Section VIII

Political Empowerment, Leadership, and Representation

SECTION VIII: FOCUS AREA - POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT, LEADERSHIP, AND REPRESENTATION

Political Diversity

Politically, Ohio has seen a great deal of diversity, leadership, and representation at the state and local levels. From city council members and school superintendents to mayors, state legislators, and the secretary of state, Ohio has seen African Americans elected to a myriad of public positions. With six African American mayors, a strong legislative Black caucus, a growing number of judges, and more leadership developing in state educational institutions, numerically, African Americans seem to be fairing well in terms of leadership and representation. Given that Ohio is also an influential swing state and considering that Barack Obama was running for office, the African American community seemed to be both engaged and eager to vote in 2008, despite concerns of voter suppression and disfranchisement.

Voter Disfranchisement

The controversial 2000 presidential election provided the biggest modern day example of alleged voter fraud and suppression the nation had seen. The 2004 presidential election hit even closer to home. In a report of the House Judiciary Committee Democratic staff initiated by Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), ranking Democrat of the House Judiciary Committee, it was stated that there were "numerous, serious election irregularities in the Ohio presidential election, which resulted in a significant disfranchisement of voters. Cumulatively, these irregularities, which affected hundreds of thousands of votes and voters in Ohio, raise grave doubts regarding whether it can be said the Ohio electors selected on December 13, 2004, were chosen in a manner that conforms to Ohio law, let alone federal requirements and constitutional standards."[265] At the center of the controversy was then African American Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell. Two weeks prior to the election in 2004, a federal judge reprimanded Blackwell for attempting to "accomplish the same result in Ohio in 2004 that occurred in Florida in 2000."[266] In a 2006 *Rolling Stone* article, Representative and former presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) stated, "The election in Ohio in 2004 stands out as an example of how, under color of law, a state election official can frustrate the exercise of the right to vote.[267]"

This is significant because an African American secretary of state allegedly lending a hand to voter fraud undoubtedly has an effect on a Black electorate already historically plagued by issues of partisan and structural disfranchisement. "Structural disfranchisement targets members of low-status groups while partisan disfranchisement targets members of a particular political party."[268] Swing states are more likely to deal with issues of partisan disfranchisement since the margin of victory can be so narrow that individual votes count, unlike safe states where very few upsets are likely to occur. Democratic voters are also more likely to be targeted, so when it comes to the African American voting population, partisan and structural disfranchisement combine to more damaging effect. "Blacks and Jews are the only two constituent groups that consistently give over 80 percent of their vote to a political party. If the Republican Party wants to depress turnout that favors the Democratic Party…there is no better constituent group to target than Blacks."[269]

Along with concerns of disfranchisement, the African American community is also overwhelmed by growing concerns over the equipment used to cast and count votes, voter registration requirements and

procedures, voter identification requirements, provisional ballots, challenges to voter eligibility, long lines at the polling place, recounts and contests, and confusion over early voting.

Term Limits

For years, there has been a national debate weighing the pros and cons of legislative term limits. Many legislative theorists believe that term limits have an effect on both the composition and the behavior of legislatures. It is assumed that since most politicians are ambitious and pondering political career opportunities, "careerism is expected to affect the types of individuals who seek and win legislative seats, their behavior in office, and how they organize the legislatures in which they serve."270 In general, individuals both for and against term limits tend to agree that limiting one's time in office creates more opportunities for individuals who are not looking to be career politicians. While some supporters feel that term limits would create a more diverse legislature,271 some opponents believe that term limits would only create opportunities for people with money and time on their hands.272

The Ohio Constitution indicates that, "No person shall hold the office of State Senator for a period of longer than two successive terms of four years. No person shall hold the office of State Representative for a period longer than four successive terms of two years."273 One interviewee indicated that term limits are a real issue in Ohio:

> *"There needs to be a better functioning General Assembly, and a lack of experience negatively impacts policy drafting and the attitude of the legislative services committee."*

As a solution, the aforementioned interviewee suggests an amendment to the State constitution repealing term limits. Although there is little conclusive evidence that indicates that term limits and membership turnover have an effect on legislative efficiency, there is less opportunity for more influence from senior legislators. While efficiency and turnover do not necessarily correlate, "efficiency declines as demands are placed on the legislature and as legislators respond by introducing more legislation. Where introductions are limited, efficiency increases."274

