

Chapter One

African-American Suburban Political Incorporation

In 1994, the voters of Prince George's County, Maryland, elected Wayne Curry as their first African-American county executive. The election of African Americans to positions of power is certainly not new, however, Curry's election to the top elective position in the county signaled a turning point.

For African-American Prince Georgians, Curry's election represented the long-awaited finale to their thirty-plus-year quest for control over the county's governing apparatus. For those who study urban/suburban politics and demographics, Curry's election represented the complete transformation of suburban Prince George's County from a predominantly white enclave of the nation's capital to a premier majority African-American suburb, and one of the largest concentrations of African-American affluence in the nation.

Although home to a large African-American middle class, Prince George's County can be likened to a tale of two cities, one affluent and the other one poor. Nonetheless, Curry's victory was largely viewed as a group victory. In 1994, having recently become a numerical majority in the county, African Americans coveted the opportunity to finally elect one of their own to a position of prominence.

When one considers the range of interests among African Americans in Prince George's County, the notion of a group victory is puzzling. However, African Americans in Prince George's County are not unique in their predilection to view the first-time election of an African-American as a group victory or, in this case, as a sign of group political incorporation. Although conceptually ambiguous, terms such as *African-American community* or *African-American political incorporation* are continually evoked, erroneously creating an image of a monolithic African-American community.¹

To be sure, African Americans do not share the same experiences, nor do they possess the same socioeconomic or political interests. This fact is perhaps most compelling in suburban Prince George's County, given its unique demographic makeup, where socioeconomic disparity among African Americans is as great as that between African Americans and whites. Nonetheless, African-American leaders consistently express the need for a unified "black agenda." The media speak of the "black community" and "black political leaders," and scholars discuss "black political incorporation" and "black political power," as if the political and socioeconomic ascension of a segment of the African-American population represents political and socioeconomic power for all African Americans.

Prince George's County's transformation presents a unique opportunity to reexamine our conceptualization of group political incorporation. It also presents a laboratory to study African-American migration from the inner city into the suburbs; the openness of suburban governing coalitions and structures as African-American populations increase; African-American mobilization efforts to become a part of suburban governing coalitions; and, most significant, the impact of class interests on African Americans' ability to press forward a policy agenda in suburbia.

The history of African Americans presents numerous examples of unified political action. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the march across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, and the 1963 March on Washington are just a few. History is replete with political events that have exhibited African-American solidarity in the fight for basic civil and political rights. What happens, however, when gains have been made in the quest for basic civil and political rights? Are African Americans any more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to unify behind a policy or an issue, despite the impact on their particular individual social and class interests?

This book addresses these questions by examining the factors that impede African-American political representation and the policy positions that African Americans advance in the education arena in suburbia. It also presents a model of African-American political incorporation that takes into account African-American socioeconomic diversity and competing interests.

Education policy is a significant policy area to examine, because it has been a political battleground for groups seeking to either alter or maintain their socioeconomic position within the American political economy. It also is significant to a study of suburbia because of its effects on the migration patterns of whites in the city and in racially transformed suburbs.

This analysis covers the 1971–1994 period in Prince George's County, Maryland. This period is significant because it surveys the rise of African-American political representation and activism in the educational arena. In 1971, a group of African Americans joined with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to

file suit in federal court, challenging the county's system of segregated schools. In 1994, African Americans won the highest political office in the suburban county, and majority representation on the board of education. An analysis of the period following the 1994 Curry victory is presented in the epilogue.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SUBURBANIZATION

Despite growth over the past thirty years, African-American suburbanization is not new. Although the latest stage of African-American suburbanization is markedly different from previous periods, African Americans have lived in suburban communities since the 1920s. During the 1920–1970 period, however, African-American suburbs were either poor or working-class jurisdictions.

Poor African-American suburban communities were underdeveloped and often unincorporated areas on the city's periphery, with a limited tax base for adequate schools and government services. These communities typically lacked adequate water and sewage infrastructure and were more similar to poor African-American urban communities than to white suburban communities. As J. John Palen notes, "while such small communities were technically in the suburbs, socially and economically they were not of the suburbs."²

Solidly working-class African-American suburbs were one step above poor African-American suburbs. Examples of this type of suburban community include Robbins and Harvey in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Although different, both types of early African-American suburbs stood in direct contrast to the typical image of white, middle-class, homogeneous, suburban communities.

