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AFRICAN-AMERICAN VOTING PATTERNS IN 1930s CHICAGO

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ABSTRACT

Urban politics and the urban political machine has for over a century been integral to Democratic political power in the United States. In this thesis, I focus on the development of the Chicago political machine in the 1920s and 1930s, with specific emphasis on the political career of Anton Cermak. The actions of Anton Cermak, coupled with the interests of the national Democratic party, allowed for the creation of a political machine that would define Chicago politics to the present day. My analysis also focuses on African-American voting behavior during the same period, with special attention paid to the party conversion of many African-Americans in the years following the 1931 mayoral election.

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Of Men And Machines

The Chicago political machine stands out in the American psyche. It is a construct that at once maintains an important place in the recent history of the U.S. while simultaneously standing in brisk opposition to the ideals of this country's founders. As a city with one of the most notorious and long-lived machines, Chicago represents the ideal arena to study the enduring legacy of that political construct, and the hold it still has over voting minds.

Chicago has been a fortress for the Democratic Party for all of recent memory, in local, state, and national politics. The current U.S. president, Barack Obama, was a community organizer in Chicago and eventually rose to prominence in the Democratic party, all in the local arena of the Windy City. The city is known as a proving ground for up-and-coming Democratic politicians, and for producing men and women who understand the game of politics.

However, Chicago also has developed a reputation as a city in which corruption is rampant, a place filled with backroom deals and inefficient policies. Chicago does have a long history of producing corrupt local and state officials. Just as recently as June 27, 2011, Rod Blagojevich became the fourth of seven previous Illinois governors to be found guilty on corruption charges. Many associated this event with “business-as-usual” in the state of Illinois, propagated by the climate of its most populous city.

Whether actually based on fact or not, many of the perceptions about Chicago, and more specifically Chicago politics, stem from the legacy of the political machine that developed in the 20th century. Indeed, as John M. Allswang notes in *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters*, the political machine endured in Chicago longer than in any other city, and its impact is further pronounced. Therefore, understanding the machine is a critical prerequisite to asking further questions about Chicago's politics, its voters, and its political impact on both a regional and national level.

My study begins with a change in pattern of voting history that occurred in Chicago in the early decades of 20th century, which seems at first glance to be wholly unrelated to the architecture of the political machine. However, this emphasis is important, for in 20th century Chicago, these concepts are inseparable, and analysis of both is vitally important. If one examines the political history of Chicago prior to 1931, there can be found some discernible patterns. In the mayoral elections for example: from 1876 to 1931, the party of each successive mayor alternates, from Republican to Democrat, or vice-versa. In the Illinois Governorship, from 1857 to 1929, the incumbent is almost unerringly Republican, save one Democratic governor in 1913.

In 1931, the patterns change. Since 1931, there have been only Democratic mayors in Chicago, the office has not shifted parties up to the most recent election of Democrat and former Obama adviser Rahm Emanuel. The governorship of Illinois shakes off its Republican dynasty, and though a Democratic one is not born, this point is not unimportant. In 1931, the Chicago Democratic political machine was born. And of course these patterns match preconceptions about the era. Anton Cermak, the winner of the 1931 mayoral campaign and a Democrat, is known as the father of the Chicago political machine. This is basically true, as Cermak was the first politician in the Chicago political scene who was truly able to understand the importance and potential of the various ethnic groups of the city: old, new, and extremely diverse. In general, there are two periods of immigration in Chicago prior to the 1940s: the mid-nineteenth century, with the influx of Irish, Scandinavians, Germans, and Jews; and the late-nineteenth early-twentieth century, with the influx of southern and eastern Europeans (Poles, Yugoslavs, Czechs, Italians, etc.) As Allswang notes, this delineates the separation between the “old” and “new” stock of immigrants to Chicago. Also, of importance was the influx of African-Americans during the Great War period, who came for the jobs that the soldiers vacated. (Allswang, *House..* p. 16-17)

Prior to Cermak's involvement in the 1931 election, ethnic voting only had a limited effect on

Chicago politics. This was in part due to the process of naturalization, which was of course necessary in order to vote. Majorities in the older immigrants groups were naturalized by 1920, but naturalization rates by that same year for newer immigrant groups were far lower, sometimes significantly under 50%. This would drastically change in favor of naturalization as the decade continued. (Allswang, *House..* p. 22) When this lag in naturalization numbers is taken in concert with the fact that “citywide organization among the Democrats or Republicans was short-lived when it did occur,” it is not hard to understand the limited role of ethnic politics in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Cermak altered this pattern drastically during his 1931 mayoral campaign. Though Democrats began to carve out ethnic majorities during some elections in the 1920s, this campaign stood apart. Every “new” immigrant ethnic group except for the Italians went for Cermak in 1931, averaging 65% majorities over all the groups. (Allswang, *House..* p. 48) The “old” immigrants, Swedes and Germans, also gave Cermak their majorities in 1931, though less powerfully than the “newer” groups. A Czech immigrant himself, Cermak had experience championing the rights of his own people, and translated that experience into an ability to form interethnic ties and coalitions. His willingness to use these skills to turn his Democratic coalition into an ethnic coalition, and the refusal of his opponent, “Big Bill” Thompson to attempt to do the same, won Cermak the 1931 mayoral election with a majority of 58% (Allswang, *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters*, Table 4.3)

This was a drastic victory. In fact, besides the Italians, the only discernible ethnic group that did not give Cermak its vote during the 1931 election was African-American. This should not surprise us. Since the Great Emancipation, most African-American votes had been firmly in the hands of Republicans nationwide. This trend was reinforced in local Chicago politics due to William Thompson. During his political career, Big Bill struck up an alliance with the local Black population, and this alliance helped him bolster his stints as mayor from 1915-1923, and again in 1927. The loyalty of the Chicago African-American community for Mayor Thompson did not waver in the 1931 election, at

least where votes are concerned. They mustered an 84% majority for the Republican incumbent.