In comparing states with term limits to states without, there is a general tendency for term limits to free legislators from the demands of the constituents in the district.275 This, however, can be interpreted in different ways. On one hand, this suggests that term limits allow legislators to be less responsive to their constituents. On the other hand, it is possible that term limits allow for broader consideration of the collective good: rather than having to focus narrowly on district issues, legislators' perspective moves from "representative" to "trustee." Interestingly, a 1995 survey showed that "newcomers in [non term limited] states were as attentive to their constituents as old-timers, more dedicated to seeking pork, and more likely to sacrifice demands of conscience to district pressure."*276* In terms of institutional effect, researchers find that *"*term limits weaken the legislative branch relative to the executive. Governors and the executive bureaucracy are reported to be more influential over legislative outcomes where term limits are on the books than where they are not."277

Leadership Strengths

Despite the aforementioned setbacks, Ohio possesses a number of strengths in terms of leadership in the African American community. A number of interviewees indicated that Ohio's African American community has strong and diverse leadership, both presently and historically, that reflects multiple sectors including politics, faith, business, and education. There are more African Americans in higher

political and public positions allowing for more influence across the State. The Ohio Legislative Black Caucus was founded in 1967, and its members currently represent over 2.5 million constituents. OLBC was established expressly to meet the needs of African Americans in Ohio by focusing on public policy, advocacy, and development as well as involvement in state and national electoral politics. "Over the past 40 years, OLBC's achievements have included obtaining increased funding for medical research, creating special subsidies in higher education for minority youth, and creating the nation's most successful minority business set aside law."278 In fact, interviewees indicated that leadership has been successful in creating opportunities for the success of minority firms, affirmative action, and access to higher education and college attendance.

The median age of African Americans in Ohio is 26.9, compared to an overall median age for Ohioans of 37.6.279 With a relatively younger population, there is an opportunity to encourage and develop younger leadership. Voting trends and individuals seeking public and political positions indicate encouraging signs of younger people becoming involved in the political system and several interviewees pointed to the Urban League and NAACP as good community leaders. Throughout the State, there are numerous280 local NAACP units, 9 National Urban League affiliates as well as an Ohio Urban League Young Professionals consortium, all of which have programming to serve their local communities and specific programming for developing and enhancing young leadership. As one Urban League president explains, *"there is a decent amount of current leadership that understands the responsibility to reach back to next leaders, to ensure that the next generation doesn't make some of the same mistakes."*

Leadership Challenges

In thinking about those mistakes, a number of interviewees indicated that while leadership is generally good, it is still a work in progress and some critical challenges remain.

> *"In some places leadership is visionary, but in other areas leadership has struggled with producing change for the African American community. There are impediments to enacting the vision of change needed for the community. Leadership is making effort to address issues, but too many structural and institutional barriers limit the impact of these efforts and a collective agenda has not been defined for the community. There certainly are individuals who have shown strength and courage and intelligence, but there are not enough of them and they are not in every jurisdiction in Ohio. There are not enough of these pockets in general, especially in metropolitan areas. There are not a significant number of individuals that would be identified by the entire community as community leaders."*

African Americans in Ohio face many of the same challenges similar to those one might find in any other community. Despite there being leadership development opportunities through various organizations such as the Urban League and the United Way, and specific leadership programs like the Ray Miller Institute for Leadership and Change281 in Columbus, and the Neighborhood Leadership Institute282 in Cleveland, there still exists some challenges in developing a new generation of leaders. Several interviewees indicate a generation gap between existing and emerging leadership that does not create a warm environment or allow for mentoring opportunities. Because of this gap, younger leaders are not reaching out to older, more traditional leadership which does a disservice to both groups and the community as a whole. There is a need to find a way to work together despite such differences. Some of this divisiveness is also perceived to come from a lack of support and unnecessary competition between and among leadership as well as a lack of a common agenda.

Normally when we think of Black Ohio, the focus tends to be on larger metropolitan areas. "The majority of African Americans in Ohio live in urban areas. Four out of every ten African Americans in the State live in the cities of Cincinnati, Cleveland, or Columbus…Overall, more than 98 percent of African Americans in Ohio live in urban areas; 94 percent live in or near a large city. The Cleveland urbanized area alone is home to more than one-quarter of Ohio's African American population."283 That being said, Ohio is extremely unique in that it is very diverse in terms of urban versus rural and northern verses southern areas and there is some acknowledgement from interviewees that Ohio's rural community has a very strong political voice that is often very influential over state policy. This, however, does not necessarily translate into political empowerment for African Americans living in rural areas. Many interviewees stated that rural and suburban communities do not have much leadership and, as a result, the political voice for African Americans in these areas is diminished and may contribute to less overall political involvement in those areas.

