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Abstract

As the United States arrived at the brink of the 2020 election, three interdisciplinary scholars engaged in a panel discussion about why and how Black women of all classes have been at the forefront of movements for civil rights and economic justice. Based on their expertise on race, gender, and class, and scholarly backgrounds in history, labor studies, and political science, this paper presents perspectives on the critical role of Black women in simultaneously fighting for the right to vote, while protesting the disenfranchisement of all African Americans from the Reconstruction Era to the present. The paper discusses why and how previously marginalized groups have struggled to gain inclusion in the American political system, and how the efforts of Black women have shaped and prodded efforts to build a more democratic nation.

Keywords

African American women political activists, African American women political activity, United States Race relations, African Americans Suffrage, Voting, Civil rights, Minorities suffrage

CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN'S VOTING RIGHTS ACTIVISM: SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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As the United States arrived at the brink of the 2020 election, three interdisciplinary scholars engaged in a panel discussion about why and how Black women of all classes have been at the forefront of movements for civil rights and economic justice. Based on their expertise on race, gender, and class, and scholarly backgrounds in history, labor studies, and political science, this paper presents perspectives on the critical role of Black women in simultaneously fighting for the right to vote, while protesting the disenfranchisement of all African Americans from the Reconstruction Era to the present. This paper discusses why and how previously marginalized groups have struggled to gain inclusion in the American political system, and how the efforts of Black women have shaped and prodded efforts to build a more democratic nation. From seeing voting rights as a collective responsibility to better the lives of the Black community, to Black clubwomen like Mary Church Terrell fighting for voting rights, criminal justice reform, and cross-class alliances, to Black women's leadership of the contemporary fight for workers' rights, this paper focuses on Black women's intersectional politics and activism.

The role of Black women in American elections made headlines in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. As one Black woman columnist opined in the *Washington Post*, “Black women saved the Democrats. Don’t make us do it again” (Crumpton). A headline from the *Guardian* noted “how Black women fought to mobilize America’s voters” using “whatever it takes” (Washington and Arnold). Black women voters, organizers, candidates, advisors, and pundits all worked to shape and direct contemporary American politics. Not only were

Black women crucial to the election of the nation's first Black president more than a decade ago, but they have also continued to flex their muscles in many aspects of the political arena both in the streets as leaders and marchers, as well as on the campaign trail as candidates and strategic organizers. Not only did 2020 mark the centennial anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment providing universal women's suffrage, but it also celebrates the election of Vice President Kamala Harris, the first woman—and first woman of Black and Asian descent—to the White House.

As important as the contemporary politics of Black women is, it would be a mischaracterization to suggest that Black women's efforts on behalf American democracy are modern phenomena of this century or even of the storied 20th century civil rights movement. Black women have played an active role in the demand for Blacks' and women's voting rights, and for both racial and gender equality more broadly, across the centuries of American history.

In this paper, based on a presentation and discussion on Black women's voting rights and elections from the 2020 Seneca Falls Dialogues, we present our perspectives on some of the ways that Black women have contributed to expanding the American electorate and changing the landscape of American democracy (Parker et al.). Black women's intersectional feminism—or the understanding that race, gender, class, and other positions or identities are inextricably interconnected—informs our approach. Black feminists' strategies for expanding democracy in the United States are based on this intersectional analysis, together with the knowledge that systems of oppression (white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy) are interconnected, and success comes from centering the voices and issues of most vulnerable and marginalized. In what follows, we begin with a discussion of the “family vote,” noting that Black women were participating in politics long before the ratification of the 19th Amendment and decades before they were able to fully exercise those rights following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. We will then turn to the activism of Mary Church Terrell, an “unceasing militant” who pushed white women to support universal women's suffrage and pushed as vigorously in her writing, marches, and testimonies for anti-lynching

measures to be passed at the local and national levels (Parker 294). Terrell saw voting rights as interconnected with workers' rights and participated in several cross-class collaborations. Following that, we consider the activism of contemporary Black, working-class women and their efforts on behalf of voting rights and social justice. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the history of Black women's activism for current day politics and into the future.

BLACK WOMEN, THE FAMILY VOTE, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The history of Black women's activism to mobilize and leverage the vote predates their access to the ballot. The advent of universal male suffrage after the ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870 provided both the opportunity and the demand for what we suggest, building on Elsa Barkley Brown's work, might be termed the "family vote" ("Negotiating"). Black women, especially, were aware of how the votes of newly enfranchised men might be used for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their communities in ways that white women were likely unaware. For Black men's counterparts in the electoral arena- white male voters- the franchise was a means of trading a vote in pursuit of individual self-interest (Savigny 18; Mansbridge 132; Gunderson 63-65). Which candidate was working on their behalf? Which man, amongst the various contenders, which platform, amongst the various options, would afford them and theirs the most benefit in terms of work hours, pay, protections, relief? The evaluation of whom to vote for from the perspective of Black men was, of necessity, broader than the question of individual self-interest. Voting, in the Black community, became a collective enterprise, an expression of "linked fate" wherein Black voters were compelled to consider "what is in the best interest of the Black community is also what is best for me" (Dawson 77-84).