(Allswang, *Bosses...* Table 4.3)

Given this massive margin for Thompson among African-Americans, it is interesting to look at the changes in Black voting behavior post-1931. It is during this time – that is, the 1930s - that the African-American population, both nationally and in Chicago, began to switch over to the Democratic party. From my research, I have settled on a distinct period in Chicago of what has been called the “Black Democratic Realignment,” starting in 1936. William Grimshaw concurs with this settlement in his work chronicling Black politics in the Chicago machine, with another major realignment period beginning in 1944.(Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, pg. 53) Despite the risk of overgeneralizing, one can state with acceptable accuracy the following about Chicago politics: prior to the mid-1930s, African-Americans in Chicago tended to vote for Republican candidates; post 1936, Chicago African-Americans tended to vote for Democratic candidates.

Of course, the importance of the African-American voting bloc does not end in the 1930s. As stated earlier, there was another massive realignment in the 1940s for Chicago Blacks. Nationally, Black Democratic identification reached 82% during the 1964 presidential election. Since then, Black Democratic identification has not dropped below 75%. (Bositus, Table 1) The story is much the same for Chicago Democratic alignment. While the conversion may have been slow and staggered, it was also incredibly momentous.

With an understanding of how important the Black vote would become for the Democratic party in the ensuing decades, it seems a bit strange that Chicago's African-Americans would not be influenced by the same factors that caused other ethnicities to switch wholesale to the Democratic party, their Republican precedent notwithstanding. In a time when political control in Chicago was shifting to the Democrats - particularly in the ethnic constituency of Chicago - there was a lag in African American conversion. Furthermore, it is difficult to find convincing catalysts to account for this

conversion post-1932. Why exactly did Chicago African-Americans convert to the Democratic party in the 1930s, and why did this conversion lag behind the rest of Chicago's ethnic constituencies? It is my intention to further explore this complicated relationship between Chicago's African-American voting bloc and the Democratic party. Furthermore, I intend to use the mayoral election of 1931 as a window into this complex relationship, as it is a watershed election for local Chicago politics. It is impossible for such a momentous local election did not have an effect on Black voters. The conversion of Chicago African-Americans to the Democratic Party in the late 1930s has its roots in the 1931 mayoral campaigns of Anton Cermak and William Hale Thompson.

Framing this analysis correctly necessitates an examination of more than just the 1931 election itself, however the majority of the analysis will concern that event. First, I will briefly examine the political history preceding the 1931 election. This brief overview will include the national political history of the era, the local political history of the era, an overview of immigration patterns prior to 1930, an overview of migration patterns of African-Americans prior to 1930, a look into the political leaders of the time, and a more concrete definition of “machine politics,” a construct which is sometimes blurred by misconception. I will then more closely examine the varied ethnic groups, including African-Americans, as they are involved with the local and national politics of the time. In this section I will also delve into some of the motivations and differences of the ethnic groups, and will examine such issues as voting participation, organization, etc. I will then turn my attention to the 1931 mayoral election itself. The emphasis of this section will be on events of the campaign and the effect these events had on ethnic constituencies, with particular attention paid to African-Americans. Following my analysis of the election, I will turn my attention to further studying the “Black Democratic realignment.” I will briefly cover the alignment as a whole, but more important to this section will be my analysis of the realignment of the 1930s. I will pay particular attention in this section to how the 1930s realignment in Chicago can be tied to issues of the 1931 mayoral election. I

will move from this section into an analysis of political and economic motivation for Chicago African-Americans during the period of interest. Of importance in this section is an examination of perceptions among the Black community versus the reality of its political situation. In other words, did African-Americans receive what they believed they would receive from either political party during this time period?

It is of course impossible to study a specific sliver of history without first having at least some understanding of the larger block from which it was taken. That being said, the contextual setup required for the study of the 1931 election is complicated. Politics then, as they are now, were complicated by myriad factors. National and local issues were often quite separate, party identification could mean different things depending on location, media influence differed from one area to the other, and of course, the agendas of individual politicians differed wildly. Before delving into the murky waters of Chicago politics, it is best to briefly review the changes that were occurring in Chicago in the early 20th centuries. The idea is to build an understanding of the mindset of the average citizen in the 1920s, and better yet, the mindset of the average Chicagoan.

Whiskey, Work, and War: America's Troubles

The event most firmly in the minds of most Chicagoans in the 1920s and 1930s was The Great War, now known as World War I. Chicago, like the rest of the country, was greatly affected by the United States involvement in the war, and many of these consequences lasted far into the 20th century. Though immigration was of great importance to Chicago during the period following the Civil War, it ceased during the period of U.S. Involvement in World War I. This had a major effect on the labor demographic of Chicago, especially as many native-born Americans left the country for the war effort. Demographics previously unused in Chicago's labor force, such as African-Americans and women, suddenly took center stage as the labor demand in the city could not be consistently met by the old methods of supply. While these changes in labor caused considerable issues during the period itself, for the purposes of this study it is much more interesting to examine the consequences of this demographic change in the decades following the Great War. After all, many native-born and second-generation Americans returned to Chicago to find that much in the city had changed and was still changing. Immigration was halted by the nativist Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, and labor became a more effective political force in the postwar period. The intersection of wartime reverberations with the changing socioeconomic landscape of Chicago had major consequences in two main areas: ethnic composition and labor organization. In addition to these external pressures was a vitally important internal one: the rise of the Temperance Movement. The culmination of this movement in the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment and the passing of the Volstead act would result in major consequences for all American cities, Chicago included. An understanding of these aspects of post-World War I Chicago is critical to understanding the politics of Chicago in the early 1930s. Therefore, I will briefly examine each, in kind.

