

# Black Political Power: Chapel Hill Style

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One of the most controversial and damaging charges levied against the "modern" Civil Rights establishment and, ultimately, UNC-CH Black politics was delivered to Black political activists by Lani Guinier.

Guinier critiques the "Black electoral success theory," a political philosophy that supports the limited influence of majority-minority gerrymandered districts, the assumption of authentic representation and effectively mobilized electorates by community groups, and the presumption that elections provide policy issue control. For Guinier, each assumption limits the possible avenues of influence available to Blacks and advanced the cause of provocateurs of racism.

These assumptions also highlight the tension created when attempting to reconcile the two impulses prevalent in the Black community: integration and nationalism. The former appeased if it is able to elect a "fair number of representatives" due to the "fairness of the process." The latter asserting participation in "politics on the basis of group power" enhances community self-determination.

Ronald Walters posits two strategies pursued by Blacks: independent and dependent leverage. The latter works with the candidates and party platforms defined by others. The former offers up a Black candidate or party, but provides the winning margin of victory for the candidate or party deemed most flexible to Black interests through a process of bargaining.

Under the guise of Black Power, Black students at UNC-CH have embraced a version of "Black electoral success theory." There are, at present, no congressional districts intentionally drawn to ensure the electiveness of Blacks on South Campus. But the ensuing campaign for Student Body President may bring to light some disturbing similarities.

First, presidential hopefuls begin an extensive bargaining process with Black political actors. Some come in the form of candidate forums, others come in subtle form of "let me see what your concerns are" discussions. Some come in the form of being seen with high profile Black students or faculty members, and having your name thrown around by "influential"

Black students.

Second, presidential hopefuls' campaign managers devise a strategy for mobilizing Black students or demobilizing Black students by alluding to Black interests. And for that limited number of Black students that do vote, the transformation of support into policies rarely occurs.

The first critical step to UNC Black political power is access to information. Questions at any discussion regarding UNC Black student voting should focus on both the historic racial and gender composition of these committees, and the specific recommendations nominees will carry to each committee from the executive branch.

Another critical step to UNC Black political power is effective mobilization. Certified election results for the SBP position indicate that in 1995 out of 21, 176 students eligible to vote, only 3,981 voted during the general election, with a small increase during the run-off seeing 4, 038 students voting.

In short, for the UNC's Black student population to engage in true political activism, they may have to refocus and redefine their activities. In the early years the phrase, "A Voteless People is a Hopeless People," emerged to characterize the consequences of political apathy, political ignorance, and a shirking of political responsibility.

Perhaps the four presidential candidates — Lee Conner, Michael Leo Farmer, Aaron Nelson, and Sean Behr — should understand how such a sentiment applies to the UNC Black student population. More importantly UNC Black students should adopt this slogan (or a similar slogan) to express their discontent with the apathetic nature of its fellow Black students.

Blacks must get past the stages of amnesia, assimilation, anger, and quick acceptance of alternatives in order to appreciate any truth to statements regarding commitment to the upliftment of Blacks.

To translate this cultural pride into political power one must gather information, campaign, vote, and provide some oversight after the election or suffer the pain outlined by Guinier of limited one shot oriented influence, or worse, narrowly defined influence and access.