Black men considered which candidate would prevent lynching, who would promote their inclusion, and which platform or candidates would recognize the basic humanity of Black people. Frederick Douglass framed Black male suffrage in terms of communal outcomes such as protection from lynching and other violence against Black men and women, as well

as a means to provide education to children (Martin 161-165). For Black women who sought woman's suffrage as evidence of their unalienable rights as well as a means to protect their families, the enfranchisement of Black men was a crucial step forward in the Black freedom struggle, a pathway toward liberation and equality in a nation that failed to recognize basic claims of Black citizenship (M. Jones 131; White 68). "The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments [became] at once a failed strategy for enfranchising white women and an important step toward suffrage for Black women," connecting the freedom struggles of Black women and men for decades long beyond the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in the early twentieth century (Gidlow 435).

Votes were not secret until the adoption of the Australian or secret ballot in almost all states beginning in the late-1880s (the secret ballot also disenfranchised Black folks who often were illiterate. This was a double-edged sword.). (Crook and Crook 236). As Republicans and Democrats competed for votes in the postbellum South, employers and the farmers who owned the businesses and land where Black men worked or sharecropped would easily know who they voted for and apply pressure to direct that vote to the preferred goals of white men. The employers of these men might pressure them to vote for a Democratic candidate who would roll back the rights gained during Reconstruction. Black men might be persuaded to trade their votes for more pay, a bonus, or for other resources such as a cart or a horse. Their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters who were without the franchise had to act as negotiators, enforcers, and protectors of the family vote (Brown, "Negotiating" 123). As Brown writes, "...African American women and men understood the vote as a collective, not as an individual possession, and that African American women, unable to cast a separate vote, viewed African American men's vote as equally theirs" in a way quite different from the "nineteenth-century patriarchal notion that men voted on behalf of their wives and children" ("To Catch the Vision" 82-83).

Black women did not have access to the franchise, but their lives and well-being and the well-being of their communities depended on ensuring the election of candidates from the "Party of Lincoln" Republicans who would enact more favorable policies. Black women had to develop means

to protect their interests through the valued franchise of the men in their lives (Brown, "To Catch the Vision" 87; Terborg-Penn, 48, 68). For these reasons, Black women practiced a politics of racial uplift, not only in suffrage organizations, but also in church and community organizations. They participated in National Colored Conventions where they made recommendations to the men on which candidates to support, even as organized amongst themselves to press for Black women's voting rights (M. Jones 131,156).

Admittedly, Black women had to navigate both racism and sexism as they sought to influence their political fortunes; however, these women were not without tools and strategies. Among these strategies was the normalization of Black male suffrage as a collective enterprise. History shows that although Black women were denied the vote as a fundamental right of citizenship, they were not entirely excluded from political life after the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movement. Many Black women in the South were active participants in politics, including in debates, conventions, parades, and security details. Far from notions of Black women relegated to off-the-record debates and quiet discussions at salons, Black women openly participated in mass meetings, including voting at Republican Party conventions (Brown, "To Catch the Vision" 73-75, 82).

BLACK WOMEN, THE FRANCHISE, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

A closer look at the activism of Mary Church Terrell sheds additional insight on the critical role that Black women played in fighting for the right to vote for all African Americans, for their bodily integrity in the face of violence by whites, and for the rights of working women. This section is adapted from Alison Parker's biography, *Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell*. Starting in the 1890s and continuing well beyond the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment, Mary Church Terrell engaged directly with white women suffragists, pushing them to understand the interconnections between race and gender that underpinned Black women's campaigns for voting rights. As the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Terrell called for an end to Black

men's disenfranchisement even while fighting to secure the vote for Black women.

Refusing to see how Black women's gender and race were interconnected and inseparable, Alice Paul, leader of the National Woman's Party (NWP), declared that the National Association of Colored Women was not a feminist group but rather a "racial one" and so could not be a member organization in the NWP (Parker 130). Even winning the right to vote via the 19th Amendment in 1920 did not diminish the gulf between white and Black suffragists.