Changing Faces: Chicago and Immigration

Immigration was one of the many significant changes affecting Chicago and the nation as a whole during this period. Of course, immigration was nothing new to the U.S. by this time; of interest is how immigration patterns and the ethnic makeup of immigration changed over this period. In order to understand the ethnic entities that existed in Chicago in the 1920s and 30s, it is necessary to briefly track back this immigration history to the nineteenth century. The first ethnic group to settle major numbers in Chicago was the Irish, who came in the 1840s largely due to the pressures of the Irish famine. The size of the Irish immigrant group, and the fact that many Irish “were immediately active in politics,” (Allswang, *A House...* p. 15) ensured their place in the power structure of Chicago for years to come. Scandinavians, Germans, and German Jews also arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, between 1840-1860. This was the first “wave” of immigration for Chicago, but it would help the city become one of America's most populous during the 19th century. The change was not without response from native-born Chicagoans, as nativist politicians were very successful during this period. These immigrant demographics increased steadily until the 1910s and the onset of World War I. Starting slightly before the beginning of U.S involvement, the demographic and rate of U.S immigration changed rapidly. The majority of Yugoslavian, Lithuanian and Italian immigrants began to migrate to Chicago before hostilities began. Many more groups affected by the war began to pour in as combat continued in Europe. This included significant numbers of Poles, Czechoslovakians, and Russians, with peak immigration periods of 1921, 1921, and 1913, respectively. A significant Yiddish-speaking Jewish population accompanied these ethnic groups during this period. (Allswang, *A House...* p 17)

However, after the war ended, the ethnic map of Chicago would be further changed by the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924. These acts greatly restricted the amount of southern and eastern Europeans who could enter the country. Beyond restricting new immigrants from entering the country

to join Chicago's ethnic communities, the acts had an effect on the existing communities themselves. These groups felt pressure to curtail overt displays of their heritage, and this, combined with “a general retreat from European Nationalism,” (Cohen, p. 54) caused many ethnic communities to question their identity and place within American culture. Furthermore, ethnic leaders' ideas about the direction of their communities often stood in contrast to the sentiments of members in the community, particularly those members who intersected with the industrial workforce. Cohen describes this as the temptation for the ethnic workforce to align themselves with societal institutions rather than purely ethnic institutions. This may have contributed to Cermak's success amongst a variety of ethnic groups, as the European immigrant experience in general involved similarities. Cermak, as an ethnic politician who had entrenched himself in societal institutions, was perfectly suited to the needs of the changing ethnic workforce of Chicago.

Though not technically not under the definition of immigration, another important demographic change in Chicago was the influx of African-Americans. This influx, known as the Great Migration, was primarily due to the availability of jobs during wartime. Though some blacks had moved to Chicago earlier to escape the sanctioned racism of the southern states, they often found more discrimination in the hiring practices of Chicago's factories and workplaces. This changed during World War I, as the desperate need for African-American labor outweighed the discriminating tendencies of business owners in the northern cities. *The Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper founded in 1905, was instrumental in spreading the message of Chicago's opportunity to many blacks in the south, which furthered migration to the city. Many of the city's other ethnic groups also founded newspapers during this time, fostering a connection between ethnic communities.

The Issue of the Age: Prohibition in Chicago

The image of Chicago in the 'Roaring Twenties' rests deep in the psyche of the average American, with thoughts of bootleggers, gangsters, tommy guns, and moonshiners. Prohibition allowed for the proliferation of organized crime across the country in the 1920s and famously in Chicago; however, that element of prohibition is well-covered and is not my focus here. Instead, of interest is the effect that prohibition had on the Chicagoan electorate as an issue, and as an issue it would dominate the political conversation for much of the 1920s.

Prohibition, the word used to describe the period governed by the 18th amendment, which restricted the sale and manufacture of alcohol, and the Volstead Act, which enforced the amendment, had its roots in the Temperance movement. Groups like the Anti-Saloon League, which stretched back membership into the 19th century, began to gain ground in many states, Illinois included. Many politicians identified the Temperance movement as a jumping-off point for elections, particularly in the rural sections of the country where Temperance was most popular. For ethnic groups in cities like Chicago, Temperance and Prohibition were issues instituted upon them; the movements and respective political actions garnered little support in mostly working class metropolitan areas. In Chicago, referendums on Prohibition were nearly unanimous for the period's entirety; in five separate referendums from 1919 to 1933, opposition rates ran from 72 to 92 percent of the vote. (Cohen, p. 255)

This issue would play a major hand in the 1931 election, as Thompson was a firm Republican 'dry' politician, with alleged connections to Al Capone and Chicago's organized crime. Cermak would stand apart from this as a 'wet' ethnic politician. Given that the voters most firmly dissatisfied by Prohibition were ethnic European workers, Cermak's stance on the issue would garner him even more support from these vitally important ethnic communities.