Although the word "suburb" continues to evoke images of economic, social, and racial homogeneity, suburbs are just as diverse as the cities that they surround.³ This is particularly true for black suburbs. As Harrigan (1993) notes, African-American suburbs vary in socioeconomic status, from those comprising old, previously rural communities, to those that are affluent, to those that are mere extensions of the inner-city communities that they border.⁴

The factors that precipitated African-American and white suburbanization were as distinctive as the suburbs that they initially occupied. White suburban migration was greatly enhanced and facilitated by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans, established by the National Housing Act of 1934, and Veterans Administration (VA) loans, which were made available to GIs returning home from World War II. Both housing policies established federally guaranteed low down payment long-term mortgages. These programs were in direct contrast to high down payment short-term mortgages that made early home ownership difficult.

Although the express purpose of the two federal housing policies was to jump-start the housing industry, features of the legislation promoted the construction of homes outside of the inner city. Title I of the Housing Act of 1934, for example, provided FHA insurance for loans to repair and renovate existing housing stock in the city. Section 503 of the Housing Act, on the other hand, provided FHA loans for the construction of new one to four family units. Between 1935 and 1974, 75 percent of the total FHA insured home mortgages went for new housing construction.⁵

The disparities that existed in support of the two loan programs were the result of FHA bias toward housing construction in economically sound neighborhoods. Considering the dilapidated conditions of urban neighborhoods, this bias basically guaranteed that new housing would be built outside of the inner city, far away from African Americans and other poor minorities who were viewed as a bane to property values.

Even more exclusionary in impact, however, was the FHA promotion of racial covenants that barred the sale of housing to nonwhites.⁶ Despite the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), declaring racial covenants legally unenforceable, racial discrimination in housing continued relatively unabated until the fair housing provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

By 1970, mass, white suburbanization had become a reality. The 1970 census of the population was the first to show that a majority of Americans lived outside of the inner city. However, the bulk of suburbanization was white, while African Americans, other minorities, and poor whites were primarily confined to the inner city.

After World War II, the migration of African Americans and other poor minorities to northern and Midwestern cities set off a chain reaction of white flight from the city. While the cities represented the Promised Land for minority and poor city migrants looking for better paying jobs and a better life, the lure of the suburbs represented the Promised Land for whites. School integration and busing only exacerbated the white flight to the suburbs.

Images of urban poverty and slums were juxtaposed in the American psyche with those of tranquil, tree-lined, suburban communities. The common perception was that movement to the suburbs would offer whites a safe haven from the ills associated with rising urban crime and poverty, and would provide them with a better life for their families. In many ways, this common perception created a self-fulfilling prophecy as city tax coffers were drained of needed resources, and strong and viable communities began to crop up outside of the city limits.

Although the 1968 Fair Housing Act greatly facilitated African-American suburbanization, other forms of housing discrimination continued to thwart equal access to housing in the suburbs. While legally sanctioned discrimination had abated, it continued, in fact, through practices such as racial steering,

which directed African Americans away from white areas. As a result of Title VIII of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, however, those African Americans who could afford to began to move outside of the city and were no longer confined to African-American poor and working-class suburbs.⁷

Once it began, African-American suburban migration grew at accelerating rates. During the decade of the 1970s, the number of African Americans living in the suburbs increased by 50 percent.⁸ As it had for whites in previous decades, African-American movement to the suburbs became a status symbol and held promises of better housing and educational opportunities for African-American children.⁹

Although this migration wreaked further havoc on the amount of resources available for city services, for those moderate and middle-income African Americans who were able to move, it was an opportunity to share in the rich public resources seemingly available in the suburbs.

The reception that African Americans received in the suburbs, however, was chilly at best. The same factors that drove mass white migration away from the city were renewed as African Americans moved to predominantly white suburban communities. As it had been in urban jurisdictions, the integration of public schools again became a contentious issue.

As African Americans settled in inner-tier suburbs such as Prince George's County, they immediately sought political influence within suburban governing coalitions. And as they had previously in the city, African Americans also began to attack barriers to socioeconomic opportunity in the suburbs.

REPRESENTATION VERSUS POLITICAL INCORPORATION

If achieving political incorporation were simply a matter of representation on policy-making bodies, it would surely seem that African Americans in Prince George's County are well on their way. But political incorporation is much more tangible than representation on policy-making bodies. It also entails the ability to become an integral part of policy-making coalitions that promote the interests of a particular constituency. Although representation on policy-making bodies is an important prerequisite to political incorporation, on its face it does not guarantee influence over the policy-making apparatus.

As numerous urban case studies attest, the quest for political incorporation by newly emerging groups typically encounters resistance, and often it entails changing the existing governing coalition to one that is more amenable to power and resource sharing. Although newly emerging groups promote representation to advance their interests, the battle does not end there.

