The Politics of Black Womanhood, 1848–2008

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Voting Rights as Civil Rights

When the activist Fannie Lou Hamer spoke of voting rights, history was never far from her mind (fig. 1). Early in her career as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), she testified about registering as a black woman in rural Mississippi. Hamer’s experience, she explained to Democratic Party officials in 1964, was of having been rebuffed, harassed, beaten, and sexually assaulted at the hands of local officials. Such memories were also linked to a more distant past, and Hamer saw her activism of the 1960s and 1970s as one chapter in the long African American freedom struggle.

Hamer, the youngest of twenty children, was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi, in 1917 and spent the first part of her life working as a sharecropper. She turned to securing voting rights in 1962, when she and a group of rural Mississippians were prohibited from registering to vote. This racial discrimination was an offense, as Hamer put it, “based upon the violation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, which hadn’t done anything for us yet,” she told a Harlem, New York, audience in December 1964. The US Constitution was important to her. She believed that its principles guaranteed voting rights for black Americans, and her work as a political organizer aimed to compel the nation to make good on that promise (fig. 2).

Hamer spoke on behalf of the millions of black Americans who were denied the exercise of voting rights, even one hundred years after Reconstruction’s constitutional revolution. She noted persistent problems, particularly in the Deep South, and described how, in the 1960s, Mississippi’s election authorities were still using literacy and understanding tests to disqualify those black men and women who
sought to register. And, while law mattered in Hamer’s opinion, she did not draw on the authority of the Nineteenth Amendment, which had guaranteed women the right to vote in 1920. This omission suggests how differently black and white American women could situate themselves in relation to the body politic.

The history of American women’s suffrage must always be explained in intersectional terms; gender and race have acted together in shaping women’s political lives. The varied ways in which women have viewed the Constitution is a case in point. Many white women of Hamer’s generation celebrated the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment as a turning point for women’s suffrage. Black women, however, also had to look to other milestones—the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870, for example—to chart how they came to influence elections. In Hamer’s analysis, while the Nineteenth Amendment ensured that sexism would no longer restrict political rights in the United States, racism continued to keep many black women from the polls until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The story of African American women and the vote overturns basic assumptions about the history of American political culture and women’s suffrage. Through the lens of black women’s history, binary notions about interests—such as men versus women or black people versus white people—quickly break down. Black women have lived at a unique crossroads of identity, leading them to develop a self-definition that reflects, rather than overlooks, their vantage point on the nation.

Following the trail of black women’s activism leads to new insights about where and in what sorts of organizations the work of women’s rights and campaigns for suffrage can take place. African American women have sometimes been active within organizations led by black men, such as churches, and those led by white women, such as suffrage associations. They have also always steered autonomous institutions, forging their own paths to political rights and efficacy. The black women’s club movement is one example of autonomous institutions. Finally, black women’s histories require us to rethink the very nature of women’s interests. Campaigns for black women’s rights were linked to their concerns about slavery and abolition, citizenship and the vote, and challenges to Jim Crow and lynching. The interests of family, community, and the race as a whole always defined their political lives. They would never limit themselves to a stand-alone set of women’s concerns.  

The Right to Preach

From as early as the 1840s, black women’s rights mixed with civil rights and anti-slavery politics. As women surveyed the political terrain, two movements drew
their attention. The first was that of the era's anti-slavery societies, where the immediate end to human bondage and the securing of rights for former slaves drove the agenda. The second was the so-called colored convention movement, where black delegates gathered at both the state and national levels to deliberate on the issues of the day, from slavery and civil rights to education, labor, and the press. Neither space was an easy fit. Still, black women worked toward building cross-racial alliances in women's anti-slavery societies. They supported the work of men's conventions, raising funds and serving meals while also occasionally taking part as speakers and delegates. By the time the first women's conventions met, black women were already on their way to entering public culture—speaking, writing, organizing, and testing the bounds of where womanhood might take them.4

A turning point for women's suffrage occurred in 1848. Two movements were born that year, one led by black women, the other by their white counterparts. One story is well known. That summer, women's conventions in the upstate New York cities of Seneca Falls and Rochester convened fledgling women activists and a small number of male allies. Out of those meetings, an ambitious manifesto, termed the "Declaration of Sentiments," leveled a critical gaze at institutions, challenging the unequal customs and regulations to which women were subjected—in politics, in churches, and in their families. No black women took part in these early women's conventions, but many of them would have been aware of the issues therein debated, as they were reported in the African American and anti-slavery press.5

