ran as an independent for governor, receiving more than 172,000 votes and coming in second to winner William L. Waller, a Democrat.

Pundits and Mississippi political leaders were impressed with Evers' showing.

Forty years later in 2011, then-Hattiesburg Mayor Johnny DuPree ran for governor as a Democrat after becoming the first African-American to be nominated for governor by a major party.



Republican candidate Phil Bryant, right, and Democrat candidate Johnny DuPree wait for the start of their gubernatorial debate at the Mississippi College School of Law auditorium on Oct. 14, 2011. (Photo: File photo/AP)

DuPree also lost, to Republican Phil Bryant, but captured 39 percent of the vote.

While other states, with smaller African-American populations, have elected statewide leaders, the glass ceiling in Mississippi has remained not only impervious but unreachable.

Mississippi, which has more African-Americans per capita and more black elected officials than any other state in the nation, has not elected a black candidate to a statewide office in the more than 140 years since Reconstruction.

That's the dichotomy of black political power today in Mississippi.

Fifty-two years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, this is the question: "How is African-American political power perceived today in this Deep South state?"

"At a standstill," says Robert Clark, the first African-American elected to the Mississippi Legislature.

More: [Mississippi's first black legislator honored \(/story/news/politics/2017/08/09/mississippis-first-black-legislator-honored/552050001/\)](/story/news/politics/2017/08/09/mississippis-first-black-legislator-honored/552050001/)

African-Americans in Mississippi haven't lived up to their political potential, says Leslie B. McLemore, a retired Jackson State University political science professor and former Jackson city councilman.

"It's good to hear that Mississippi has the highest number of black elected officials, but many of the positions are for school boards, aldermen, election commission, etc., where African-Americans aren't in the majority (on those boards)," he said.



President Lyndon Baines Johnson moves to shake hands with Dr. Martin Luther King after signing the Voting Rights Act in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol on Aug. 6, 1965. An Alabama county, opposed by the Justice Department and civil rights groups, wants two key sections of the Voting Rights Act declared unconstitutional. Gannett News Service President Lyndon Baines Johnson moves to shake hands with Dr. Martin Luther King after signing the Voting Rights Act in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol on Aug. 6, 1965. (Gannett, Yoichi R. Okamoto/LBJ Library and Museum/File) (Photo: File photo/USA TODAY Network)

House Democratic Caucus Chairman David Baria, D-Bay St. Louis, said African-Americans likely had greater political influence when Clark was president pro-tem of the House than today with only two African-Americans serving as chairmen of House committees.



Former Democratic speaker pro tempore Robert Clark waves to friends in the gallery as he concludes his comments Wednesday in a program at the Old Capitol Museum in Jackson recognizing his overcoming barriers 50 years ago to become Mississippi's first black legislator since Reconstruction. The Holmes County Democrat won a seat in the state House in 1967 and was ostracized by white colleagues when he took office, but he gained a leadership role after just over a decade and, as chairman of the House Education Committee, helped push the Education Reform Act of 1982 into law. (Photo: Rogelio V. Solis/AP)

Clark was elected to the Mississippi House in 1967 and took his seat on Jan. 3, 1968. He retired in 2003 after serving for 35 years, during which he rose from a freshman lawmaker to the second most powerful position in the House as speaker pro-tem.

Clark, a veteran of the civil rights movement, sums his feelings this way: "I have been wandering in the wilderness for 50 years. We still haven't found the promised land."

Charting a new course

Clark says African-Americans need to come up with a political road map for the future.

The only way for an African-American to be elected statewide is for a change of philosophy to take place in Mississippi, he said. Racism is still paramount, he said, with too many voters considering a person's skin color rather than the individual's qualifications.

While racism certainly has played a role, other factors have too, including failing to get out the vote, infighting, gerrymandering and the rise in power of the overwhelmingly white Republican Party.

"The key to electing an African-American to a statewide office in Mississippi is voter registration, voter engagement and voter participation," said Rep. Sonya Williams-Barnes, D-Gulfport, who chairs the Legislative Black Caucus. "The African-American voter population in our state has substantial numbers to ensure our representation in a statewide-elected position, but these three key points must take place."