As Mack H. Jones (1978) argues, there is a difference "between having power, political and otherwise, and being associated with those who have it;

between participating in the decision process and actually influencing the outcome of that process; and between the symbolic trappings of political power and political power itself.¹⁰

Bachrach and Baratz (1970) also make a distinction between power and influence in the decision-making process. They argue that investigators place too much emphasis on decision making, ignoring the real power that exists in non-decision making—or the extent to which power is inherent in the ability to limit the scope of what is placed on the public agenda, or to influence the type of policy that is recognized as negotiable.¹¹

They maintain that there are two faces of power. The most significant often is less apparent, and it entails the ability to influence community values and political procedures and rituals, and to reinforce barriers to the public airing of policy conflict.¹²

Both the Jones and Bachrach and Baratz formulations are typically applied to the contest between distinct groups with competing interests. Nevertheless, they are also applicable to the contestation of competing interests within groups, particularly a socioeconomically diverse group such as African Americans.

Reed (1999) argues that the “black community” “is a reification that at most expresses the success of some interest networks in articulating their interpretations and programs and asserting them in the name of the group.”¹³ Therefore, what often are presented as “black interests” are the distinct interests of a segment of the African-American community—those who have been most successful in articulating their claims.

To determine the conditions that impact on African-American political incorporation, it is first and foremost necessary to define what “black interests” are, an undertaking that is typically ignored in most analyses of African-American politics. Are there any authentic black interests among a socioeconomically diverse community of African Americans in suburbia? Unless “black interests” pertain solely to issues related to civil rights or racial equality (issues that affect all African Americans), it would seem that one segment of the African-American community would have to subordinate its interests in service to the aims of another.

Reed argues that there is conceptual inadequacy in the “presumption that there are, or can be, authentic or automatically discernible community interests and that, therefore, political legitimacy rests on appeal to such interests.”¹⁴ To this extent, when we study the policy interests of the African-American community, it is necessary to discern whether the policy, or the action that proceeds from it, proportionally influences all group members.

Every political organization holds a set of biases or interests that forms the basis of its political struggle with competing interests. This is as true for

African Americans as it is for other groups. As E.E. Schattschneider (1983) argues, "organization is itself a mobilization of bias in preparation for action."¹⁵ Schattschneider maintains that:

the pressure system makes sense only as the political instrument of a segment of the community. It gets results by being selective and biased; if everybody got into the act, the unique advantages of this form of organization would be destroyed, for it is possible that if all interests could be mobilized the result would be a stalemate.¹⁶

Some interests become the foundation by which other interests are either addressed or suppressed. This holds true not only in competition between groups but also within groups. In their study of minority political incorporation in ten Northern California cities, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) recognize a middle range in which political incorporation is not complete, and where minority political participation in a biracial coalition may result in co-optation.¹⁷ While the authors maintain that protest is not enough, it also is clear that representation alone is not enough to secure substantive "group" gains. Some interests are addressed, while others are suppressed.

THE ORIGINS OF "BLACK INTERESTS"

The rise and the articulation of an authentic "black interest" date back to the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when

the nature of the challenge posed by disenfranchisement and the consolidation of the Jim Crow order exerted an understandable pressure toward a defensive and group-conscious orientation that also buttressed [black] elite interpretations and programs. . . . The totalistic nature of the white supremacist threat, which in principle affected all black people equally, buttressed the impetus to craft singular racial agendas.¹⁸

Although the concept has little to no basis in political reality, as Reed asserts, its use continues today, setting "the terms of mainstream black political debate."¹⁹ In this context, black interests are promoted on the basis of whatever official black representatives say they are. Black leaders' hegemonic control of corporate black interests, argues Reed, allows them to utilize the "moral force of racial populism," even when it undermines black grassroots efforts.²⁰

It is out of this orientation of black politics that concepts such as African-American political incorporation or African-American policy influence

have grown. If African-American political incorporation entails the ability to advance African-American interests, then it stands to reason that full African-American political incorporation can only take place when all African Americans within the community share the same interests and are working in a cohesive manner toward the same goals.

As in the Jim Crow South, this may be easier to accomplish when the policy to be advanced relates to basic civil rights such as voting or equal public accommodations—issues that create the potential for group socioeconomic or political exclusion. Conversely, full group political incorporation may be difficult to accomplish when the issue disproportionately influences socioeconomic standing. Policy is never neutral but is biased in the interest of some at the expense of others. This holds true within and outside of the African-American community.

TOWARD A MODEL OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SUBURBAN POLITICAL INCORPORATION

An accurate model of African-American political incorporation must examine internal and external factors—the pattern of relationships and the interaction within and outside of the African-American community. Internal and external factors affect the African-American community's ability to elect African Americans to political office, and the policy positions emanating from the African-American community.

External factors relate to patterns of interaction and relationships *outside* of the African-American community. They include the availability of allies to assist in the formation of a challenging coalition and the subsequent position of African Americans within the newly formed coalition; the strength, stability, and practices of the existing coalition; and/or external pressures arising from the court system or federal government mandates.