Grassroots organizations are often pointed to as a source for political engagement and potential leadership development, but because of a lack of resources, many in Ohio seem skeptical about the presence and viability of such organizations. One individual stated, *"Grassroots and local initiatives face challenges because of the significant fiscal stress facing local governments and local school districts. Local governments are facing budget shortages and must prioritize funds toward police, fire and public works, leaving short funding for community programming."* Despite the obvious fiscal constraints, some individuals still indicate that a powerful grassroots movement is what is needed to lead to a response by the government and the courts.

Developing Future Leaders

Regarding whether or not the next generation of leadership is being developed, both the successes and the challenges must be considered. In that light, perceptions of leadership development seem to be conflicting. While some interviewees see a noticeable amount of leadership development within schools and churches, some point to less church involvement and lower education rates as a hindrance. Several individuals pointed to the presence of specific programs as an indicator of leadership being developed.

> *"We see more involvement in groups like the Urban League (Head Start), Children's Defense Fund, and The National Leadership Development Institute working to develop future leaders. The Urban League's African American male development initiatives provides youth with solid, stable male models. We need more programs like this in the community and identify models for leadership outside of just church-based programs."*

Others, however, indicated that leadership development needs to be strong, persistent and consistent and unfortunately there is a lack of continuous leadership training and comprehensive programming to help develop leadership skills. One individual states, *"I think we are not developing the next generation. I think there are pockets of individuals that are trying to cultivate this, but I don't think there is enough of this."*

The concern of friction between generations causing a divide between the two groups also seems to remain a salient issue for individuals in Ohio. Some point to development styles being different from generation to generation (i.e., mentoring versus self-initiated) while others point to a resistance to change.

While there is no consensus regarding whether or not future leadership is being developed, it is clear that there is a lack of cohesion, programming and information sharing, and communication between generations that would lend itself to not effectively cultivating a new generation of leaders.

Recommendations

Leadership Development   Leadership styles vary across individuals and generations. Six different styles of leadership appear to be most common: laissez faire, autocratic, participative, emergent, transactional, and transformational.284 A laissez faire style of leadership is largely hands off and tends to minimize the amount of direction and face-time required. This style works well if one is leading a highly trained and motivated group of individuals. The autocratic style of leadership is sometimes thought of as the classical approach where the leader retains as much power and decision making ability as possible without taking in much input from others. The participative style of leadership encourages everyone to be a part of decision making and the leader serves as more of a coach. This style is challenging, however, because it requires a high level of creativity and teamwork but is also a happy medium between micromanaging and not being engaged. Emergent leadership points to the challenges of new leaders who are unaware of the proper behaviors to use when taking over new groups and find individuals resistant to their leadership. Transactional leadership emphasizes getting things done within the umbrella of the status quo, which is almost in opposition to the goals of the transformational leadership. It is considered to be a "by the book" approach in which the person works within the rules. As such, it is commonly seen in large, bureaucratic organizations. Finally, transformational leadership is about implementing new ideas: these individuals continually change themselves; they stay flexible and adaptable; and they continually improve those around them.

Transformative leadership should be the goal of any leader. The goal of leadership should not be to reorder existing conditions but to meaningfully change and improve conditions. Leaders, in general, find themselves faced with a number of challenges. Keeping oneself grounded to his or her community, serving as a bridge *for* his or her group, and serving as a bridge *of* his or her group *with* other groups are all issues with which a leader must contend. Keeping that in mind, the ultimate nature of serving as a bridge is transformation.

Leaders of color often find themselves faced with a more specified set of challenges, especially when dealing with a diverse world. There are often tensions between dealing with the group one is leading while also dealing with those outside of the group. There is a need for a leader to be grounded within his or her group but that person should also be able to go beyond their community, not by distancing themselves from it but by linking it to other communities and linking other communities back to their group. This creates something new for all, yet it is grounded in what is already known so there is some type of guidance. For example, if we want our leadership efforts to be transformative, then the product of our undertakings should be a better, more just, and inclusive society.

Inclusion   A region and all its residents share a linked fate. To thrive, regions must be competitive in the global economy. Inequality is a sign of an economically and socially inefficient region where proper investments are not made in human capital, and where much of the population cannot meet its creative potential. These disparities make the region less competitive, nationally and globally.
We need to increase public and political will to address the challenges facing the African American community. We need to illustrate the connectivity between the challenges facing the Black community and the overall vitality of the State of Ohio.