Earlier that same year, in spring 1848, black women began a debate about their rights. Female lay leaders and women preachers, who had banded together as the Daughters of Zion, headed to Philadelphia to attend the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church's quadrennial general conference. Armed with an agenda and accompanied by allies, they confronted an imposing gathering of 175 ministers and 375 male lay leaders from fourteen states and competed for a place on an "official agenda" that included the election of a bishop, the structure of the church missionary society, the establishment of a book depository, a plan for common schools, and sanctions for divorce and remarriage. The women planned to disrupt the proceedings just long enough to insert a proposal that demanded that the preachers among them be granted licenses.6

These were women experienced at challenging gendered customs. Four years earlier, at an 1844 general conference, preaching women had recruited a male delegate, the Reverend Nathan Ward, to act as their spokesperson. Confronting the sixty-eight ministerial delegates in attendance, Ward spoke on behalf of forty "others," all signatories to a petition that called for the amendment of church law to permit the licensing of female preachers. Among the women was Julia A. J. Foote, an upstate New York native who had, despite ridicule and the threat of excommunication, earned a reputation as an effective preacher (fig. 3). Foote had been refused a preaching license a few years earlier and described what she saw unfold following the presentation of Ward's petition: "This caused quite a sensation, bringing many members to their feet at once. They all talked and screamed to the bishop, who could scarcely keep order. The Conference was so incensed at the brother who offered the
petition that they threatened to take action against him.” The women’s petition met with defeat, but it also launched a campaign that sought rights for all churchwomen.

In 1848, talk of women’s rights was not a complete surprise. Again, a male ally, Dr. J. J. Gould Bias of Philadelphia, placed a petition for women’s preaching licenses before the church’s leadership. Its text has not survived. Still, the dissenting report captures the spirit of the exchange. The women’s opponents crafted a shrewd argument. Daniel Payne, a Baltimore-based minister who was moving toward election as bishop, argued that female preaching ran afoul of women’s obligations to respectability and domesticity. The licensing of female preachers was “calculated to break up the sacred relations which women bear to their husbands and children,” he warned. It would lead to the “utter neglect of their household duties and obligations.” This view adapted well-understood arguments made by anti-slavery and temperance advocates of the period. Like slavery, women’s rights threatened the sanctity of African American family life. And, just as the consumption of alcohol led men to neglect their families, so too would women become irresponsible if they bore the burdens that being licensed to preach imposed. In 1848, successfully defeating a petition for churchwomen’s rights demanded heavy ideological artillery.

Voices at Seneca Falls and Rochester echoed those in Philadelphia: churches were sites of power and contestation over women’s rights. At Seneca Falls, the Declaration of Sentiments criticized thinking that deprived women of preaching licenses: “He allows her in Church, as well as State, but in a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.” That meeting’s final resolutions included two demands that endorsed women’s right to preach: “Resolved, . . . it is pre-eminently his duty to encourage her to speak and teach, as she has an opportunity, in all religious assemblies,” and, “Resolved, That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit.”

Women in the AME Church understood the stakes.

Churchwomen’s rights arose again weeks later at the women’s meeting in Rochester, and a debate ensued. Men there split over the issue, with some advocating the emancipation of women from “all the artificial disabilities, imposed by false customs, creeds, and codes,” while others argued that “woman’s sphere was home . . . seriously deprecat[ing] her occupying the pulpit.” The women persisted, led by Lucretia Coffin Mott, a Philadelphia-based Quaker and anti-slavery activist who explained that she was not surprised to find some men opposed to churchwomen’s
rights. Education had indoctrinated them in this view. Still, she rejected clerical authority and turned to the Bible, explaining that “none of [its] prohibitions in regard to women” included anything that prohibited a woman “from being a religious teacher.” The result in Rochester was a final resolution that opposed “restricting her to an inferior position in social, religious, and political life” and insisted instead “that it is the duty of woman, whatever her complexion, to assume, as soon as possible, her true position of equality in the social circle, the church, and the state.”

If churchwomen’s rights were one among many for women at Seneca Falls and Rochester, then they were paramount for African American Methodist women. This reflected the unique place that churches occupied in African American public culture. Yes, such institutions were associated with spiritual beliefs and sustenance. They were also, however, hubs for mutual aid endeavors, such as burial societies and widow’s relief funds. Many churches also sponsored schools in an era during which white-controlled municipalities refused to support black education. And churches were centers of political life. Their sanctuaries doubled as meeting halls; their ministers led conventions; and churchwomen’s fund-raising supported newspapers and conventions along with the ongoing needs of religious communities. When black women talked about rights in the church, they were going to the core of their community’s associational life and to the heart of its power.

