

Race and Progressive Politics in Chicago

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The progressive movement in Chicago may not be as broad-minded as depicted in the academic literature. Racial polarization based on plantation politics are part of a strategy the Democratic machine used to drive a wedge in mayoral campaigns, yet additional factors are contributing toward a multifaceted fragmentation of progressives as a movement as outlined in mainstream literature.

This article examines progressive politics in Chicago, focusing particularly on the Harold Washington (1983) campaign and administration and Jesús García's (2015) mayoral run. Despite expectations of race neutrality (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011; O'Connor 2002) among progressives, the field appeared to mirror societal tensions between and within races. Moreover, progressives broke into silos in competition with one another, diminishing their chances of gaining and retaining government. Given the diversity of progressive strands, we use a qualitative mixed method approach of grounded critical visualization (GCV) to guide the narrative; analysis draws from interviews of 28 progressive leaders involved in these two candidacies,¹ unveiling some of the fault lines of progressivism.

The progressive movement and the Democratic machine

The term *progressive* was first used to characterize the social activism and political reform of the 1880s–1920s era. In Chicago, it was pioneered by advocates of municipal socialism and worker rights; however, a coalition between European immigrants, labor and the Democratic party created a machine that has dominated politics since 1931 and pushed these causes away. Nevertheless, a small segment of liberal democrats continued the fight against government corruption. The civil-rights movement, meanwhile, introduced a new branch of progressivism focused on racial equity. Although the machine controlled the Black vote through plantation politics (Alkalimat and Gills 1989),² its blatant actions against minorities enticed civil-rights and other leaders to explore alternatives to the machine.

As anti-machine sentiments peaked in 1983, a coalition of minorities, good-government liberals, neighborhood leaders and other anti-machine forces slated charismatic civil-rights leader Harold Washington for a mayoral run; the coalition organized a mass registration campaign that defeated the candidates of the machine in the primaries and Republicans in the general elections. Although Washington ran on a platform of unity, inclusiveness, transparency and universal fairness, the vote split by race (with Whites voting for the White candidates and minorities for the Black candidate); only a small proportion of voters crossed the racial lines. Moreover, immediately following the

¹ The use of GCV (Vanik 2018) is a mixed method combining constructivist grounded theory and critical qualitative and visual approaches in the collection and analysis of data; interviewees were compiled from media, archives, published research, word of mouth, interviewee recommendations, and the authors.

² As in plantations where selected Blacks were used to control other Black slaves, plantation politics uses Black politicians faithful to the machine to control Black voters on its behalf.

election of Washington, the machine in control of city council launched the “council wars” between White machine hacks and Washington supporters of color stalling his major reforms.

Progressivism under Harold Washington

Soon after his election, Washington enacted his vision in the *Chicago Works Together* plan (City of Chicago 1985). Unable to pass his reforms in city council, he used the power of his office to govern by executive order. While the literature has documented this (e.g. Mier 1993; Grimshaw 1992; Rivlin 1992; Holli and Green 1989; Kleppner 1985), this paper addresses lesser-known dynamics that researchers and participants of his coalition shared with us.

Interviewees contrasted the unity of forces in the electoral coalition with the divisions and tensions of the governance coalition (see Betancur and Gills 2000). While all groups worked in unison to elect Washington, once in government they contended for position largely along racial lines. Because Blacks had provided the bulk of the work, they claimed proportionate control of government; this factor and the opposition’s focus on race moved progressivism to the back. Meanwhile, although most interviewees acknowledged the centrality of race, they differed in their narratives and emphases; for instance, while minorities spoke almost exclusively of racial equity, Whites insisted on expediency, good government and interventions that did not alienate White voters. Similarly, the decision of White liberals to vote for Washington was related to his embrace of their cause, good government; thus, once in government, they prioritized this part of the agenda while pushing aside the issue of racial equity. Similarly, minorities supported Washington because they saw in him a true alternative to the machine³ and were most concerned about redress.

A civil-rights veteran himself, Washington gave progressives a major role in drafting his campaign papers and the city plan, as well as hiring some of them for strategic positions in city hall. However, as he started replacing machine appointees and implementing his vision of a transparent and inclusive governance, tensions grew among coalition members competing for position and the implementation of their agendas. Tensions did not subside, as illustrated by his conflicts with Black nationalists and the alienation of Latinos that felt marginalized and resented the lack of Latino appointments (Torres 1991). These tensions peaked at his death in 1987, starting with the battle between two Black aldermen over his succession and ending with the split of the Black vote and the loss of the Latino vote in the 1989 elections. These divisions allowed the machine to reclaim power in 1989.⁴ In the words of a Black interviewee, “When Washington died, the wind got sucked out of the progressive movement.”