Rep. Sonya Williams-Barnes (Photo: File photo/The Clarion-Ledger)

Said McLemore: "The tragedy is that we always seem to wait for elections to have voter registration drives. We should have ongoing voter registration ... We have to become more sophisticated."

African-Americans haven't done enough to improve their own political power, such as placing an emphasis on getting out the vote, Clark said.

"And we've got to stop fighting each other," he said.

The benefit of working together was clear on a smaller scale in Jackson 24 years ago. In 1993, Harvey Johnson Jr. was one of about a half dozen candidates vying to become the capital city's first black mayor. Then-incumbent Mayor Kane Ditto, who is white, won the Democratic primary and was re-elected. When Johnson won four years later, black residents rallied behind his candidacy.

Evers, who will be 95 in September, says for an African-American to win statewide in Mississippi, pushing and preparing a candidate will be required.

Need for broad appeal

African-Americans make up 37.7 percent of Mississippi's population, according to the most recent census figures. While that's a strong starting point, a black candidate would still have to appeal to a broad base of voters to get elected to a statewide office, McLemore said.

McLemore says for an African-American to win a statewide election, it will require a candidate who appeals to black voters and white voters. He said former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy was an example of a candidate who appealed to both when he ran for Congress.

Espy represented Mississippi's 2nd Congressional District from 1987 until 1993. He resigned after then-President Bill Clinton appointed him agriculture secretary, the first African-American to hold the position. An ethics investigation, from which he was ultimately cleared, led to his resignation and the end of his political career. Today, Espy is a successful private attorney in Jackson.

Asked if he believes an African-American can be elected to a statewide office in Mississippi, Espy responded: "Yes, I do. Mississippi will elect an African-American to a statewide office in the not too distant future."

He cited two reasons for his belief: First is the coming shift in population. He said experts confirm that by 2025 African-Americans and other racial minorities will constitute the majority of citizens under age 20. The second, and most important is that most younger voters are less racially conscious in their voting patterns than in decades past.

Rep. Bennie Thompson won a 1993 special election to succeed Espy in Congress. He is considered by many as the most influential African-American politician in the state, but most politicians doubt Thompson could win broad support to win outside the majority black 2nd District.

"Historically, whites don't vote for black folks," McLemore said. "There are exceptions, but those exceptions are few and far between."

McLemore said some white voters have unfounded fears that if African-Americans are in control, white people won't be treated right. McLemore said that way of thinking has been proven wrong by African-American elected officials bending over backward to ensure white constituents are treated fairly.

Gary Anderson, who had served in top financial positions in state government under both Democratic and Republican administrations, logically should have had the broad appeal needed to win statewide office. But he lost a 2003 bid for treasurer to a then-little-known Tate Reeves, who is now lieutenant governor and presumed to be a Republican candidate for governor in 2019.

In 2007, Anderson ran for insurance commissioner and was defeated by current Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney.

Longtime state Sen. David Jordan, D-Greenwood, said Anderson was an ideal candidate when he ran for statewide office.

One day, with the right candidate, an African-American will win statewide office, he said, but added he can't think of any other person besides Anderson who could do so.

Anderson said black political power in Mississippi is undergoing a new stage with many civil rights pioneers moving on and a younger generation emerging. But Anderson said "it remains to be seen whether there will be a new level of getting things done ... There are a lot of question marks."

Anderson, who now lives in his native Byhalia and works as a consultant for Marshall County, said he has no plans to run again for statewide office.

"It won't be me," Anderson said. "I have gone around that circle."

Anderson believes it will be harder now for an African-American to be elected statewide because of the divisive political climate in Mississippi and across the country.

"A lot of things have happened since I ran," Anderson said. "People aren't talking to each other; they are talking at each other."

Allegiance to one party

After Medgar Evers was assassinated on June 12, 1963, Charles Evers returned to Mississippi from Chicago and took over his brother's job as the state NAACP field secretary, leading marches, boycotts and other civil rights activities.

He was a Democrat, but switched parties.

Evers, who has identified as a Republican and served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention, believes African-Americans may place too much political allegiance to the Democratic Party.

Evers said it was mostly Democrats in power during the turbulent civil rights era, who opposed rights for African-Americans.

From the period after the Voting Rights Act to 2000, African-American political power was on the upswing with white candidates for statewide offices courting black voters, knowing that black voters could influence the outcome of an election.