Black and white women’s calls for churchwomen’s rights remained largely separate throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Those black women who did cross the color line into the conventions led by white women were met with a mix of fascination and skepticism. When Sojourner Truth debuted as a speaker at the 1850 National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, she joined a fledgling movement, and she stood out among the other participants (fig. 4). News reports unfailingly framed her remarks as those of “a colored woman, once a slave,” as the New-York Tribune put it. Truth did attempt to bridge the distance. Women’s fates were linked, she explained, but not because they were the same. Instead, when black women had been liberated from slavery in New England, only then did white women begin to endure the “burdens of hard work.” Thus, the liberation of some black women led to “complaints” about the “enslavement” of white women, which in turn gave birth to a call for women’s rights.

Truth is best remembered for what is often mislabeled her 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, delivered at an Akron, Ohio, women’s rights convention. She likely never uttered that precise refrain. Still, her remarks do make plain the degree to which black women, even as they stood at the podium under a women’s rights banner, also contended with racism. Truth insisted to her listeners that she was indeed a woman. Her challenge was to claim her rights as such, without disguising her capacities and her strength: “I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed.” She might have labored like a man, Truth explained, but still she was a woman with standing to make the case for her rights (fig. 5).

This dilemma — how black women could speak by way of both similarity and difference — was never fully resolved for Truth. In her 1850 narrative, she reprinted a letter that showed how far audiences would go to challenge a black woman
FIG. 4

*Sojourner Truth* (1797–1883)
Mathew Brady Studio
(active 1844–1894)
cia. 1864
Albumen silver print
8.9 × 5.6 cm (3 1/2 × 2 1/8 in.)
National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution

FIG. 5

*Broadside: Sojourner Truth Lecture*
cia. 1878–1879
Printed paper
29.8 × 22.9 cm (11 3/4 × 9 in.)
Berenice Bryant Lowe Pipers,
Bentley Historical Library,
University of Michigan

who publicly called for her rights. At a northern Indiana anti-slavery meeting, an opponent literally disputed Truth's sex, asserting that some in attendance believed her to be a man and an imposter. Truth replied that she had “suckled many a white babe,” and then she “disrobed her bosom,” eschewing any pretense to the cloak of respectability that many women maintained when they took to the podium. Some women may have feared compromising their status as ladies, but Truth clearly did not. Yes, she was a woman, but she was also a black one whose womanhood was intertwined with the families of her white audience, not as an equal, but as a subject of exploitation.14

If there was one place where black and white women did manage to forge alliances, it was not in churches or in women’s conventions. It was instead in anti-slavery societies. The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, established in 1833, included black women—members of the influential Forten clan—among its founders. Working together, the black and white members of the society petitioned the state legislature and Congress, and raised funds to support fugitive slaves and local schools.15 Around this same time, Sarah Parker Remond, a free black woman, ventured away from her home in Salem, Massachusetts, to join the anti-slavery speaking circuit (see cat. 6). Remond had been propelled by the examples of her own brother and the white anti-slavery activist Abby Kelley Foster.16
A New Constitution

The upheaval of the Civil War— for black Americans, a war to end slavery— also called into question existing gendered strictures. Through the work of war, free black women stepped into public culture with two feet as teachers, nurses, scouts, and relief workers. Charlotte Forten left the relative comfort of her New England classroom to teach among the free people of the South Carolina Sea Islands. She learned to operate a schoolhouse and a gun. In Washington, DC, Elizabeth Keckley, known best as Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker, coordinated with women's organizations throughout the North to offer refugee relief to former slaves. Susie King Taylor graduated from cook to nurse, all the while lending sustenance and care to the Union Army's black soldiers, including men of her own family. The conditions of war meant that women's roles and their visibility were changing.\textsuperscript{17}

With so much of the male population fixed on the battlefield, new opportunities opened for women to work collaboratively and with less oversight from men. Enslaved women claimed their freedom through law, policy, and their own initiative. As their liberty became a certainty, new questions arose about who former slaves— men and women— would be to the body politic. The earliest political conventions of the postwar years saw an old coalition resume its work. Abolitionists and women's rights activists met up to chart the meaning of freedom and citizenship, and black women joined the debate.