Internal factors relate to patterns of interaction and relationships *within* the African-American community. Because the African-American community is so diverse, one of the most significant internal variables is the type of policy or issue under consideration, and the impact that it has on the lives and aspirations of various segments within the African-American community. Again, when a policy is set forth as one that is “in the interest of the African-American community,” one must ascertain which socioeconomic segment of the population it impacts and/or whether the impact is proportional across socioeconomic subgroups. Other internal variables include African-American population size and the socioeconomic and organizational resources within the African-American community.

The Impact of Population Size

The size of the African-American population has an impact on African Americans' ability to win elective offices and on the response to their policy positions and demands. In his seminal study on the impact of African-American voting in Tuskegee, Alabama, and Durham, North Carolina, William Keech (1968) observes that until African Americans made up a majority of the population, they were unable to win significant political gains in Tuskegee, Alabama. Similar public-sector progress, however, occurred in Durham, North Carolina, even though the African-American population was proportionally smaller.²¹

The differences were attributed to the varying responses of the politically dominant white population. In Tuskegee, African Americans were confronted with a white community that was resistant to relinquishing political power. In Durham, the white community did not view the smaller African-American community as a political threat, and thus, it was more willing to allow changes in the distribution of public-sector goods. Differences between the white community's response in Durham and Tuskegee also can be attributed, in part, to the more entrenched racism of the Deep South.²²

James Button (1989) supports Keech's claim that a relationship exists between the relative size of the African-American population and gains made in the public sector. Button maintains that while improvements in African-American employment or protective services were usually greatest in majority African-American communities, cities with medium and low percentages of African Americans typically experienced few differences in the level of service improvements.²³ Both studies recognize the existence of a middle range of a relative African-American population at which whites feel most threatened and resist African-American service demands.

Lawrence J. Hanks' (1987) study on the struggle for African-American political empowerment in three Georgia counties also asserts the importance of population size. Through case studies of Hancock, Peach, and Clay counties Hanks examines the significance of leadership, organization, and resources in the African-American political empowerment process. His study of Hancock County depicts how, among other factors, an overwhelming African-American population was necessary in order to defeat white racial bloc voting, and to overcome low levels of African-American voter participation. According to Hanks, for African-American officials, the African-American vote, and thus a significant African-American population, becomes the sole support base for empowerment.²⁴

Many studies agree that, once elected, African-American officials have a positive effect on public employment, recreational services, and police and fire safety.²⁵ African-American representation on policy-making bodies also has a

positive impact on the ability to garner sensitivity for African-American interests from white cohorts.²⁶ According to Button (1989), representation gave African-Americans easy, constant, and relatively quick access to the decision-making arena and to white leaders, both public and private.²⁷

Preston (1990) notes that “not only have African-American mayors actively recruited African Americans, Hispanics, and women, they have [also] hired large numbers of them.”²⁸ African-American mayors also have been relatively successful in dispensing city contracts to members of the African-American community.²⁹ According to William E. Nelson Jr. (1990), “the outstanding record of legislative achievements compiled by African-American mayors over the past twenty years clearly establishes the fact that African-American mayoral offices are not hollow prizes.”³⁰

These authors address the extent to which African-American mayors have accommodated African-American interests. The question is, however, “whose interests?” Have all African Americans benefited proportionately? Have poor African Americans’ interests been subordinated to the interests of the African-American middle class? Surely poor African Americans have not benefited as much from policies pertaining to affirmative action and contracts, however, again we see the tendency to lump all African-American interests together.

While some studies extol the virtues of African-American representation on the life chances of African Americans, others argue that it does little to decrease the socioeconomic disparities that exist between African Americans and whites.³¹ Preston (1990) notes that several African-American mayors start out as community activists fighting against the politics of exclusion. Later, however, they lose their vitality to attack new problems with the same vigor.³² According to Preston, “the new problems of gangs, drug warfare, homelessness, and the need for low-income housing, to name only a few, are difficult problems with regional, state, and national implications.”³³

In line with Preston, Nelson (1990) notes that “despite the heroic effort of African-American mayors, the urban agenda for African-Americans remains unfinished,” and that “African-American mayors have not eliminated the social, economic, and political crisis faced by African Americans in America.”³⁴ Nelson attributes their limited success to several factors. Most prominent is the inability of African-American mayors to live up to the dictates of progressive politics, and to “move the quest for African-American political incorporation beyond the narrow confines of elected office.”³⁵ Again, we see that representation alone is not enough. In order to represent their constituency effectively, elected officials must advance a policy that is in the interest of that constituency.