Although most interviewees and the progressive literature characterized Washington as progressive, our findings also show that racial polarization and internal struggles deepened the divides within the coalition. Although the regime increased public investment in the neighborhoods, diversified the city’s workforce, and opened government, these gains were largely taken back by the machine after 1989, reinstating plantation politics for Blacks and extending it to Latinos. As far as the progressive movement itself was concerned, rather than consolidating around a concerted platform and retaining government after the death of Washington, it started disbanding and some of its components were actually absorbed by the machine—as was the case of neighborhood community-based organizations (CBOs) trading public contracts and grants for loyalty.

Eventually, the machine regained the Black vote by purchasing the support of Black churches and other leaders with large constituencies, but also by going after progressive elected officials and

³ Examples of Washington’s government reforms included the Freedom of Information Act, endorsement of decrees prohibiting political hiring and firing, and public budget hearings. Racial equity programs included affirmative action hiring and neighborhood investment; on the nationalist front, Washington hired more Blacks than any other administration and created a program requiring the awarding of contracts and procurement to minorities and women.

⁴ Moberg (1988) breaks down Blacks into “Black nationalists, civil-rightists, Baptist preachers, middle-class professionals, Muslims, Black businessmen, machine hacks, trade-union members..., welfare poor in CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] concentration camps, and the vast army of ill-paid workers barely scraping along.”

replacing them with machine hacks. Progressives also lost their jobs in city hall and sought refuge in unions, independent nonprofits, academia, and media. They dedicated themselves to the advocacy of issues such as affordable housing, safety, and good government or to advocacy on behalf of racial and non-racial minorities (e.g. women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities), coalescing at times but for the most part operating separately.

The mayoral campaign of Jesús García

Once in power, having defaulted back into the practices that had caused its demise, the machine reestablished its ancestral racial hierarchy and plantation politics while expanding pinstripe patronage⁵ to secure the support of donors and strategic leaders. Conversely, the new focus on the corporate sector and the wealthy neighborhoods of the city contrasted with disinvestment and zero tolerance in minority neighborhoods: public health-center and school closures in these communities, clashes with organized labor, and attacks on worker pensions mobilized progressives and anti-machine forces this time around the mayoral pre-candidacy of Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers' Union, who jumped ahead in the polls before announcing. However, when a brain tumor prevented her from running, she recruited Commissioner Jesús García, a Washington coalition member that had lost his Illinois senate seat in 1998 to an unknown as part of the machine's all-out campaign against progressives.

By the time García entered the race, Black and Latino elected representatives had endorsed the machine (after all, they were elected under its banner) and only a Latino alderman and a Black congressman joined his camp. Despite this, García received enough votes to force incumbent mayor Rahm Emanuel into a runoff. At this point, Willie L. Wilson, the top Black candidate in the primaries endorsed García, as did some labor unions (e.g. Chicago and Illinois teachers' unions, service workers' unions—SEIU, ATU Locals 308 and 241), LGBTQ+ leaders, Black civil-rights veterans, and various liberal groups. Hoping for a repeat of the Washington experience, progressives jumped on the bandwagon immediately. However, according to interviewees, a nucleus of White managers kept a tight control of the campaign, choosing its own White experts and marginalizing both independent progressives and grassroots minorities that had offered to take the campaign to their communities.

Two forces that were pivotal in Washington's election were missing in action: the traditional lakefront independent block of progressives leading the charge on issues of good government had been displaced by corporate bankers, lawyers and high-service professionals that were the backbone of the machine since 1989; and the neighborhood NGOs movement that Washington had incorporated in his government were absorbed by the machine, which conditioned funding on loyalty. Although one might expect minorities to vote against the machine, plantation politics carried the day⁶ (see Kennedy 2015); different from the common assumption that voter support for Washington and García was a function of their progressive platforms, racial dynamics appear to have made the difference in both cases. As in 1983, when Blacks provided Washington with 78% of the total vote, two thirds of Latinos voted for the Latino candidate in 2015.⁷

In his speeches, García emphasized the tale of two Chicagos, one affluent and one poor—the former favored by city hall and the latter plagued by disinvestment, police abuse and crime. He promised to be a “mayor for the entire city.” Interviewees argued that the campaign had softened the message to appeal to White voters and had focused on White and Latino voters while conceding (or taking for granted) the Black vote. Marginalization and eventual dismissal of Black staff within the campaign confirmed this. Latinos claimed that the campaign had turned its back on the grassroots,

⁵ As court rulings undermined patronage, the machine turned to favoritism in grants and contracts, procurement, appointments to boards and commissions, permits and licenses, and so forth, to secure the support of the corporate sector and community leaders.