Within the newly formed American Equal Rights Association (AERA)— men and women, black and white— were soon exchanging ideas about the terms of voting rights in the post–Civil War era. Slavery was abolished in 1865 by the Thirteenth Amendment, leaving unresolved questions about the degree to which former slaves would be incorporated into the body politic. This debate unfolded in Congress, where lawmakers vied with President Andrew Johnson for supremacy over the nation's political reconstruction. At the same time, prewar radicals— once allied variously with the abolitionist and/or the white-led women's movement— came together under the auspices of AERA to refine their ideas about the United States as an interracial democracy.\textsuperscript{18}

This promiscuous coalition was very quickly tested by the language of the Fourteenth Amendment, which introduced a distinction between the sexes into the Constitution. Its section two penalized those states that “denied [the vote] to any of the male inhabitants of such State.” Within the AERA coalition, those who advocated for universal suffrage— regardless of race or sex— saw in this clause the formal insertion of a gender distinction— the first instance in the Constitution.\textsuperscript{19}

A debate ensued over who should vote and under what terms. In principle, few among the veteran activists abandoned the ultimate goal of universal suffrage. Still, factions emerged over how such a goal should be realized when Congress proposed a Fifteenth Amendment that prohibited laws that limited the franchise “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It was a bold step forward for voting rights but left states at liberty to prohibit women from voting. AERA members wrestled with whether the organization should support what amounted to
constitutional protection for black men when there was no parallel provision for women in sight. One view was best captured by abolitionist Wendell Phillips’s declaration that “this hour belongs to the Negro.” Phillips judged that there were practical limits to Reconstruction-era politics and accepted that the new political order would be gendered, with only men exercising formal authority. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a women’s rights advocate, captured the essence of the competing view when she decried the possibility that white women would be made into the political subordinates of black men who were “unwashed” and “fresh from the slave plantations of the South.” Educated women, overwhelmingly white in the war's immediate aftermath, should take precedence, she urged.20

While black women’s interests remained at the rhetorical margins of the debate, they were present during the AERA meetings, in contrast to their absence during the women’s meetings of the 1840s. Still, few delegates considered explicitly where black women might stand in a campaign for voting rights that was envisioned as a contest between black men and white women. Nonetheless, at least one black woman—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper—weighed in, asserting that any reenvisioning of the body politic should take place at the intersection of race and gender (fig. 6). In this view, the AERA coalition was urged to consider how the circumstances of black women might guide the future of political culture, including voting rights.21

The atmosphere was tense from the start of the AERA meeting of 1869. Delegates charged Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, along with others associated with the publication of the women’s magazine the Revolution, with having advocated for “educated suffrage,” a position that implied that former slaves were not fit to exercise the vote. Delegates took sides. Frederick Douglass tried to chart out common ground by acknowledging women’s stake in the vote, but he ultimately deemed their claim to political rights less urgent than that of black men for whom voting was “a question of life and death.” An unidentified delegate challenged Douglass, asking if his thinking applied to the case of black women. “Yes, yes, yes,” he responded, what was true for black men was “true of the black woman, but not because she is a woman, but because she is black.”22

After many rounds of debate, Harper took the floor. She was the lone black woman to speak on the record.23 A teacher, poet, and anti-slavery activist, Harper first weighed in on the question Douglass posed, supporting his view: “If the nation could handle one question, she would not have the black women put a single straw in the way, if only the men of the race could obtain what they wanted.” Harper leveled a direct critique at white women’s aspirations for the vote: “I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do
not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent.  

Harper underscored how black and white women stood in differing shoes: “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs.” She went on to chronicle how racism kept white women from allying with their black counterparts. Men, including African American men, fared no better in her analysis. She had felt “every man’s hand” against her as a black woman. No one, for example, had stepped up to aid the widowed Harper when she settled her family in Boston. These were the circumstances that the vote was intended to remedy. Finally, Harper declared that she stood for a vision that might keep the AERA coalition together: “We are all bound up in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse of its own soul.” She urged the delegates to reject pitting a “privileged class” against “unprivileged classes.” Instead, she demanded that black women be included as part of “one great privileged nation.” This was the purpose of the ballot, in her view.

Universal though they were, Harper’s ideas were not enough to keep the coalition intact. The bitterness generated during the AERA debates finally brought about the end of radical prewar alliances. Women and men, black and white, would continue to work toward women’s suffrage, now through two competing organizations: the American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and Julia Ward Howe, and the National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Black women would not join either camp in important numbers and instead focused most of their public work on reconstituting black communities in the wake of war and emancipation. This, however, does not mean that black women were turning away from concerns about women’s rights. Quite the contrary, within African American communities, particularly churches, women continued the debates that had so forcefully animated the American Equal Rights Association.