But, as in other Southern states, many white Democrats began switching to the Republican Party, beginning in the 1990s and continuing until today.

In 1992, Kirk Fordice was elected the first Republican governor since Reconstruction. He won re-election in 1996, the first governor to win consecutive terms. Democrat Ronnie Musgrove won the gubernatorial election in 2000, the state's last Democratic governor, serving only one term after losing to Haley Barbour in 2003.

Today, Attorney General Jim Hood is the only statewide elected Democrat in Mississippi.

The rise of the Republican Party has led to a waning of African-American political influence on the statewide level since the majority of African-American support tends to be for Democratic candidates — although notably Espy, a Democrat, endorsed Republican Barbour in his 2007 re-election bid over Democrat John Arthur Eaves.

Yet the strength in numbers of African-American political power is there, and the Mississippi Republican Party is aware of it.

The influence of African-American voters to alter the outcome of a statewide race was evident in the 2014 Republican primary for the U.S. Senate between incumbent Thad Cochran and upstart state Sen. Chris McDaniel. Political observers say it was black voters who accounted for Cochran keeping his seat in the hotly contested race.

Mississippi GOP Chairman Joe Nosef said outreach to African-Americans has been one of his priorities. It is necessary to get the most votes and have a strong diverse base and because "it is the right thing to do," he said.

"We are currently working on a revised plan not to just reach more African-American voters but also in order to elect as many African-American Republicans to office as possible," Nosef said.

He predicted one day having "a robust presence of African-American Republican officeholders across the state."

"From the beginning, I made it clear to Chairman Nosef that expanding the Party with outreach to the African-American community would be a major priority," Gov. Bryant said. "We are made stronger by African-American voters and candidates, and I will continue to prioritize their active participation in shaping the Republican Party's future."

In some Southern states, African-Americans, like U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, have won office as Republicans in statewide voting.

In 2015, Republican Jenean Hampton became the first African-American elected to statewide office in Kentucky when she became lieutenant governor.

Is the pendulum swinging again?

Columbus attorney and philanthropist Wil Colom says that rather than belabor the negative he chooses to look to the future.

Colom was once a Republican, but left the party in 2007. He is now a member of the Democratic National Committee. In 2015, his son, Scott Colom, was elected as a Democrat to the office of district attorney for Lowndes, Oktibbeha, Clay and Noxubee counties.

"Young Mississippians, black and white, see broad participation and inclusion as the only sane way forward, and they are swinging to the Democratic Party," Wil Colom said. "In the near future, Democratic candidates will appear carrying a message and style that will appeal to a large cross section of the people of this state."

Black political power in Mississippi also can be assessed using other metrics besides holding statewide office, such as legislative representation and party composition, Millsaps College political science professor Nathan Shrader said.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 28 percent of the Mississippi Legislature was comprised of African-American members as of 2015 — the highest proportion in the nation and nearly 20 points above the national average for all state legislatures, Shrader said.

The majority of black political gains in the Legislature was the result of court challenges leading to the creation of black majority districts.

Also, because 86 percent of African-American voters in Mississippi identify as Democrats, as a poll released last August by Magellan Strategies found, "this segment of voters plays a critical role in both leading one of the state's two major parties as well as serving as the base of the party's rank-and-file," Shrader said. "Thanks in part to robust, unwavering African-American support, the Mississippi Democratic Party's nominees can never be completely counted out of contention."

The state's aging demographics may be an asset as well.

"Older, white voters who may be more prone to abstaining from voting for a minority candidate on the basis of race will eventually be exiting the pool of eligible voters," Shrader said. "They may likely be replaced by younger voters who are more racially tolerant and possibly less politically conservative than prior generations of white voters, opening new pockets of support for African-American statewide candidates."

In the end, Colom said, "What is certain is that the status quo can't, and shouldn't, continue. To isolate and exclude 40 percent of the population is unsustainable. To quote MLK: 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.'"

Contact Jimmie E. Gates (<mailto:Jimmie%20E.%20Gates>) at 601-961-7212 or jgates@gannett.com (<mailto:jgates@gannett.com>). Follow him on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/Jimmie-E-Gates-999105063482724/>) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com/jgatesnews>).

Read or Share this story: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2017/08/19/black-political-influence-mississippi-has-slowed-despite-increase-elected-officials/537533001/>