

CHOICE VOTING AND BLACK VOTERS IN CINCINNATI

• *The following is from "Reform, Politics and Race in Cincinnati," by Robert Burnham in the "Journal of Urban History," January 1997. Cincinnati used choice voting for elections from 1925 to 1955. Approximately 75% of African-American voters supported restoring choice voting in ballot measures in 1988 and 1991.*

The adoption of [proportional representation -- PR], and the pluralistic conception of the city that had spawned it, held special significance for the city's growing black population, which increased from 30,079 to 47,818 during the 1920s. (By 1930, blacks comprised 10.6% of the total city population.) **PR [gave] blacks a chance to elect members of their own race to city council, which had never included a Negro representative in the past....**

Black Support for PR

Within the black community, the City Charter Committee [e.g., *the campaign behind the new charter with PR*] received its staunchest backing from the Universal Negro Political Union, the political arm of the Cincinnati chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the black nationalist organization that had been founded by Marcus Garvey in 1914. The Cincinnati chapter of the UNIA, which has been formed in 1920, could boast about 8,000 members by the middle of the decade, making it a formidable force within the black community..... **UNIA strongly supported the city charter amendment of 1924, knowing that PR could help blacks put one of their own on city council.**

That support, however, went unrewarded by the City Charter Committee when it came time to nominate candidates for the city council race of 1925. In accordance with the notion of functioning as a multi-partisan party, the City Charter Committee chose candidates who represented various groups to form a ticket that reflected the composition of the "community as a whole." **An examination of the candidates from the perspective of religion, ethnicity, gender, class and political affiliation suggests that the Charter Committee sought to appeal to Catholics, Jews, German Americans, women, labor, Republicans, Democrats and political Independents.** The ticket was not representative from the perspective of race, however, as not a single black candidate was chosen.....In the election of 1925, the Charterites won a stunning victory against the GOP, taking six of the nine council seats....

Use of PR System To Press for Representation

In the election of 1927, Frank A. B. Hall emerged as a black candidate to be reckoned with. A retired police detective and lifelong Republican, Hall defected from his party to run as an Independent only because the GOP had refused to endorse him. Hall came in fourteenth among the twenty-four candidates who entered the race, a respectable showing for an Independent. Moreover, of the seven candidates on the Republican ticket, only two, incumbents Fred Schneller and Charles Lackman, received more first choices votes than Hall.... [Hall] made an even better showing in the council election of 1929, again running as an

Independent because the GOP refused to endorse him. He finished eleventh among the twenty-four candidates.....

[Hall's] candidates as an Independent posed a serious dilemma for the GOP because he drew crucial black votes away from the regular Republican ticket. His candidacy also represented a kind of protest against the relationship that had developed between the local Republican organization and the black community. At least that was the way it was depicted by Hall's campaign committee, which, after the election of 1929, issued a stern warning to the GOP.....

Recognizing that it could no longer hope to maintain the level of black support that it had enjoyed in the past without nominating black candidates, the GOP endorsed Hall for council in 1931....**As a candidate on the Republican ticket, he garnered the second largest number of first-place votes among those who ran and became the first black to be elected to city council in Cincinnati.** Although Hall lost in his bid for reelection in 1933, **it became standard practice for the GOP to endorse one black candidate in every councilmanic election, with happy results for the candidates and their party.** It enabled the GOP to retain an important group of voters and resulted in the election of black council members in all but two of the eleven council races held between 1931 and 1951....

Civil Rights and Swing of Black Votes to Charter

As its support began diminishing in the mid-1930s, the City Charter Committee concluded that it could no longer concede the black vote to the GOP. Third prompted the reformers to endorse their first black candidate, Dr. R. E. Beamon, a local dentist, who ran for council on the Charter ticket in 1937... Beamon placed twenty-third among the forty candidates who ran, and lost the black candidate on the Republican ticket, incumbent Richard McClain, by more than a ten-to-one margin in the West End wards, which still had the heaviest concentration of black voters in the city.... Whatever the reason for Beamon's defeat, his loss did not deter the City Charter Committee from trying to elect a black council member again in 1939....

... [In] 1944 the Charter board of directors discussed "whether it was a waste of time and money to put up a colored candidate," and ultimately decided not to do so. **Within the next few years, however, Cincinnati, like other northern cities, experienced a wave of civil rights activism, which changed the racial politics of the city in ways that gave the Charter Committee an opportunity to win black voters....** It also represented, from a local perspective, the single most significant reform movement to emerge in Cincinnati since the Charter Committee's own good government uprising of the 1920s.....