According to Nelson, African-American mayoral candidates have a tendency to enter “into coalitions with conservative white-led political organizations [and] to block the election of race-oriented African Americans.” These practices, Nelson argues, can be attributed to the unwillingness of new African-American leaders to directly confront and challenge the system of racial subordination that is pervasive in the political system.³⁶ It also may be a manifestation of the extent to which group interests are subordinated to particular interests once gains have been made.

Socioeconomic Resources

Whether the issue is greater accountability of African-American representatives, or overcoming the resilience of an opposing established organization, much of what occurs is decidedly predicated upon the socioeconomic resources available within the African-American community. As Clarence Stone (1989) argues in his study of Atlanta, votes count, but resources decide. The power to govern depends on the ability to assemble vital resources.³⁷ While population size is important to representation, and representation is important to the decision-making process, the amount of available resources determines what gets done. And what gets done often is a matter of what can occur within the boundaries of existing institutional arrangements.

Socioeconomic resources can have a dual impact on African Americans’ quest for political incorporation. On the one hand, it may predispose governing officials to favor some interests over others, particularly those that are more in line with existing power arrangements.³⁸ As Stone notes, public officials operate in an environment that rewards them for cooperating with upper strata interests and often penalizes them for cooperating with lower strata interests. Systemic bias ultimately raises the opportunity cost for poorer groups to have their interests addressed within the political system.³⁹ Barring extenuating circumstances, it is predictable that middle-class, African-American interests will prevail, particularly in an affluent suburban jurisdiction.

Second, socioeconomic resources within the African-American community will likely have an impact on the type of interests and policy positions that are advanced within the political system. If the level of socioeconomic resources is homogeneous, then group identity or consciousness will likely be present—group members probably will view their position and interests in the same manner. If, on the other hand, socioeconomic resources are skewed, as in the case of Prince George’s County, group members may view their positions and interests differently.

Organizational Resources

The level of group identity or consciousness determines the level of organizational resources available to a group. Group consciousness promotes unified action, and unified action, regardless of the issue or goal, is the most significant organizational resource that a group can possess.

In their award-winning book, *Protest Is Not Enough* (1984), Browning, Marshall, and Tabb examine the optimal conditions for minority political incorporation. In doing so, they stress the importance of electoral effort to minorities' ability to promote change in the policy-making process. They maintain that protest, while sometimes a successful strategy, is not enough but must be sufficiently coupled with "electoral organizing, the traditional political activity of recruiting candidates, controlling the number who run, and developing support and coalitions."⁴⁰ The authors illustrate the significance of cohesiveness and unity in the African-American quest for electoral representation:

We were able to establish the agreement that if one African-American candidate was selected by the caucus, the others would not run, since there would be white candidates in the field. More than one African-American candidate would practically insure the election of no African-American candidates.⁴¹

Similarly, in his study on the impact of the civil rights movement in Southern communities, James Button (1989) notes that many African-American representatives reported that conflict within and lack of cooperation from the African-American community itself often were major impediments to more effective public service. While the African-American community provides unified support behind the first African-American candidates, their unity and support often fractionalized after this goal was accomplished, denying minority candidates and incumbents the unified racial support necessary for election victory.⁴² An alternative description is that the tendency toward division is nothing more than competing interests exerting themselves when basic group goals have been accomplished. To suggest that a departure from the group represents division is to obscure the nature of politics and competing interests.

In his examination of suburban Riviera Beach, Button describes how early African-American political incorporation was brought about by mobilization and protest strategies. Later, however, after years of hegemony, African-American political power was lost as a result of "corruption, factionalism and conflicts among African Americans."⁴³ As a result of growing stagnation and apathy in the majority African-American community, conservative whites

were able to take advantage of African-American divisions and to overthrow the African-American governing coalition in power.⁴⁴

The disunity described by Button can be attributed to the growing frustration of the African-American community when African-American elected officials are unable to fulfill their campaign promises.⁴⁵ Again, conflict also may arise when there are different opinions within the African-American community regarding the best policy objectives to be pursued. This is more likely to occur within a socioeconomically diverse community.

While policy type, population size, socioeconomic resources of African-American group members, and the organizational resources within the African-American community address the internal factors that are significant to African-American political incorporation, political incorporation does not occur within a vacuum. External factors determine the degree of resistance or receptivity that the African-American community will encounter in its quest to elect representatives and to advance policy. External factors include the ability to ally with other groups; the strength, stability, and practices of the dominant political organization; and external pressures from the court system and/or federal government mandates.