⁶ Black interviewees attributed the limited Black vote for García to his campaign's marginalization of Blacks and to the proposal to hire 1,000 new policemen; the other interviewees attributed it to plantation politics.

instead focusing primarily on labor issues. Rather than allowing the bases to energize the campaign and including them in agenda development and the campaign itself, as Washington had done, decisions came from the top. Lastly, for interviewees, the campaign failed to counter the machine's characterization of García and to articulate a clear platform. Taking advantage of this, the machine portrayed García as an amateur lacking the skills to manage the ongoing fiscal crisis and turning its back on Blacks. Although García prioritized the issues affecting all minorities (promising reform government), his campaign failed to mobilize Blacks in the amounts needed to beat the machine. His last-minute candidacy, corporate support, saturation of the media, pinstripe patronage, and plantation politics kept the machine in power.

Absent were the movement politics of 1983, the united minority vote, the lakefront liberal vote, and the neighborhood movement. As for progressives, the campaign was accused of marginalizing the racial equity branch and relegating minority leaders to the periphery. Minority interviewees pointed to a highly centralized, top-down campaign with majority Whites at the core; and minorities resented the campaign's monopoly of the candidate and his isolation from its base. Thus, while good-government progressives had carried out their own recruitment, voter registration and campaigning in Washington's campaign, the campaign marginalized them this time. Meanwhile, the rift between good-government and racial-equity progressives continued: reflecting this, a Black interviewee claimed that progressive politics had endorsed the ugliest tenet of American politics, "suppressing the Black vote along with the Black voice."

Despite these shortcomings, comparatively high proportions of voters voted for García (43% in Black-majority precincts, 33.5% in White-majority precincts, and 47% in racially mixed precincts—Kennedy 2015), suggesting the possibility of a deracialization of Chicago politics.

Concluding remarks

The racial hierarchy securing White control of electoral politics in Chicago reached a critical point in 1983 with the polarization of voters and elites by race. Then, rather than subsiding, the machine reinstated the racial order in 1983, defaulting back into plantation politics. Its return to plantation politics and the corporatization of politics, however, mobilized anti-machine forces and progressives once again in 1989. Led in both cases by progressive candidates and forces, the opposition forces assumed a progressive face—although race continued to be the defining factor.

Meanwhile, this analysis brought out the issue of racial tensions and hierarchies among progressives. A minority interviewee compared it to plantation politics with Whites at the core and minorities in the periphery. As each group viewed the world from its window, good government was the major topic of progressive politics among Whites and racial equity and redress among minorities. Although many progressives crossed the racial line, Whites appeared to subject racial equity to good government or to seek a middle point between the two. While minority nationalists stayed in their corner, integrationists tried to avoid alienating White voters through the endorsement of racial equity—after all, Whites continue to be the major voting bloc in the city.⁸

Four additional factors have added to the complexity of the progressive movement. First is the growing strength of other minorities (e.g. women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals); second, an alleged split between the old progressive guard (covered in this analysis) and a new, younger generation operating through social media that this research did not explore; third was the observation that progressivism operated in the form of siloes; and last—and closely related to the previous point—was their historical inability to develop a concerted agenda.

⁷ Kennedy (2015) found that Rahm Emanuel beat García 63% to 37% among affluent voters while the less affluent split their vote between the two. In Black-majority precincts, Emanuel received 57.4% of the vote and García 32%. Latino-majority precincts gave García 66.7% of the vote and Emanuel 33.3%. The corresponding White breakdown was 66.5% against 33.5%.

⁸ By race, voter breakdown is as follows: Whites, 43%; Blacks, 38%; and Latinos, 19%. White voter turnout is historically the highest, followed by Blacks, with Latinos last (Bogira 2015).

These findings open the question of flexibility and fragmentation among progressives and the possibility of concerted, horizontal, cross-racial, cross-issue and cross-generational fronts.

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To cite this article:

John J. Betancur and Leonor Vanik, “Race and Progressive Politics in Chicago”, *Metropolitica*, 9 January 2019. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Race-and-Progressive-Politics-in-Chicago.html>.