“The World's Fair Mayor:” The 1931 Democratic Primary

The study of the 1931 mayoral election is not confined to the general election that culminated in Anton Cermak's victory over the incumbent William Hale Thompson on April 6th. The story really begins in the primaries of the respective Democratic and Republican parties. In fact, a study of the primaries is crucial to obtaining the maximum amount of relevant information for the purposes of understanding voter choice. This is largely because the primary campaigns are where platforms are hashed out and honed, where the party as a whole decides which issues are priorities and votes for the candidate most ready to defend those priorities in the general election. It stands to reason, then, that the primaries may also contain points of intraparty contention, the time that fissures within party lines become most apparent. It follows as well that when searching for points of party dissatisfaction among ethnic groups, a careful study of the electoral primaries is crucial. This is all true of the 1931 mayoral election.

Anton Cermak's path to the Democratic ticket was decidedly different than William Thompson's was to the Republican spot, as Thompson was an incumbent and had been in and out of the mayoralty for more than a decade. As covered earlier, by the late 1920s Cermak had risen to a prominent position within the Chicago Democratic party after many years of political experience. His major opportunity to become the frontrunner and de facto leader of the local Democratic party came when George Brennan - the Irish party leader whose organization Cermak was a part of - died in 1928. Cermak had made political alliances with certain prominent members of the Chicago Democratic party, alliances that reflected his understanding of the cultural underpinnings of Democratic suborganization. He allied with such individuals as Pat Nash, an Irish politician with rare ties to the black community, (Allswang, *Bosses*, 109) and prominent Jewish Moe Rosenberg and Jacob Arvey. With these alliances, and his ability to assign other ethnic leaders to office as the President of the County Board, Cermak was able to

build a suborganization within the Democratic party that allowed him leverage against the mostly-Irish leadership bloc. This was also important for Cermak in the general election, as he had built his power base in the party without causing any publicly noticeable rifts, something at which the Republican leadership was less successful. (Allswang, *Ibid.*) With regard to African-American voters, this change in the factional dynamic of the Democratic party was of massive consequence, albeit delayed. What Cermak had done in the years just prior to his election as mayor would redefine a party platform that had been previously defined by Irish-Catholic leadership. The fact that a group that held such a small percentage of Chicago's population was so powerful in one of its two major parties was an issue for the “new” immigrants, and abhorrent to the still-Republican African-Americans. As an example, “constituting only about 5 percent of the city's population in 1926, the Irish held 33 of the 50 Democratic ward chairmanships; 25 of the party's 42 candidates for county office were Irish.” (Buenker, *Dynamics of Chicago Ethnic Politics 1900-1930*, p. 196)

The prominent Irish-Catholic faction, led by Roger Sullivan and George Brennan, “was not anti-ethnic. Both leaders had demonstrated considerable ethnic consciousness in making up party tickets and in seeking votes generally.” (Allswang, *House..* p. 152) However, in the late years of the 1920s, it would take an even keener understanding of ethnic politics and a willingness to use many ethnic groups to achieve Democratic victory overall – rather than to bolster Irish control of the party – to remain relevant at the top of the Democratic pecking order. This is where the Irish leaders failed. Their suborganizations were perceived as Catholic and “old immigrant,” indeed as many of their policies and stances were defined by these labels. The Catholicism of the Irish leaders was an enormous factor in the perceptions of many groups, especially protestant or those that were largely non-observing. Being of the “older immigrant” class allowed the Irish leadership to gain footholds in Chicago politics, however this would prove to be somewhat of a disadvantage as “new,” often-

protestant, Democratic-leaning ethnic groups became more relevant.

While the Irish-Catholic Democratic leaders were able to utilize certain ethnic groups and remained standoffish with others, this did not apply to African-Americans. Chicago's blacks, already predisposed towards the Republican party, stood against almost every facet of the controlling Irish faction of the Democratic party. First and foremost, this faction was decidedly and publically anti-black. In the 1927 mayoral election for example, the reigning Democratic platform was largely defined by an anti-black stance, aimed at using Bill Thompson's control over African-American voters against him. Campaign distributions were filled with anti-black rhetoric, some stating "Do you want Negroes or White Men to Run Chicago? Bye, Bye, blackbirds." (Allswang, *House.* p. 147) The campaign was so odious to Chicago's African Americans that "Thompson received 90% of the [black] vote...his margin of victory." (Ibid, p. 148) Important to consider too is the role of the large, Protestant, church-going community. Grimshaw maintains in *Bitter Fruit* that "the black church, rather than the Republican party, was the machine's principal opponent in the black wards." (Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, p 64) He attributes this religious component to a difference between moral appeal and the individual material appeal that could be found in the Democratic party. However, the very fact that the leadership of the Democratic party was perceived as staunchly Catholic was its own religious deterrent to the Protestant blacks. It is therefore not surprising that the black vote was so overwhelmingly Republican prior to the 1930s, if one adds these factors to the inherent African-American disposition towards the party of the Emancipator. Cermak partially alleviated these issues when his faction became dominant in the years leading up to the 1931 election. Of the highest order was his refusal to engage in anti-black campaign techniques and rhetoric. He also immediately shifted some of his party's policies toward being more African-American friendly, a point I will examine further in the section on the 1931 general election. Cermak stood out as a new type of leader in the Democratic party, something that needed to occur before African-Americans could even consider abandoning the Republican party. After his

reelection as president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners in 1930, Cermak emerged as the preeminent Democrat for the party's mayoral nomination. His body of work prior to this nomination did not go unnoticed by the African-American community.