The Impact of Coalitions

In their analysis of ten Northern California cities where African Americans were a minority, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) found that overcoming white resistance to African-American political demands depended on the replacement of conservative coalitions with strong, challenging, liberal coalitions. According to the authors, when liberal coalitions that included minorities successfully challenged conservative coalitions, significant policy change occurred in favor of minority interests.⁴⁶ Biracial liberal alliances, assert the authors, provide the strongest form of African-American political incorporation. Conversely, African-American protest strategies lead to greater resistance by whites and to continued exclusion.⁴⁷

Coalitions with liberal whites, however, are not in and of themselves a panacea to the African-American community. Contrary to the claims of Browning, Marshall and Tabb, some have noted that once conservative coalitions have been overthrown, a clash of interests often erupts between African Americans and liberal whites. According to Raphael Sonenshein (1990), "when the minority struggle for political representation directly threatens the interests of liberal whites, the odds of biracial politics ought to decline."⁴⁸ Accordingly, "even the strongest ideology is unlikely to become a formula for a persistent reduction in self interest."⁴⁹ Similarly, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) argue that liberal whites "are unreliable allies when a conflict of inter-

est arises. Morality and sentiment” they maintain, “cannot weather such conflicts.”⁵⁰

Contrary to Browning, Marshall, and Tabb, James Button’s examination of six Florida communities attributes greater success to protest strategies in their ability to mobilize African Americans and to provide a disruptive challenge to private-sector discrimination. Button found that in cities where majority African-American populations had not developed their own dominant ruling groups, liberal coalitions were rarely dominant, or African-American elected officials had difficulty gaining access to such groups.⁵¹ Thus, for Button, the absence or lack of receptivity of liberal whites precluded opportunities to form biracial liberal coalitions.

Claude Barnes’ study of Atlanta points to the distinct differences in the political empowerment of poor and middle-class African Americans in Atlanta. Similar to Barnes’ assessment, Clarence Stone (1989) found that Atlanta’s strong biracial coalition between whites and middle-class African Americans was based less on ideology than the African-American middle class’ ability to assemble resources that were valuable to the governing coalition. Stone notes, “democratic politics mirrors resource inequalities.”⁵² While middle-class African Americans were afforded a place in the city’s governing coalition, poorer African Americans and neighborhood organizations were excluded. In this instance, the capacity to develop “norms of mutual support” was far more important than ideology. As Stone notes, “Atlanta’s African-American middle class, with its rich network of organizations and its substantial store of civic skills, was able to bring off an immediate and substantial voter mobilization,”⁵³ a resource that poorer African Americans and neighborhood groups were unable to assemble.

Atlanta has been referred to as a Black Mecca as a result of African-American, middle-class membership in the governing coalition. This description is, however, overshadowed by the high rate of poverty among African Americans in Atlanta. The Atlanta case represents a perfect example of how African-American political incorporation may not represent the advancement of all African-American interests within a given community.

While Atlanta has a tradition of biracial cooperation, localities without the potential for strong alliances are likely to confront a resistant governing coalition. Among other factors, Doug McAdam’s (1982) study on African-American insurgency argues that the structure of political opportunities available to insurgent groups is crucial to the generation of social insurgency.⁵⁴ The political opportunities available are largely determined by the strength, stability, and practices of the dominant governing coalition. Barring intervention, an existing coalition may be able to maintain its position of dominance over emerging groups indefinitely, particularly if the emerging group lacks organizational resources or effective allies.

*The Strength, Stability, and Practices of the
Dominant Governing Coalition*

Challenges pose a threat to existing institutional arrangements and embody an explicit demand for more influence in the decision-making process. It is expected that elites will utilize a variety of tactics in their attempts to maintain the status quo. These strategies may include divide-and-conquer tactics, as well as the co-optation of excluded group leaders and their demands into the routine channels of public policymaking.

The success of elite strategies, however, is dependent upon the stability of the established organization. When one political party dominates, as in the case of Prince George's County, the established organization is vulnerable to penetration resulting from disunity and fragmentation.⁵⁵ As V.O. Key notes, "in a loose, catch-as-catch can politics highly unstable coalitions must be held together by whatever means is available."⁵⁶ As it relates to the inclusion of challengers, African Americans have an opportunity in a "loose, catch-as-catch can" environment to break the stalemate between competing factions. But this also may lead to co-optation rather than the furtherance of a group goal.

Typically factions within a party are less the result of issue conflicts and instead, based on voter grouping, the composition of leadership (essentially personalities), or localism.⁵⁷ Issue articulation and competition are most likely to take place in a two-party atmosphere. The factionalism of one-party states generally impedes the ability of a sustained programmatic theme. For example, Key notes that

in a sense the absence of issues comes from the fact that these groups are unchallenged; when someone stirs the masses issues become sharper. Under such a chaotic factionalism, it is impossible to make any rational explanation of how the people of a state vote in terms of interest. They are whipped from position to position by appeals irrelevant to any fundamental interest. A loose factional system lacks the power to carry out sustained programs of action, which almost always are thought by the better element to be contrary to its immediate interests.⁵⁸

Although factionalism may facilitate infiltration, it becomes a hollow prize for infiltrators, because the type of issue articulation necessary to promote change is simply not present unless the emerging group has tremendous resources.