In demonstrating this connectivity, efforts should be collaborative to help re-conceptualize society to promote the political and social well-being of all. In order to allow for such transformative change, increased efforts should not be spent in directions that have shown little success in the past. New approaches that take into account personal and social responsibility as well as seek to dismantle the barriers that hinder political empowerment and leadership in order to bring about lasting, substantive change are what are necessary.

Big problems do not necessarily require big solutions. Small interventions can be critical to create change, but these interventions must explicitly target the arrangements causing the breakdown in leadership development and political empowerment. Some interviewees pointed to programmatic interventions. *"We need to expand and provide more resources to critical organizations in the African American community like the NAACP and the Urban League."* Other solutions could include maintaining a comprehensive and visible database of all leadership development programs and institutes specifically aimed at developing cultivating African American leaders in Ohio in order to establish better communication among groups and with the public, established leaders committing to personally mentoring emerging leadership, State funds specifically allocated to minority leadership development, and statewide collaboration on developing a common agenda for addressing the needs of African Americans in Ohio.

Civic Engagement and Political Participation   Encouraging civic engagement and political participation are among the most basic ways to become involved in the community and the political process and help make the connection of shared fates. Although there are a number of indicators that suggest civic engagement and volunteerism are lower than in previous decades, individuals who do participate socially and politically are more connected to their communities both formally and informally. "Volunteers are more interested in politics and less cynical about political leaders than non-volunteers. Volunteering is a sign of positive engagement with politics."285 In order to foster a sense of community and connectivity, ownership and pride in one's own community, and political empowerment, encouraging and even incentivizing, civic and political engagement and participation may help bring about positive transformative change. Capitalizing on the momentum following the election of Barack Obama and sense of political empowerment could help in this endeavor.

Increasing voter education efforts would also help ease some of the anxiety many African Americans experienced with the more recent presidential elections. Despite many changes having been implemented by current Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner and the information provided by her office,286 many are still skeptical about the voting process in Ohio. Increasing effort, how and where the information is communicated, and reaching larger and more diverse populations could help ease distrust of the voting system.

Utilizing Existing Assets   Ohio is a wealth of institutions of higher education including historically Black colleges and universities, active Urban League and NAACP chapters, African American legislators, and African Americans in prominent positions in nearly every sector.

"The State needs to pool the institutions that serve the African American community to meet the needs of the community. These include institutions like the Urban League and NAACP but also universities and Historically Black Colleges. We need to tap into our higher education institutions more to help develop and build the community (especially HBCUs). We need to provide more support to places like Central State, community colleges and tech schools."

It is also important to utilize grassroots and other nontraditional organizations to look for and help cultivate new leadership. For example, one interviewee indicated:

"The skills of fraternities and sororities are underutilized and many in the community are not aware of the extent of their work. We should strengthen their work, which could provide young professionals as role models who would show young people that there are opportunities for advancement."

Grassroots Movements and Coalition Building   Coalitions and grassroots movements possess the capability to promote transformative change. Transformative thinking increases the opportunity for new movements and coalition building and organizations that bridge traditional institutional, class, geographic, racial, ethnic and denominational boundaries while also recognizing connectivity. In general, successful and lasting coalitions require an engaged leadership and followers that act on a regional, and possibly state-wide, level in order to be inclusive and develop initiatives to strengthen the African American community in Ohio as a whole.287

Term Limits   There is a perception that term limits produce inexperienced legislators which, in turn create an inefficient policymaking process. Such sentiments, however, are not unique to the State of Ohio. Amending the state constitution to repeal term limits is one plausible solution with the caveat being that problems of efficiency may not necessarily be solved. States with and without term limits each face their own set of challenges with no quick fixes. Further research on the pros and cons of term limits as well as a comparative analysis of states with and without term limits is necessary before any recommendations to amend the constitution should be made.

Conclusions

Ohio is a politically diverse State that has enjoyed a history of African Americans in significant and influential leadership positions. However, as new leaders emerge, there is a need for leadership development and mentoring in order to see this tradition continue and bring about transformative, progressive change. Though many of the tools necessary to address the challenges of the African American community are already currently available, cohesion and inclusion are needed to move forward. Ohio will undoubtedly continue to play a significant role in the political landscape of the country, and the African American community in Ohio has the ability to bring about substantive change as well.