

Introduction

***B**y 1907, Edward Austin Johnson was fed up with the system of racism in North Carolina that limited his ability to participate in politics (E. Johnson 1942). Just a decade earlier, he and other Black Republicans were working in coalition with white Progressives in the Populist Party. He served on the Republican Party's executive committee in the Fourth District and had been a delegate to three Republican National Conventions.¹ In 1896, Johnson was elected as an alderman in Raleigh. However, in the White Supremacy Campaign of 1898, the white members of the Populist Party broke ranks with Black Republicans to join political forces with southern Democrats. Johnson lost his seat in the city council, but he remained involved in local politics through his ties to the Republican Party. From 1899 to 1907, he worked as an assistant to the federal attorney for the district of eastern North Carolina. Although he was still active in politics, he despaired of the political situation in his home state. So in 1907, Johnson decided to migrate to New York City and establish a legal practice.² He became involved in local politics immediately, arguing that New York City's political parties should nominate Black people to represent the rapidly growing Black areas of the city. Eventually, he was appointed Republican Party chair for the*

predominately Black Nineteenth Assembly district in Harlem. In 1917, Johnson became the first Black person elected to the New York state legislature.

While Johnson was preparing to take his seat in the New York legislature, Clarence Metcalfe and Marie Attaway were getting ready to leave their home in Atlanta with their seven-year-old son, Ralph. Clarence and Marie—a stockyard worker and a seamstress—believed they could do better for themselves and their son in Chicago. That same year, a clothier named Richard Brown was also contemplating ways to make a better life for his family. Richard moved his wife and daughter, Alice and Cora, a relatively short distance from their home in Bessemer, Alabama, to Birmingham. But the urban South proved less lucrative than Richard had hoped, so on the advice of his in-laws, he moved the family north to Detroit, Michigan.

Unlike Johnson, Ralph Metcalfe and Cora Brown did not actively choose to participate in the Great Migration. Their parents made the decision for them, just as many other Black parents did when they moved their children to try to provide access to a better life. Ralph and Cora thrived in the North. Ralph graduated from high school in Chicago and attended Marquette University as a student athlete. Eventually, he became an Olympic sprinter. After a career as an athlete, war veteran, and university instructor in Louisiana, Ralph returned to Chicago to work as the director of the civil rights department of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations. Cora also did well in high school. Like many migrants of her generation, she returned to the South to attend a historically Black college, studying sociology at Fisk University in Nashville. Cora returned to Detroit immediately after graduation and began a career as a social worker. Cora's success, like Ralph's, also extended into her adult life and translated into a strong record of public service.

In 1952, Ralph and Cora experienced another similar life event—both won campaigns for elected political office. Ralph became an alderman representing the Third Ward of Chicago on the city council. This political victory would be the first of many during his long career. Cora became the first Black woman to serve

in any state senate after winning her seat in Michigan. The decision to migrate to the North powerfully shaped Ralph's and Cora's lives throughout their careers and political trajectories. This book is about the ways that such people as Edward Johnson, Ralph Metcalfe, and Cora Brown changed politics in the North through their Great Migration.

Where we live matters. However, when we think about the implications of place and home, we often focus on the relatively trivial. Hometowns influence how we speak and what we eat: consider a southern drawl or New England clam chowder. Americans with good “midwestern values” or a “New York state of mind” might say where we are from influences how we interact with people. For Black Americans, the implications of one's location have always been far more serious than an accent or food preferences. Location has meant the difference between slavery and freedom, discrimination and equality, or poverty and economic opportunity.

Where Black people live has also been an important determinant of their ability to participate in political processes. Under normal circumstances, American citizens' formal participation in politics can begin when they reach voting age. However, Black Americans living in the South have always faced tremendous impediments to political participation. When Reconstruction ended in 1877, Black suffrage came under siege. Southern legislatures implemented laws to weaken or eliminate the Black vote, including grandfather clauses and white primaries.³ Outside the political apparatus, southerners used violence and intimidation to diminish the Black vote. Because most of the Black population lived in the South and faced these barriers to voting, only a small percentage of Black Americans in the South participated in electoral politics before the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

From 1915 to 1965, more than six and a half million Black Americans left their homes in the rural South to resettle in the North through a movement called the Great Migration. Together with the frustrations brought by denial of fundamental rights and privileges, restricted opportunities for economic

mobility drove Black people out of the South in large numbers. Their migration fundamentally altered the American demographic landscape by shifting almost half of the Black population from primarily southern and rural places to the urban North. Migrants went to big, far-away cities, such as Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. In some instances, they moved out of the larger cities to settle in places that were just a bit smaller, such as Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. They also moved to places that bordered the South, such as St. Louis, Topeka, and Washington, D.C.