Before the NWP's 1921 convention, Terrell and other Black suffrage leaders met together to write and plan for a way to introduce a resolution voicing their primary concern. Knowing that Black men were already disfranchised in the South, they wanted the NWP to join them in: "urging Congress to appoint a committee to investigate the disfranchisement of colored women." In order to avoid being "double-crossed by Miss Paul" who might block them during the convention, the women decided to ask her to endorse their resolution in advance (Parker 130).

Black suffragists, led by Mary Church Terrell and Addie Hunton, who represented both the NAACP and NACW, demanded a meeting with Alice Paul, who initially declined to hear them out. When they did get their meeting, Terrell read aloud their proposed resolution demanding enforcement of their voting rights. Despite the clarity of their request, Paul asked, "What do you women want me to do?" Terrell replied, "I want you to tell us whether you endorse the enforcement of the 19th Amendment for all women." Paul refused to say she did. This highly unsatisfactory meeting was not the end of the story (Parker 130).

Alice Paul conceded that Mary Church Terrell and a few other African American women could speak at the 1921 NWP convention, but only as individuals, rather than as representatives of their organizations. Terrell recorded in her diary that she addressed the Resolutions Committee, asking for a congressional investigation. She explained that Black men and women's voting and civil rights were inseparable: "colored women need the ballot to protect themselves because their men cannot protect them since the 14th and 15th Amendments are null and void. They are

lynched and are victims of the Jim Crow Laws, the Convict Lease System, and other evils” (Parker 131).

To highlight the fact that Black women experienced gendered brutality (disfranchisement and violence) as interconnected realities, Terrell gave a specific example. She told the white NWP women the tragic situation of the pregnant Mary Turner, who had been brutally lynched in Valdosta, Georgia, in 1918, for protesting the lynching of her husband. Terrell described her as: “A colored woman, two months before she was to become a mother, [who] had her baby torn from her body.” Terrell’s heart sank upon hearing the white feminists’ cruel and insensitive comments: “‘What did she do?’ one asked. Another said, ‘She did something, of course’” (Parker 131). These white women assumed that Turner must have done something to warrant her gruesome murder and that of her unborn child. Terrell had hoped this audience of women would empathize and identify with the victim, finding the incident as deeply disturbing as she did, but NWP members’ interest in protecting women’s equality and their bodily integrity did *not* extend to those who were Black.

Embracing cross-class coalitions, NACW clubwomen like Terrell demanded justice for Black women caught up in the criminal justice system. In 1912, for instance, Terrell led a small delegation representing the National Association of Colored Women to meet with the governor of Virginia to defend the life of a poor African American teenaged girl, Virginia Christian. This young girl had been sentenced to death in the electric chair for accidentally killing in self-defense her abusive white female employer. And later, in 1953, Terrell led interracial delegations of women to meet with Georgia’s governor to advocate for clemency for a poor Black sharecropper, Rosa Lee Ingram, accused of murdering a white man when he assaulted her.

Advocacy of gender and racial justice and equality has been an ongoing, long-term priority for Black clubwomen. Seeing wage-earning as an aspect of community betterment and racial and gender equality, Terrell fought for Black women workers, too. During World War I, she and her young-adult daughters tried to get jobs in the federal government. Although they were highly qualified, they were denied access to some jobs and were segregated from other workers. When Black women were hired,

white women workers protested, went out on strike, and threatened to quit if they had to work with or near Black women. White women workers demanded segregated bathrooms, cafeterias, and workspaces. Not surprisingly, Black women workers found they were discriminated against and/or fired from their positions. Thinking through an intersectional lens, Terrell realized that working-class Black women faced great hardships since they were excluded from white women's unions. Thus, during World War I, she helped found the Women Wage Earners' Association to unionize Black women workers.

For Black women, workers' rights were an integral part of the freedom struggle. During the Great Depression, Terrell and other Black women activists joined the picket lines of the National Negro Council, demanding that white-owned shops in Black neighborhoods hire workers from their community. Carrying signs that read "Don't Shop Where You Can't Work," the campaign led to the hiring of Black workers. Similarly, during the Cold War, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 led to demands that workers sign anti-communist pledges. Yet, since leftist unions had been most welcoming to Black workers, 1,000 striking Black women restaurant and cafeteria workers in Washington, D.C., asserted their freedom of assembly and speech rights. They refused to sign an anti-communist pledge. Octogenarian Mary Church Terrell joined them in their picketing and gave speeches to rally the workers. Black women's cross-class alliances continue today.