The Power of Churchwomen

The promises of Reconstruction’s revolution were vividly manifest in the period immediately following the Civil War. Black men and women, along with philanthropic partners, formed institutions and churches, schools, and mutual aid societies that began to dot the landscape of the South’s public culture. Law reform unfolded at the state and local levels, stretching the reach of equality into the lives of former slaves. Black men voted and became officeholders by the hundreds. There was no secret about the major role black women played in these scenes. Their capacities for fundraising and organizing were acknowledged as essential. And in politics, male suffrage did not leave women out. Instead, the early years of Reconstruction were characterized by women’s robust presence—as participants in rallies, public meetings, and conventions, as safe keepers of the polls, and as partners with men who exercised
the franchise in a communal or familial approach that reflected the consensus rather than the will of any individual male voter.  

Black women also talked about their rights. The first signs that debates over the Fifteenth Amendment were carrying over into religious circles appeared in the 1870s. In churches, black women continued to call for their right to vote. In black Methodist churches, women petitioned to revise governing texts so that the language would read as, in the words of some church activists, “gender neutral.” The AME general conference in 1872 agreed that its laws would be amended such that “the word ‘male’ wherever it occurred as a qualification of electors be struck from the Discipline.” Four years later, gender qualifications were struck from all provisions related to Sunday School personnel. In AME Zion, similar revisions were taken up in 1876 when the general conference voted to “strike out the word ‘male’ in the Discipline.” Apparently, this directive was not fully complied with, and in 1880, a group of Boston churchwomen petitioned “to strike out words ‘man’ and ‘men’” in the Discipline, specifying those sections of the church law that had not already been properly amended.

Churchwomen gained the right to vote in church elections through these little-remarked-on but still major changes in denominational governance. There was no debate. Indeed, there was no opposition to women’s enfranchisement. Boston-based petitioners in the AME Zion Church explained the amendments as “giving women the same rights in the church as men.” Such rights extended to office-holding, and between 1872 and 1876, black Methodist leaders created the office of the Stewardess, authorizing local congregations to designate between three and nine women to sit as a governing board that paralleled the men’s office of the Deacon.

Churches had become the center of a black women’s movement for rights by 1880. Calls for changes in how churches distinguished between male and female authority were expressly framed in the language of political rights. The Christian Recorder weekly published a commentary that asked if offices such as that of the Stewardess would ultimately lead to a political end — woman suffrage — or more likely to women “taking hold” and “speaking” in religious gatherings. Ambivalences about extending new authority to women were present. Still, a consensus among black Methodists led to the chartering of female missionary societies, bodies that formally acknowledged the fundraising work that women had long performed without recognition. One AME Church commentator surveyed the changes and then termed such societies the “‘woman movement’ of our church.”

Black women’s religious authority experienced a sea change; women were voting, holding office, and exercising newfound authority over work they had long done under men’s oversight. Perhaps, though, by deeming this period a women’s movement, the bridge had stretched too far for some male leaders. Eliza Gardner was among the women who felt a backlash (fig. 7). Raised as a free girl in Boston’s anti-slavery circles before the Civil War, Gardner was a Sunday School teacher, a missionary society leader, and a lifelong church activist who supported herself as a dressmaker. Her challenge, as she stepped to the podium at the 1884 AME Zion general conference, was to defeat those who sought to halt the expansion of churchwomen’s rights.
with legislation that read: "Females have all the rights and
immunities of males, except the rights of orders and of the
pastorate. They may be licensed as evangelists." It was, in
essence, a religious glass ceiling. Women would be authorized
to travel, occupy the pulpit, and interpret the gospel, and
would even be welcomed by local congregations when they
did so. Some, such as Julia A. J. Foote, did just that, and
they often traveled with male ministers who credited them
with winning new converts to Methodism.32

Women might have regarded the promise of
preaching licenses as a victory. After all, they had sought them
as far back as 1844 and 1848. But by the 1880s, not only were
Gardner and other churchwomen determined not to lose
ground, they also knew that on the horizon, there was a strug-
gle over ordaining women to the ministry, the highest office
in black Methodism. Gardner’s response began with no sign
of deference: "I do not think I feel quite so Christian-like as
my dear sisters.” While other women implored and appealed
to the benevolence of male leaders, Gardner spoke expressly
about power.33

At stake, Gardner made plain, were principles that dated back to the
1840s: “I come from old Massachusetts, where we have declared that all, not only
men, but women, too, are created free and equal, with certain inalienable rights which
men are bound to respect.” Gardner linked the rights of churchwomen directly to the
equality and freedom provided for in the constitution of her home state. As well, they
were an extension of the “inalienable rights” provided for in the Declaration of
Independence. And, in a twist on Justice Roger Taney’s notorious pronouncement in
Dred Scott v. Sandford, she claimed for churchwomen rights that “men were bound to
respect.” The movement she championed was part of the struggle for women’s rights
and had been born alongside “other good movements” that were dear to black
Methodists, including “temperance reform and the anti-slavery cause.” Gardner cast
churchwomen’s struggles as part and parcel of the long-standing “good” cause of
women’s rights.34