The difference in laws between the North and the South created a political coming of age for Black migrants. Seeing political participation as a badge of honor and hallmark of success in northern life, migrants registered to vote in large numbers. Northern parties and candidates worked to gain Black support through their election campaigns, and the parties expected Black voters to turn out to vote for their nominees on Election Day. Further, unlike in the South, Black transplants to the North had the opportunity to directly participate in politics by holding elected and appointed positions.

The central question of *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party* is “How did the Great Migration influence American politics in northern cities?” I argue that the Great Migration changed how Democratic Party elites interacted with Black communities in northern cities. My argument consists of four premises: (1) Black Americans moved out of the South into the North through the Great Migration. In many instances, they settled in large urban areas. (2) The migration changed Black citizens’ ability to participate in politics because many barriers to participation in the South did not exist in the North. The Great Migration effectively created a new pool of eligible voters. (3) Many white Democratic politicians came to believe that Black voters could help them reach their electoral goals. They often believed that Black voters might swing the balance of power in elections and that a unified Black voting bloc might help them win factional disputes during primary elections. Where they were not able to tip the balance of power, Black voters might be important

coalition partners in elections. (4) White Democratic politicians changed their campaign strategies and positions to manage Black support because of their belief that Black voters were important. In some instances, that management was positive, with some white politicians trying to encourage Black political participation. In other instances, that management was negative, with some white politicians actively working to suppress Black political activity. Therefore, the Great Migration led to changes in northern political parties, especially the Democratic Party. This book contributes to our understanding of the fifty-year period from 1915 to 1965 by expanding how we think about the Great Migration, twentieth-century American state and local politics, and party development. *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party* adds to the existing literature by framing the Great Migration as an important economic and social event that had serious political consequences. Further, it adds to the American politics literature by emphasizing the Great Migration as one phenomenon, among many, that contributed to changes in political parties during the twentieth century.

Plan of the Book

The chapters that follow describe the impact of the Great Migration on politics in three American cities from 1915 to 1965.⁴ Chapter 1 describes my argument and methods in detail. Then, the chapter engages the American politics literature on realignment to discuss how and why parties change their positions on issues in two ways. First, I assert that demographic changes are important to explain party position change. Some of the literature on secular realignment considers demography by questioning how movers are influenced by politics in a place. Instead of questioning how a place changes people, I take the position that a large influx of potential new voters could lead to change in a political environment. In other words, I question how people change the politics of a place. Further, I consider demographic trends among Black people as an important explanation for change in politics outside the South. Second, concerning the “why” of party change,

I argue that change most likely occurs when parties believe that altering issue positions will have a positive impact on electoral outcomes. In other words, parties adjust when they believe that the benefits of changing outweigh the costs of remaining the same. Parties construct expectations of costs and benefits on the basis of feedback from members of the party coalition, who may express opinions directly or through their votes. Chapter 1 frames established Black residents of the North and migrants as an increasingly important part of the Democratic coalition, who forced the party to change by voting and pushing their agenda through groups of like-minded individuals.

Chapter 2 draws on scholarship from historians and sociologists to provide detail about the causes and consequences of the Great Migration. The first half of the chapter covers the Black migrations in America that preceded the Great Migration. The second half of the chapter focuses on the Great Migration, including (1) the timing of the migration, which scholars generally describe as happening in two waves, (2) the factors that encouraged migration, and (3) how the distribution of the Black American population changed because of the migration. This chapter also provides the reader with background information about the migrants that is necessary to understand the rest of the story. Who were they? What motivated them to leave the South? What were their experiences once they moved to the North?

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe the political situations in Detroit, New York, and Chicago—three cities with vastly different political environments. In these chapters, I first rely on local newspaper accounts, political analyses, and scholarly work about the cities to explain how changes in the electorate shaped mayoral candidates' positions on issues of importance to the Black community. I describe how candidates and parties changed their positions—and in some instances adopted new ones—to manage electoral support as the Black population grew in these cities. Second, I describe the direct political involvement of Black elected officials, including the migrants themselves. I use official government records, news media, books, and dissertations to pull together a data set of all⁵ Black elected officials in Chicago, New York, and Detroit from

1915 to 1965. I then identify which of the Black elected officials were migrants. Finally, I consider the legislative priorities of Black elected officials and highlight instances when the migrants had distinct legislative priorities.

This book's Conclusion provides a summary and a bit of epilogue. The period following the Great Migration saw a wave of Black electoral power across the United States, including election to the highest local offices in the cities under consideration here. The Conclusion also introduces new ways to think about the contemporary impact of Black migration on American politics. The children and grandchildren of Great Migration participants have been returning to the South since the 1970s in a movement called Return Migration. This new generation of migrants is demonstrating preferences for metropolitan areas in the South, such as Charlotte, Atlanta, and Houston. Their movement raises important questions about their potential to influence politics at the subnational level. Further, it raises questions about these migrants' potential to change presidential candidates' approach to campaigning for Black support in the South. Thus, the Conclusion sketches some of our first understandings of the political impact of the Black population's move back south.

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