BLACK WOMEN, WORKING-CLASS INTERESTS, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Just as Alice Paul saw the work of the NACW as a racial organization and not a feminist organization, too often today, the work of Black women, regardless of the arena, is seen as "racial justice." This disregards the work of Black working-class women's 21st century efforts to protect voting rights for all. The centuries-long intersectional approach to Black women's politics needs to be historicized for our current moment. This was made clear after the 2016 presidential election and in the leadup to the 2020 election, after a long summer of racial and economic justice protests. Too often, pundits make generalized assumptions about "labor" or the

“working class” that only focus on white, male union workers or suggest the labor movement is somehow separate from the fight for racial and gender-based justice. Yet, Black working-class women, using intersectionality as an organizing and mobilizing tool, have successfully helped reshape our political landscape.

A key example from our current moment is the work that UNITE HERE union members have been doing since the pandemic hit the U.S. in Spring 2020. UNITE HERE is a national union of hospitality workers. While a small union, it is one of the most powerful examples of a social justice union in the United States. Many of these low-wage service workers are employed at hotels, airports, and casinos. Their slogan is “One Job Should Be Enough.” Black women are overrepresented in UNITE HERE and many locals across the United States are led by Black women. When businesses closed down, there was 98% unemployment rate amongst members. Even as the COVID-19 vaccine rollout occurred, the unemployment rate was in the 80% range. Despite this, UNITE HERE had more workers knocking on doors to support the Biden-Harris ticket than any other organization, including the Democratic Party (Nolan). They have organized in their local communities and nationally to fight for economic stimulus packages. They have also fought for their members by extending healthcare coverage and untangling access to unemployment benefits. They are showing people in their communities that the union is committed to helping all working people, not just union members (“Take Back 2020”).

This summer, the Black Leadership Group of UNITE HERE published a powerful statement, as did many Black union leaders across the nation, calling for racial justice. They linked their demands for racial justice and their actions with economic justice, expanded healthcare, and solidarity. At the same time, the message called for a united front to expand democracy, protect the most vulnerable in our communities, and work for a brighter future:

Today we call upon you to stand with us. To join us in the fight for our lives — just as we will always stand with you and fight for yours. We know that what happens to our communities can and does happen to others. And it will

continue to happen so long as any of us stand idly by. We will stand with our Asian family through the rise in hate, with our Latino family, and our immigrant family discarded, detained, and left in cages. We will stand with our white kin who choose the fight for real liberty and justice for all. (“We Are the Black Leadership Group of UNITE HERE International Union”).

The UNITE HERE get-out-the vote campaign helped shift votes in key swing states like Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. Their work knocking on doors across the nation fueled an increased turnout, highlighted the value of labor’s work building community, and provided a blueprint for future elections and other efforts to organize a multiracial social movement for social justice.

This 300,000-member union is a movement for change. Their Black, women-led activism, especially at the local level, can transform our political landscape. There is a long history of radical Black women (many wouldn’t call themselves radical, but their actions were and are radical) helping push economic justice in urban and national politics. It was evident in 2019’s Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns and Chicago teachers’ strike and the Los Angeles teachers’ strike. It is evident in the political shifts happening in Ferguson and St. Louis since the murder of Mike Brown in 2014. It was evident in the buildup to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, as Black women union members helped get over 200,000 people to D.C. for the protests (W. Jones x, xvi, 169-176). And it was evident in 1881 when Black washerwomen in Atlanta went on strike to reverse public policy seeking to deny them the ability to demand fair payment for their services, even when they did not have the right to vote (Hunter 88-97).

Yet, too often commentators try to pit the working class or the labor movement against Black and brown people as if they are somehow separate, ignoring that Black people are more likely to be union members and that Black women are overrepresented in many of the low-wage unionized service industries. Commentators also ignore that unions have been a key vehicle for civic participation and economic justice for working

people. Too often there is an assumption of Black people as consumers and takers instead of producers and givers (Trotter xv). We can lament the low voter turnout among working people but unless we learn the lessons of the Black women organizing within their unions and communities for change, we will never bring most working people to the polls. They do not see their interests represented. Politicians who avoid addressing the interconnected issues of racial and economic justice miss opportunities to motivate voters to the polls. This is harming our democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

Like their counterparts across time, twenty-first century Black women activists have similar priorities in demanding full voting rights, justice, and equality for all, and in responding to violence against the Black community. Kimberle Crenshaw's African American Policy Forum, for instance, coined the hashtag movement, #SayHerName, to add to the Black Lives Matter movement by bringing specific attention to police violence against Black women like Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland (African American Policy Forum). To achieve lasting change, white women must finally decide to reject their privilege and join in the contemporary movement that is insisting upon the full equality and voting rights for all, including those who are most marginalized, such as Black and Latina trans women. We need a multiracial, cross-class movement that works together to craft a new vision for what democracy in the United States should look like. We need to center the voices of the most vulnerable in our communities, break the myth of scarcity, and invest in democratic institutions like expanding access to healthcare, living wages, and voting rights.

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