Gardner carried the day by proposing a tough bargain: Women would
continue to ensure the well-being of the church but only if they received the support
and respect of male leaders. “If you will try to do by us the best you can . . . you will
strengthen our efforts and make us a power; but if you commence to talk about the
superiority of men, if you persist in telling us that after the fall of man we were put
under your feet and that we are intended to be subject to your will, we cannot help
you in New England one bit.” Her threat was not an idle one. Black Methodist lead-
ers knew well that Gardner and other black women in New England were already
organizing in the secular realm.35
The Clubwomen’s Era

Reconstruction did not fail all at once. Still, by the 1890s, Southern courts, legislatures, and local leaders were all conspiring to narrow the avenues by which black men could take part in public life. Violence, oppressive legislation, and the drawing of a bright color line—in short, the political and legal regime known as Jim Crow—eventually relegated black men to the margins of politics through disenfranchisement, lynching, and segregation. Women’s activism took on a new urgency. Organizations formerly devoted to the work of war relief began to address community concerns related to race and rights. As the issues surrounding the racialized body became increasingly urgent, these organizations knit together into a national network of clubs. Black women attempted new alliances with white women for the first time since the late 1860s. These renewed efforts were largely thwarted by the adoption of a “Southern strategy” in a white-led campaign for women’s suffrage that sacrificed the incorporation of black women in the interest of winning the support of white women in the South. Still, Northern black women would begin to vote in important numbers.

Eliza Gardner knew that in addition to their church activism, black women were harnessing their influence through secular clubs. By 1895, she was among a cadre of national leaders who convened black women under the auspices of the National Conference of Colored Women. As chaplain, her words provided the opening and closing prayers at that body’s inaugural meeting. It was a natural transition for women like Gardner who had already imbibed women’s rights ideas in abolitionist and church circles. Now, black women activists were joining forces to tackle national problems under the motto “lifting as we climb.”

The 1890s inaugurated what has been termed the “woman’s era.” This did not reflect the emergence of a neat or single focus on the rights of women. Instead, the woman’s era was a companion—indeed, it was a response—to what was also deemed the “nadir” or low point of American race relations. Segregation was being institutionalized, and racial violence was on the rise. As for political rights, black men were losing the right to vote through intimidation and the imposition of racially discriminatory poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses. The essence of the women’s era lay in the view that black women must organize to combat the rise of Jim Crow. It was a development that embraced the power of women, a power Eliza Gardner had named during her church battles.

Black churchwomen embraced this activism as a way of ameliorating racism’s social and political ills (fig. 8). In “A Woman’s View on Current Topics,” AME Zion member May Brown queried, “what will the Negro of the United States do to gain just and merited recognition?” Brown saw clearly the tension that defined the nadir: “The whites are struggling to retain the supremacy. The Negroes are struggling for right and justice.” But if the problem, as Brown saw it, lay in the dire state of race relations, the solution was to be found in women’s activism. “The women cannot, must not, dare not be idle,” she urged. Brown challenged her “own women” to “read, to study, to keep . . . abreast with the thoughts of the day . . . take part in the
social, religious, philanthropic and intellectual subjects which have never been found so exacting or so diffuse as now.” Writing in 1891, Brown captured black women’s optimism and ambition: The “New Woman” was a critical agent in battles against the “race problem.”37 Black women had long experienced working on behalf of the race as a whole. They worked by way of a capacious politics that eschewed narrow alliances of race and gender. And their womanhood acted as a sort of cover-up over their ambitions—black men were often Jim Crow’s most direct targets, leaving women to do organizing, absent heavy scrutiny.38

As black men in the South were being turned away from polling places, black women in the North were gearing up to vote. This was possible, in part, because the terrain of political life for many black Americans was shifting. Major migrations of thousands of black southerners to the North created new hubs of activism and concentrations of potential new voters. And, well before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, polling places in the same northern locales were opening for the first time to women. Black women were entering the body politic; in northern cities, their growing numbers gave them strength, while the lifting of gendered barriers gave them access.39