William Grimshaw's (1992) study of the relationship between African Americans and the Chicago political machine is a prime example of co-optation as a strategy to undermine the interest articulation of emerging groups. Grimshaw describes how poor African Americans were co-opted by

the Daley machine after middle-class African Americans moved to more affluent areas of Chicago. Although it could surely be said that African Americans formed coalitions with the Daley machine, this coalition by no means represented poor African-American interests.⁵⁹ Further, although African Americans fulfilled the interests of the machine, they did not receive any real influence.

*External Pressure from the Court System or
Federal Government Mandates*

African Americans have faced intense resistance to change and have historically depended upon external pressure from the courts or the federal government. External pressures have resulted in more policy influence than would have likely occurred if it were absent. The civil rights movement is a case in point. Until federal pressure was placed on Southern whites, African Americans' quest for political empowerment was largely stalemated. The Civil Rights Act (1964) and subsequent amendments, the Voting Rights Act (1965), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) are three significant examples of how external pressure can pose a significant, viable challenge to the status quo.

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, African-American suburban political incorporation is predicated upon factors that are internal and external to the African-American community. But perhaps most significant is the type of policy under consideration and the disproportionate impact that it has on segments of the community. All of these factors taken together focus attention on the patterns of interaction and transaction within the African-American community; between African-American and white political elites; and with political elites who are external to the community at large (state and federal governmental actors). These factors also focus attention on the impact that African-American socioeconomic diversity has on representation and policy positions advanced by African Americans within a suburban jurisdiction. Taking African-American socioeconomic variance into account allows an examination of how segments of the population are acted on differently and is a complete divergence from the common practice of lumping together those whose interests are not advanced with those whose interests are truly incorporated.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

This book relies on several sources of information: (1) semistructured interviews with African-American elected and appointed officials who were in office during the period of study and with African-American civic and community

Figure 1.1
A Model of African-American Suburban Political Incorporation

African-American Suburban Political Incorporation
is predicated upon



INTERNAL FACTORS

- **The Type of Policy in Question**
 - Universal (civil rights/race based)
 - Class based
- **Proportion of African Americans in the Population**
- **Socioeconomic Resources of African-American Population**
 - Income
 - Education
 - Occupation
- **Organizational Resources of the African-American Population**
 - Mobilizing to elect African Americans
 - Establishing a cohesive policy agenda

a combination of
internal and
external factors:
pattern of relationships
and interaction
inside and outside of the
African-American
community

EXTERNAL FACTORS

- **The Availability of Allies to form coalitions and African Americans' Position in the Coalition**
- **The Strength, Stability, and Practices of the Dominant Coalition**
- **Pressure from the Court System or State or Federal Government Mandates**

leaders; (2) local and community newspapers; and (3) public documents and the transcripts of hearings and meetings of policy-making boards, departments, and committees relevant to education policy.

The research chronicles the rise of African-American representation (elected and appointed) and policy positions that were advanced in the education arena. Group resources are significant to efforts to elect African Americans and to the policy positions that are set forth. Significant group organizational resources include mobilization efforts and policy unity. As mentioned, unified group political action is not always likely within a socio-economically diverse group. Nonetheless, it represents a significant group organization resource that can facilitate group goals.

Mobilization is measured by the presence of activities and efforts undertaken to elect and appoint African Americans to policy-making posts. A high degree of consensus for a particular candidate or set of candidates is implicit in the concept of mobilization. Thus mobilization also entails the presence of efforts designed to reach a consensus over who will run for office. These efforts may include endorsements from key African-American community leaders and organizations.

Equally important is the level of cohesiveness that is exhibited on major policy issues. Consensus must be fostered toward particular policy initiatives, goals, and strategies if group goals are to be enhanced. Again, policy consensus may not be possible in an arena of competing interests, however, it is nonetheless a significant organizational goal.

Cohesiveness is measured by the degree of unity exhibited behind a particular policy or issue. The existence of cohesiveness entails appeals to the African-American community eliciting unity in its support of policy demands, and the extent to which an overwhelming majority of group members have agreed on a particular course of action, or a particular policy demand.

The term *policy demand* here is defined as educational programs or proposals that organizations or individuals initiate and attempt to implement in order to eliminate existing educational disparities. A measure of policy demands that address educational disparities will be the extent to which the policy demand actually offers straightforward, direct, and nonambiguous solutions.

Examples of these type of policies would be those that create programs that attempt to raise test scores, decrease dropout rates, and eliminate the disparities existing in the amount of resources available to African-American and white public school students. The study does not attempt to measure the outcomes of various policies but rather to identify those policies that seek to reconcile disparities.