Beginning of the End: The Fall of Mayor “Big Bill” Thompson

Bill Thompson's campaigning in the years prior to the 1931 general election also did not go unnoticed by the African-American community. However, it was of the opposite type of attention, as Thompson's actions post-1927 led to many raised eyebrows amongst those in his historically unwavering black voting bloc. By this time, Thompson had already begun to alienate many of the ethnic groups gaining relevance in Chicago. This was in large part due to his support of “America First” during his 1927 mayoral campaign, a nativist platform that was off-putting and made little sense to most immigrant groups, especially newer ones. This aspect of his did not affect African-American support, though it did push Thompson's reliance on black support to an all-time high. This proved to be damaging when, in 1930, Thompson believed his clout to be high enough amongst black political leaders that he asked them and their supporters to vote for a Democratic Senatorial candidate, J. Ham. Lewis, over the Republican nominee, Ruth Hanna McCormick. This may have been in part related to the fact that Mrs. McCormick was connected to the *Chicago Tribune*, a newspaper that did not support Thompson. (Allswang, *Bosses*.. p 105) Earlier, the *Chicago Tribune* acted as a plaintiff in the “experts' fees” case against Thompson. In the trial, the Thompson and others in the mayor's office were accused of providing false salaries amounting to nearly three million dollars to so-called “real estate experts.” (Allswang, *House*.. p152) Thompson and the other defendants would be found guilty in the case, and were due to owe over two million dollars in damages. Though he remained mayor, this event would remove Thompson from politics and more; he apparently “started drinking more, and spent the greater part of the next two years in semiseclusion.” (Allswang, *Ibid*.) The next time Thompson took part in politics was in aforementioned opposition to Mrs. McCormick. Given McCormick's *Tribune* connection, it is not wholly out of bounds to assume that Thompson engaged himself against her senatorial campaign as a measure of revenge. The *Tribune* itself reported that the circular that Thompson had issued was “a combined attack upon Mrs. Ruth Hanna McCormick...and upon *The*

Tribune.” (*Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 23 1930) The *Tribune* went on to note the circular's text, quoting it saying to its black audience: “Those who vote for a member of *The Chicago Tribune* family for the high office of United States Senator may jeopardize their lives because a seat in the senate would again give great political power to a McCormick and *The Tribune* to use against public peace and peaceful citizens.” (*Chicago Tribune*, *Ibid.*) However, Thompson vastly overestimated his influence in the black community, and many leaders and newspapers that had previously given the mayor their support publically denounced him for attempting to mislead black voters. The African-American congressman Oscar De Priest, formerly a close ally and organizer for Thompson, railed against the mayor for this action. Interestingly, De Priest owed a great deal of his election to congress to Thompson, having received the mayor's support for his district's nomination in 1928. (*Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 8 1928) This did not stop De Priest from criticizing Thompson in 1930. In the *Tribune*, the very newspaper and controlling family that Thompson claimed was so harmful to black voters, De Priest argued forcefully against Thompson's actions. “I propose to spend the rest of the time until election advising our people to pay no attention to the ravings of Mayor Thompson,” he said, “...He talks about what he has done for the colored race, but he should remember that three times it was we who saved him from defeat. I don't propose to see him use our people as his cats-paws.” (*Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 27 1930) This was the most dramatic and outspoken of Oscar De Priest's reactions to Thompson, but it was not to be the last of them. He sent out special circulars and newspapers with the intention of bringing down the Democratic opponent, J. Ham. Lewis. De Priest was not the only African-American opposition to Thompson's efforts. The Chicago branch of the NAACP and the *Chicago Bee*, an African-American newspaper, criticized Thompson's actions, and the *Defender* said nothing in his defense. Allswang notes that this was a watershed moment for Big Bill's relationship with the African-American community, stating that “Thompson was the big loser. His [African-American] support would never again be as great as it had been, and a number of his close [African-American] allies left him.

(Allswang, *House..* p. 149) This obviously does not show that Thompson's supporters broke for the Democratic party prior to 1931, as much of this criticism was a result of Thompson supporting a Democrat. It does show that Thompson's most stalwart supporters, the African-Americans were willing and able to break with him and his party if cause was found to do so. Though his position amongst the Republican party and his supporters was shaky when it came time for the 1931 mayoral election, Thompson was able to secure the Republican nomination. However, the 1931 general election would prove how shaky Thompson's position had become, even amongst his most loyal of supporters, the African-Americans.

Before moving on to an examination of the 1931 general election, it is important to note a few things about both candidates' actions in regard to African-American perceptions. Specifically, there is a clear distinction between the perception of a political party in general, and of the individuals and leaders that make up that party. This is especially true in regard to local political leaders. The loyalty that many of Chicago's African-Americans had for the Republican party in general was somewhat different from their loyalty towards "Big" Bill Thompson. Since the 19th century, blacks had little cause or motivation to move away from the Republican party. Southern Democrats remained a major source of black disenfranchisement nationwide. But, this is tacit support; the level of active support that Republicans received from African-Americans varied, and was limited. The support that Thompson received from his black constituency, however, far exceeded the general level of support provided to the Republicans. Beyond the general level of support Thompson received for being Republican, it was clear that "Big Bill" exercised as strong an emotional and organizational hold on Chicago's [blacks] as probably any politician has ever exercised on a like group in the history of American politics." (The Chicago Negro Voter and the Democratic Consensus: A Case Study, 1918-1936 Author(s): John M. Allswang Source:)

Therefore, the important factor to take away from an examination of the events prior to the general election is not necessarily related to African-Americans' relationship with the Republican

party. It is instead the black voters' relationship with Mayor Thompson. The fact that a man who had such an extraordinary ability to influence the African-American ethnic group lost this ability in the years prior to his ousting as Chicago mayor is supportive of this thesis.