FIG. 8
Nannie Burroughs (1879–1961), left, and eight other African American women gathering for the “Banner State Woman’s National Baptist Convention”
Unidentified photographer
1915
Gelatin silver print
21 × 16 cm (8¼ × 6¼ in.)
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC
The example of Chicago illustrates these changes. Between 1890 and 1930, the city’s black population grew from just under 15,000 to nearly 234,000 residents. Most of this growth was attributable to the arrival of southern migrants, who had been pushed out by the rise of Jim Crow laws, and the pull of better jobs and relief from Jim Crow’s strictures. For the women among migrants as well as those women native to Chicago, Illinois’s voting regime was undergoing radical change. First in 1891, a Woman’s Suffrage Bill authorized women to vote for candidates in school-related offices and to a limited degree in rural areas and unincorporated cities. In 1913, the Presidential and Municipal Suffrage Bill permitted women in Illinois to vote for the US president and for municipal officeholders throughout the state. By 1916, four years before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, black women in Chicago were readying to cast their first ballots ever for president.40

Demographic and structural changes tell one part of this story. But to understand how black women in Chicago arrived at the polls in 1916, and what they did there, requires returning to what occurred in their churches and their women’s clubs. These collectives had always been defined in part by the drive to enhance women’s power, with rights coming in the form of the vote, officeholding, and structures of independent leadership. And perhaps after voting and holding office in churches, doing the same in the realm of party politics was an obvious shift of focus. What is certain is how through their clubs and their churches, black women transformed into party activists: rallying, marching, vetting candidates, electioneering, voting, and even running for local office.41

The women’s era was thus distinguished by a new brand of black women’s autonomy. Their Republican Party clubs, such as that named for journalist and anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells (fig. 9), were spaces that encouraged black women’s leadership, independent thought, and activism. Their clubs provided an alternative to church-based gatherings, which were still dominated by men, and differed from existing women’s clubs, which were linked through the auspices of the white-led General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Black women did not wholly distance themselves from these other organizations—but they continued to be marginalized, encountering sexism in bodies led by black men and experiencing racism when they attempted to ally with white women.42

Ida B. Wells was more than a women’s club namesake, of course. She was renowned in Chicago and nationally as a journalist, educator, and anti-lynching crusader. Her campaign for the passage of federal anti-lynching legislation is a reminder that for black Americans, the vote was a partial, imperfect instrument of political empowerment. The unabated rise of lynching was both the cause and the effect of ongoing black disfranchisement in the South. Violence sharply discouraged potential black voters from registering or attending the polls. The resulting all-white political and legal structures—including law enforcement agencies, courts, and legislatures—meant that the victims of racial violence and their survivors could expect little in the way of justice or redress.43

No amount of political influence in a city like Chicago and no amount of black voting power there could wholly remedy the ills that Wells and other black
clubwomen aimed to relieve. Still, they became voters. And like Wells, many also became documentarians, compiling the evidence of lynching and publishing it in newspapers and pamphlets. They became writers and public speakers, bringing both the facts of racial violence and the necessity of remedial legislation to audiences nationally and internationally. Black women emerged as lobbyists, pressing lawmakers locally, in state capitals, and in Washington for laws that would combat rising inequality. This approach to moving a political agenda forward, especially on behalf of black southerners, regarded voting as only one tactic among many. With so many black Americans disenfranchised, pursuit of their interests could never be channeled into elections or officeholding alone.44

The work of Ida B. Wells links these early chapters in the history of black women and the vote to the modern civil rights era of Fannie Lou Hamer. Not only is Wells an icon for the history of black women’s clubs, the advent of their voting, and their nimble approach to politics in the era of Jim Crow, she was also present for the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the twentieth century’s flagship civil rights organization. Women’s voting rights would continue to play a role in African American politics going forward. This was especially true in northern cities like Chicago, where black voters could help shape policy and leadership closer to home. Black women there would play a critical role in electing Oscar De Priest to the House of Representatives in 1929, the first African American to be elected to Congress since Reconstruction.45 But it was the NAACP’s multilayered work, from the grass roots to high courts, that chipped away at the foundations of Jim Crow. When, in the 1960s, Hamer began to define her own political identity, she followed on a long tradition of black women demanding that political culture incorporate their approaches to how race and gender might remake the nation.

Still at the Crossovers

Between 1848 and 2008, black women traveled a great distance in the quest to fully join the body politic. Their campaigns played out in churches and political conventions. They entered onto the public stage with the advent of women’s voting rights, and they remained innovative, versatile, and ever ready to deploy varied tactics as they campaigned for justice—for themselves and for their communities. Still, in 2008, questions resurfaced as Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton squared off in the Democratic Party’s presidential primary contest. Commentators were eager to explain the Clinton-Obama contest in race-versus-gender terms. The New York
Times published first Gloria Steinem and then feature writer Mark Leibovich, with each attempting to explain how identity shaped political culture. Their starting place was 1868. Wasn’t gender, as in womanhood, a more crippling political liability than race, as in blackness, they queried. The past might provide useful analogies.