Another important factor relating to the treatment of policy demands is the extent to which programs that are initiated and implemented are symbolic

in nature rather than substantive. Policy demands that do not directly address educational disparities are not included in the study, however, an attempt is made to include all of those policy demands that African-American officials and community members believe are an effective tool to eliminating educational disparities.

The greatest limitation of the research is the single case study method. Although Prince George's County meets the criteria of a suburban jurisdiction with a sizable African-American population, it is not necessarily typical of other African-American suburban jurisdictions across the country.

As it relates to the standard criteria, Prince George's County, Maryland, is a jurisdiction outlying a central city—Washington, D.C. Although Prince George's County is politically autonomous, it is economically and socially integrated with Washington, D.C.

Like other suburbs across the country, the growth of Prince George's County, Maryland, resulted from several factors working in tandem. These factors include: (1) technological advances that allowed people to commute further distances to their jobs in the central city; (2) federal and state government highway construction, and the federal provision of long-term, low-interest home mortgages (FHA and VA); and (3) a desire to escape the central city.

Another limitation of this book is that the use of the single case study method precludes comparisons between suburban jurisdictions. The most that is attempted here is a comparison of socioeconomic characteristics with Montgomery County, Maryland, a neighboring Washington, D.C., suburban jurisdiction. Comparisons between Montgomery County and Prince George's County help place Prince George's County in context. Comparisons of the two counties also avoid cumbersome cross-analyses of jurisdictions that do not share similar levels of political authority. Where applicable, however, parallels are drawn between Prince George's County and a central city—Baltimore, Maryland. Only one central city comparison is offered, however, because the research is mostly concerned with what is likely to occur in suburban jurisdictions where a significant population of affluent African Americans resides.

Despite the limitations, this book begins to fill the void of theoretical analysis on the growing phenomenon of African-American suburbanization. Little is known about how suburban governments respond to the recent and growing migration of African Americans outside of the inner city. This book also begins to reformulate our common conceptions of minority communities as socioeconomic and political monoliths, and it allows us to examine the impact of class on African-American representation and policy positions.

The suburbs represent a relatively new laboratory in which to examine African-American politics, however, it is by no means expected to be exempt

from some of the exigencies of urban politics. While some peculiarities are expected, this book parallels some important concepts from urban analyses of African-American political incorporation. Although most, if not all, of the urban minority incorporation literature treats African-American political empowerment as an all-encompassing group prize, it nonetheless points to significant internal and external factors impacting on African-American political influence.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In chapter 2, I discuss the history and politics of Prince George's County and its relationship to the African-American community. Machine and postmachine politics in Prince George's County facilitated African-American migration to the county and inclusion into the governing coalition.

Chapter 3 looks at the social and economic condition of African-American and white Prince Georgians in comparison to their counterparts nationally, in Montgomery County, Maryland, and in Baltimore. Although African Americans in Prince George's County are affluent relative to the African-American population in the United States, they have not reached socioeconomic parity with their white counterparts in the county; there also are considerable disparities within the African-American community.

In chapter 4, I address the thirty-plus-year quest for African-American representation in the county. African Americans in Prince George's County have utilized a number of strategies to increase African-American representation, however, there have been several instances where the African-American community has failed to reach consensus.

Unsuccessful mobilization efforts have primarily resulted from a lack of consensus within the African-American community and the practices of the white-controlled governing coalition. The standard reason that African Americans have failed to reach consensus behind a particular candidate has been varying perceptions about the candidate's socioeconomic class interests.

Chapter 5 examines the African-American quest for key political appointments. Socioeconomic status again played a role in the level of support that candidates for key appointments received. The split in support for elected officials and appointees over time created two camps within the African-American community that mirror the distinct split within the white-controlled political organization.

In chapter 6, I explore the politics of suburban education. Education policy has been a contentious policy area in urban and suburban settings. The affluence of African-American Prince Georgians seemingly makes them less likely to encounter the resistance to integration that their urban brethren

encountered. This is not the case, however. Not only were there sharp education policy conflicts between whites and African Americans but also within the African-American community.

Chapter 7 summarizes the preceding chapters. Despite the presence of African-American affluence in suburban Prince George's County, Maryland, the African-American community is not a monolith. Socioeconomic disparities among African Americans thwart mobilization efforts in the electoral and education policy arenas. Nonetheless, significant disparities exist between African Americans and whites that seemingly necessitate a concerted effort from the African-American community.

The first step toward African-American suburban political incorporation is to recognize the realities of internal and external factors that impact on it, and to work within the framework of these realities toward establishing more democratic arrangements.

Chapter 8, the epilogue, surveys the county's socioeconomic and political trends after 1994, the outcome of its twenty-five-year desegregation order, and African Americans' thirty-year quest for political incorporation.