Nasty, Brutish, and Short: The 1931 General Election

The story of the 1931 general election is demonstrative of the changes that were occurring in both of Chicago's political parties. It is also a story of a rather fast and furious campaign, as both candidates were only officially selected in their primaries by February, 1931. The primary bouts were intense because of their length, the general election campaign was intense because of its brevity. Rightly, many studies of the 1931 election focus on Anton Cermak, on his ability to form an ethnic coalition and on the "birth" of the Chicago machine. This of course will be part of my focus. However, by examining the events with an eye to how they might be perceived by Chicago's black voters of the time, it will be possible to deduce qualities of the election that had an effect on the African-American realignment of the mid '30s. By 1931, Thompson was on shaky ground within his own party. He had received the Republican nomination for mayor, largely due to his status as an incumbent, but the rank and file of the party had begun to split into factions.

The difference in strategy between the two mayoral candidates was apparent from the start. In his first speech after being nominated, Thompson "told of the dire things that will befall his Democratic opponent," and "promised a 'lot of dirt,' in the upcoming meetings. (*Chicago Tribune*, March 15, 1931) Cermak responded by promising a clean campaign from his end, stating that "there is no use talking against Thompson. Everything that could be said against him has been said already." (*Chicago Tribune*, March 15, 1931) Soon, Thompson decided to move his campaign in a nativist direction, perhaps recognizing Cermak's Czech origins as a weakness for him to exploit. Thompson had of course supported "America First" in Chicago, the program was also allegedly of his own creation. (Allswang, *House...* p 104) The public's perception of Thompson as a nativist was not all-encompassing, his actions up to 1931 were not directly assaulting particular ethnic groups and his status amongst these groups was not adversely affected. This would change in 1931. Thompson chose to attack Cermak's ethnic immigrant background as a major point in his campaign. This point is illustrated by perhaps the

most famous line from the mayoral campaign, a rhyming taunt focused on Anton Cermak: “Tony, Tony where's your pushcart at? Can you imagine a world's fair mayor with a name like that?” (*Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1931) The quote also illustrates the extra gravity given to this particular mayoral election, as this mayor would be in office for the world's fair that was to be held in Chicago, a high honor. If Thompson thought that this extra gravity would sharpen the edge of his ethnic attack on Cermak, he was mistaken. Many ethnic groups simply did not understand where Thompson was coming from, according to their newspapers, and some groups found this type of campaigning to be outright offensive. One Polish newspaper for example, wrote that “This campaign is not only against Anton Cermak, but also all of those who are not North Americans. (*Polish National Alliance*, via Allswang, *Bosses...* p. 110) Given that Cermak had successfully been organizing many of these groups within the Democratic party for years, their displeasure with Thompson's tactics severely hurt his campaign and bolstered Cermak's. However, this nativist stand by Thompson did not really affect Thompson's relationship with Chicago's blacks, one of the only cohesive ethnic groups in Chicago that remained indifferent to the ideals of “America First,” having been in the country for many generations. De Priest, the African-American leader who had criticized Thompson in the primary and earlier, nevertheless supported Thompson in the general election. This was also true of many other African-American leaders in Chicago, despite their shaken confidence in Thompson prior to 1931. Allswang notes that Thompson's relationship with Chicago's blacks was “not as close as before,” and that *The Defender* “virtually ignored the election and made no endorsements...Thompson's grip on his Negro support was not what it had been.” (Allswang, *House for...* p. 160) Thompson also suffered in the general election from the perception of his latest stint as mayor. Some of the battles he fought while in the office affected him adversely during the election. For instance, Thompson's “bitter fight over control of the city's schools in 1927-28, had alienated much of the city's leadership... groups like the Municipal Voter's League, and leaders like Emily Dean of the Illinois Republican Women's Clubs”

(Allswang, *Bosses...* p. 111) Furthermore, the public's perception of Thompson was mired by his alleged association with criminals and multiple, albeit unsubstantiated, allegations of corruption and ineptitude. Cermak knew as the election approached that many advantages were already his. However, he left little to chance. His attention to the organizational control of the local party was disciplined and effective, and stood as a stark contrast to the organization of the local Republicans. This was evident even before the candidates were completely set, as Cermak instructed his party members to not interfere in the Republican primary.

Ultimately, Cermak won the 1931 mayoral election, and he won it by a landslide. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Cermak had won by 191,916 votes out of a total number 1,143,142, adding the subtitle 'Worst Defeat in City History.' (*Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1931) The *Tribune* had been predicting Cermak's victory for weeks, based on poll data, so the victory came as no surprise to Chicagoans, and indeed, Cermak and his supporters. Cermak was able to take majorities in every ethnic group in the city save Italians and African-Americans, with many of these groups voting “more Democratic than in any other mayoralty of the period.” (Allswang, *House for...* p. 160)

In the days after the election, the *Chicago Tribune* would examine the Thompson legacy, with subheadlines like “End Regime Filled with Scandal,” and “Gloom Shrouds Thompson and City Hall Crew.” (*Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1931; April 9, 1931) The media noted that a “reason for his defeat was the refusal of Republican leaders who opposed him in the primary to come into his camp.” (*Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1931) Newspapers also reported that Thompson was the one who had infused the 'dirt' into the campaign, and that he had relied too much on appeals to race, and religion. The *Tribune*, in addition to its objective reporting of the election results, published an editorial berating Thompson for his recognition of the *Tribune* “as his chief enemy,” and also claimed that “For Chicago, Thompson has meant filth, corruption, obscenity, idiocy, and bankruptcy.” (*Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 1931) After his defeat, Thompson left for New Orleans on a poorly attended Mississippi tour that had

been intended as a victory lap pre-election; he was never again prominent in Chicago politics. Anton Cermak moved swiftly as mayor, and though his reign would not last long, it would produce lasting consequences.