Steinem’s January 2008 op-ed “Women Are Never Front-Runners” asked, “Why is the sex barrier not taken as seriously as the racial one?” She looked to history for answers: “The abolition and suffrage movements progressed when united and were damaged by division; we should remember that.” Steinem then went on to read the terms of the Fifteenth Amendment, concluding: “Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot.” Less than one week later, Leibovich authored a feature piece, “Rights vs. Rights: An Improbable Collision Course,” that relied on the “bitter case” of the “abolitionist—women’s rights split” to explain how race had trumped gender: “Blacks won the right to vote with the 15th Amendment in 1870,” while women won theirs decades later in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Leibovich suggested.

Neither here nor elsewhere in the mainstream media landscape was there an explication of how black women were positioned in political culture, past or present. Melissa Harris-Perry, then a professor at Princeton University, confronted Steinem during a broadcast television exchange on Democracy Now! A scholar of political science and African American studies, Harris-Perry had worked with the Obama campaign in Chicago. She also spoke directly as a black woman: “I’m sitting here in my black womanhood body, knowing that it is more complicated.” Her tone was stinging as she explained that she was “appalled” and “offended” by Steinem’s essay. Harris-Perry’s message was about the need for an intersectional analysis: “We have got to get clear about the fact that race and gender are not these clear dichotomies in which, you know, you’re a woman or you’re black.”

When Michelle Obama stepped to the podium at the August 2008 Democratic National Convention, she put false dichotomies to rest (fig. 10). Her speech drew on childhood reminiscences, moral philosophy, and her role as a mother and turned on a view of the American dream as produced through struggle and determination. Struggle was part of our history, Obama insisted, and she placed the occasion of her speech squarely into a historical frame: “This week we celebrate two anniversaries. The eighty-eighth anniversary of women winning the right to vote and the forty-fifth anniversary of that hot summer day when Dr. King lifted our sights and our hearts with his dream for our nation.”

Obama claimed two histories: the history of gender—as represented by the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, and the history of race—as expressed through the civil rights movement. “I stand here today at the crosscurrents of that history, knowing that my piece of the American dream is a blessing hard won by those who came before me,” she stated. Obama reintroduced the dichotomies set forth by Steinem and Leibovich and then mapped out the intersections—or, in her terms, crosscurrents—that expressly ran through her life’s experience. In Obama’s vision of American political culture, she drew her insight from her position as a daughter of both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. She embodied the
FIG. 10

First Lady Michelle Obama
(b. 1964)
Amy Sherald (b. 1973)
2018
Oil on linen
183.2 × 152.7 cm
(72 1/8 × 60 1/8 in.)
National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution;
Gift of Kate Capshaw and
Steven Spielberg; Judith Kern
and Kent Whealy; Tommie
L. Pegues and Donald A.
Capoccia; Clarence, DeLoise,
and Brenda Gaines; Jonathan
and Nancy Lee Kemper; The
Stoneridge Fund of Amy and
Marc Meadows; Robert E.
Meyerhoff and Rheda Becker;
Catherine and Michael Podell;
Mark and Cindy Aron; Lyndon
J. Barros and Janine Sherman
Barros; The Honorable John
and Louise Bryson; Paul and
Rose Catter; Bob and Jane
Clark; Lisa R. Davis; Shirley
Ross Davis and Family; Alaa
and Lois Fern; Conrad and
Constance Hipkins; Sharon
and John Hoffman; Audrey M.
Irmas; John Legend and Chriisy
Teigen; Eileen Harris Norton;
Helen Hixon Raiser; Philip
and Elizabeh Ryan; Roselyne
Chromani Swig; Josef Vascovitiz
and Lisa Goodman; Eileen
Baird; Dennis and Joyce Black
Family Charitable Foundation;
Shelley Brazier; Arlyn Dake-
Lee; Andy and Teri Goodman;
Randi Charno Levine and Jeffrey
E. Levine; Fred M. Levin and
Nancy Livingston, The Shenson
Foundation; Monique Meluche
Gallery, Chicago; Arthur Lewis
and Hau Nguyen; Sara and John
Schram; Alyssa Taubman and
Robert Rothman

legacies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer. Race and sex, in her analysis, were not a fraught dyad, they were core facets of black women’s political identities and the starting place for their insights.

Obama would go on over the course of eight years to make her mark as a distinctive first lady. But first, like the generations of black women before her, she made plain her unique vantage point and might very well have had the words of Anna Julia Cooper, written in 1892, in mind: “Only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enter[s] with me.” Of course for Michelle Obama, she was ushering in not only other African Americans but also the nation as a whole.