In carrying out these efforts [campaigns against

segregation and employment segregation], some black activists in Cincinnati came to the conclusion that the local Republican organization, which enjoyed a council majority from 1942 to 1947, stood as an obstacle to the civil rights movement.... Anger toward Locker [Black Republican council member] and distrust of the GOP gave the City Charter Committee an opportunity to win black voters. **And the Charterites made the most of it by putting Theodore M. Berry, a black attorney, on their council ticket in 1949. Berry, who had served as president of the local NAACP from 1943 to 1946, was recognized as a leader the local civil rights movement** and symbolized its new spirit of activism, which made him a well-respected figure within the black community. It also stood him in clear contrast to Councilman Locker, a point which the City Charter Committee wanted no one to miss, as indicated by a campaign form letter that described Berry as a "militant" in the struggle for black advancement.

In the election, Berry received just 13% fewer first-choice votes than the incumbent Locker, and became the first black Charterite to be elected to city council.

Though Berry had clearly drawn off some of Locker's support, the black Republican received enough votes to win reelection, which meant that for the first time council, would have two black members. **The success of both Berry and Locker reflected the growing size of the city's Negro population.... Blacks comprised about 15% of the total city population by 1950.**

Once in office, Theodore Berry earned the respect of fellow Charterites and solidified his reputation as a champion of civil rights. This may account for his impressive showing in the council election of 1951, when he not only won his bid for re-election, but received 35% more first-choice votes than Locker. Berry, moreover, became a fixture on the council until 1957, a critical year for understanding the demise of the political system that had developed in Cincinnati since the mid-1920s.

In 1957, the Republican organization launched a campaign to amend the city charter so as to repeal PR, which the party had opposed since the 1920s. It should be noted that the GOP had also introduced repealer amendments in 1936, 1939, 1947 and 1954, but each time met with defeat....

These periodic campaigns by the GOP, to say the least, unnerved the City Charter Committee because the idea of operating as a multi-partisan party rested upon the institution of PR, which acknowledged and accommodated pluralism. The so-called 9-X system, the voting system the Republicans proposed in 1957, provided for a nine-member council elected at large without proportional representation. This system would require a council candidate to garner a majority or a plurality of the total vote to win election....

Even though the number of African Americans in Cincinnati increased by 39% during the 1950s, which meant that they comprised almost 22% of the total population by 1960, they could be easily out-voted by the white majority. Past voting behavior, moreover, suggested that whites were not likely to give black candidates much support. Indeed, all of the black candidates who won seats on

council since 1931 had, by necessity, depended primarily on votes from members of their own race to get elected.

As things turned out, the 9-X amendment was passed by more than 10,000 votes. Exactly why Cincinnati voters abandoned PR after thirty-two years remains unclear. **Many contemporaries, however, felt that racial hostility, stirred by the national attention given to school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, caused the downfall of PR in Cincinnati.** Those who made this argument charged the opponents of PR with conducting a secret smear campaign against Charter council member Theodore Berry. As part of this clandestine attack, white voters were told that the needed to abolish PR to prevent the black councilman from becoming the city's next mayor. Also, the false rumor spread that Berry intended to buy a home in a white neighborhood....

[In the first non-PR election] the prevalence of split-ticket voting, combined with the fact that eight of the nine candidates who won in 1957 were incumbents, suggests that name recognition meant as much or more than party affiliation. **Name recognition, however, did not help Theodore Berry, the only incumbent who failed to win reelection. Berry not only lost, but lost by a large margin, placing fifteenth among the eighteen candidates who ran.** Considering the strong support enjoyed by all the other incumbents, it seems clear that Berry lost simply because too few white Cincinnatians voted for him.

Berry's defeat in 1957 dramatized how important PR had been for him and black council candidates who came before him. In the election of 1955, the last PR election, Berry had won rather easily, receiving the second largest number of first-choice votes among those who ran. So long as he only needed to secure one-tenth plus one of the total vote to be elected, as provided under PR, he could win without much white support. But under the new 9-X system, which required candidates to muster a majority or a plurality of the total vote, he could not win without considerable help from white voters. **Because such help was not forthcoming in 1957, city council would be without a black representative for the first time since 1941. And the composition of the council remained all white through 1963.**

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• *The following is from a summary chapter in **Proportional Representation and Election Reform in Ohio** (Ohio State University Press, 1995), by Kathleen Barber.*

The case for improved racial representation under PR systems is a stronger one. In Cincinnati, Hamilton and Toledo, African-American candidates were elected to council on the PR Ballot, although they had been unable to win in pre-PR elections. In all three post-PR (plurality/at-large) elections, black candidates were unsuccessful....In Cleveland, black representation grew in proportion to black population growth, from one to three members in the PR period.