Tony's Pushcart: Cermak as Mayor

Though short, Cermak's tenure as mayor of Chicago was momentous, both for what he accomplished and for what he allowed his Democratic allies to accomplish after his death. In general, Cermak recognized that the coalition that he had built in order to take the mayoralty could be maintained. To strengthen his machine, Cermak targeted both groups that had not supported him in 1931, the blacks and the Italians. The pressures of Italian ethnic politicians and the powerful presence of organized crime - which generally supported Thompson - in the Italian wards had caused this group to vote Republican. Cermak sought Italian politicians to serve city positions and supported many on his Democratic ticket; he also began to curtail the influence of organized crime, being a wet politician who connected his campaign with efforts to reduce the corruption of city hall. Cermak also introduced black politicians to his ticket, and sought to develop a black Democratic suborganization that was allied with his coalition.

Ultimately, it was not Cermak's tenure as mayor itself but the power of the organization that he built and this organization's effect on subsequent local and national elections that would have a lasting effect on the city of Chicago. After Cermak was killed by a bullet intended for President Roosevelt in 1933, his machine would be transformed into the Nash-Kelly machine, named after Pat Nash and Mayor Edward Kelly. Though this meant that control of the Democratic organization returned to Irish hands in the years following Cermak's death, these were Irish politicians who had formed with Cermak's suborganization, and stood apart from the Democratic Irish "old guard." Nash and Kelly were able to use the organization that Cermak built to keep Chicago in the hands of Democrats, and even used its power to influence national policies during the New Deal period. The legacy of Cermak's machine continued beyond this next manifestation, into the Daley machine and in some regards into the present, defining Chicago politics for decades.

Changing Times: The Black Democratic Realignment

The events that characterized the political climate at the end of the 1920s showed a change in the voting behavior of many groups, particularly Chicago's ethnic groups. However, for African-American voters, change in voting behavior was not immediate. Eventually this group that had been of importance for the past decade would follow the trend that many other of Chicago's ethnic groups began to follow. Yet, there was an unmistakable delay in this transformation: the Democratic alignment for most ethnic groups was either in progress or complete for most ethnic groups by the end of the 1931 mayoral election; African-Americans did not definitively begin voting Democratically until 1936. If the change in Chicago's African-American electorate was indeed tied to the political campaigns of the late twenties, this delay would seem to be problematic. After all, if sentiments were changing among Chicago's blacks during these campaigns, shouldn't that change have been reflected in the election itself? It is therefore important to explore the actual period of realignment that occurred in the mid-1930s for black voters. For the sake of objectivity, my analysis will be confined to sources that discuss only the period in question, 1932-1941. However, the point of this analysis will be to illuminate credible and significant connections between the sentiments of this later period and the events of the late 1920s' political campaigns.

Of course, the national climate, both politically and economically, was changing during this period as rapidly as the local climate. The beginning of the Great Depression is usually attributed to the stock market crash of 1929, but by 1931 the unemployment effects of the Depression were becoming abundantly evident, and Chicago was not excepted. Also characterizing this phase was the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, the first Democratic president to be elected since Woodrow Wilson. A relevant combination of these two events is the establishment of the New Deal, a series of economic programs instituted by the FDR administration from 1933-1936 aimed at staving off the effects of the

Depression. It is important to determine the effect that the election and actions of Roosevelt had on black realignment in Chicago in order to gauge this effect relative to the local campaigns of the late '20s. There is some debate among scholars as to the genesis of the black conversion to the Democratic party in national elections. One interpretation is the socioeconomic draw of Democratic policies during the Depression. That is, black Democratic votes came from converted Republican African-Americans who were motivated to exchange their votes according to their economic needs. Gosnell (1967) and Grimshaw (1992) reject this interpretation. Rather, they attribute the national conversion to a “complex explanation involving generational change...and social class – the tendency of many middle class blacks to view 'politics in a more realistic fashion.’” (Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, p.53)

Rather than Andersen's “favors-for-votes” interpretation of socioeconomic pressures for party change, I find that more attention should be paid to the economic and labor policies of the Democratic party. The economic agenda for the national and local Democratic party would benefit the black population, the group largely confined to the lower quadrants of the socioeconomic spectrum. Thus economic pressures were important, but African-American acknowledgment of the benefits of Democratic policy was repressed by other aspects of the party. The lingering racist agenda of the southern Democrats was perhaps the most important factor in delaying African-American conversion. I will examine this factor, with special emphasis on examples of how African-American sentiment towards the Democratic party changed during the realignment period.

“Do YOU want to vote for a NEGRO:” The Lingering Racism of Southern Democrats

The institutional agendas aimed at disenfranchising blacks in the southern U.S began shortly after the end of the Civil War. In the late reconstruction period, many political offices were again taken by white Democratic candidates, in some cases with the help of voter intimidation practices. As lingering Union forces began to be withdrawn from the southern states, elected officials began to enact Jim Crow laws. These were laws aimed at making it difficult and in some cases impossible for African-Americans to vote; they often took the form of literacy tests and poll taxes. Even as many African-Americans began to move north during the Great Migration period, the institutional racism of the southern Democrats galvanized into the ethnic group's major political issue. Though many blacks were able to escape the jurisdiction of the Jim Crow laws by fleeing north, by the early 20th century the southern Democratic party had grown into a powerful sect with a national agenda as well. This element in Congress was able to block any early attempts at civil rights legislation, such as anti-lynching laws and laws aimed at equality. The disproportional national presence of the southern Democrats further provoked the ire towards the Democratic party as a whole from African-Americans who had managed to escape areas of disenfranchisement. It is important to note that racism was not confined to southern states in any degree, many Democratic campaigns designed in non-Jim-Crow states used racially charged rhetoric as the black vote became more important for Republican success. This too added to the African-American distrust of the Democratic party even in northern states, as often these politicians were complicit with if not supportive of the racist agendas of their southern brethren. In Chicago, events such as the 1919 race riot exacerbated racial tensions between African-Americans and other ethnic groups, particularly the largely Democratic Irish population, as described earlier. The riots occurred after the drowning of an African-American teenager, and while both whites and blacks engaged in retaliatory behavior, violence by whites was more widespread, and in some cases even

supported by the all-white police forces. Thus, while Chicago was not subject to the overt institutional racism of the Jim Crow laws, the racist elements of the Democratic party pervaded local politics in the 19th century.

These elements of the southern Democratic party continued well into the beginning of the 20th century. African-Americans in Chicago, and elsewhere, experienced difficulties imagining the Democratic party as a possible political choice given the continued institutional racism displayed by this party sect, even as Democratic policies became more appealing to the black electorate. In the years after the 1931 mayoral election, this disconnect between the appealing nature of some northern Democratic candidates and the reviled nature of the Democratic party as a whole became more pronounced. In 1932, a D.J. Russell published in *The Defender* a letter he sent to three Democratic senators. In it, he makes a bold statement about many of his fellow African-Americans: “I will say that today most all the Negroes in the United States would vote for the Democrats if they would advocate and give the Negro his vote with the abolishment of lynching.” (*The Defender*, Jan 9th, 1932) While such a statement should not be taken as representative, it shows a point of view in the African-American community open to conditionally advocating for the Democratic party. Another editorial, published two months later by a Dr. G.F. Waters and entitled 'Our Political Future,' reads: “The Negro is a Republican by tradition. If you ask the average one just why he votes the Republican ticket nine times out of ten he will tell you because his foreparents did so.” The editorial goes on to state that “What America needs today most of all is two strong political parties, and what the Negro needs to do is to divide his vote.” (*The Defender*, Mar 6th, 1932)

The change in sentiment continued into the second half of the 1930s. One editorial in the *Defender* from October 1936 acknowledges that some actions of northern Democrats are appealing, but stresses their inadequacy in the face of the party's racism. It reads: “I have read most of the articles appearing in Negro magazines ... advising Negroes to vote the Democratic ticket in the coming

election but not a single one offers hope for the benefit of the Negro.” The editorial goes on to add that “Your Democratic lords are against you, and all the Democrats in the North, East, and West cannot change their attitude or conduct.” (*The Defender*, October 31, 1936) The sentiment expressed in this article and others was common amongst African-Americans nationwide, even as late as 1936, a critical year in which a majority of black Chicagoan voters went Democratic in both local and national elections. By 1940, it is clear that many of Chicago's African-Americans had found reason to align with the Democrats, locally and nationally, despite continuing issues with the southern party sect. Consider what the publisher of *The Chicago Defender*, John H. Sengstacke wrote in his newspaper following the Democrat's victory in the 1940 reelection of President Roosevelt:

“A recent statistical study showing an overwhelming proportion of votes cast by Negroes in both the industrial and the farm sectors for the return of the New Deal to power. This proves that the Negro is no longer blindly welded to the Republican party. It also proves that the American black man is now using the ballot to advance his political interest regardless of sentimentality and tradition...For 75 years members of the Race have been paying a political debt to the Grand Ole Party. That debt was paid long ago, but the leadership of the party had them using .. an entry sheet with no credit.” (*The Defender*, Nov. 30, 1940)

I believe Sengstacke's excerpt effectively summarizes the decade of black realignment as a whole. It is even reasonable to assume that Sengstacke is referring to Thompson when he writes about Republican leadership. It is also reasonable to assume that one of the major factors preventing Chicago's blacks from voting for Democratic candidates in earlier elections was the national influence of the southern Democrats, and that this influence overshadowed any appealing aspects of the Democratic party prior to the late 1930s. In Chicago, this applies to Roosevelt and his New Deal, just as it applies to Anton Cermak and his ethnic coalition of 1931.

A Lasting Legacy: Conclusions

The shifting landscape in America in the early 20th century was the cause of many changes in Chicago. The universally American story of immigration had momentous and lasting consequences in the Windy City, as it did nationwide. The story of African-American life intersected with these external changes in myriad ways, and it is these intersections that complicated black America's understanding of its place in a changing political landscape, and of its identity as an ethnic group in a country that often ignored or hurt its members. The Democratic party was a changing entity in the interwar period, and its many segments were changing at different speeds and in different directions. Anton Cermak was a representative of the new direction of the Democratic party of the time. His political career was built upon an understanding of the ethnic complexities of the United States in the interwar period, a rejection of the waste and corruption that made the Roaring Twenties famous, and an agenda that emphasized the plight of the destitute and disenfranchised. In this way, he was of the same mold as FDR, and could have very well been an integral part of Roosevelt's Democratic coalition had he survived into the New Deal period. Cermak's representation of this new direction, coupled with political savvy, is what garnered his momentous ethnic support in the mayoral election of 1931. Though Cermak offered a platform that would ultimately be beneficial for Chicago's African-Americans relative to alternatives, the political realities of the time made it impossible for him to fully garner their support. In truth, this was partially due to the fact that Cermak did not have a strategic advantage in turning Chicago's blacks on to his campaign, and thus did not devote resources in an attempt to do so. Though many African-Americans may have found Cermak's policies appealing even as early as 1931, the Democratic party's tendency towards racist policies and strategies, both in Chicago's Irish-led old guard and entrenched in the southern Democrats' national and local agenda, made it unthinkable for Chicago's black voters to consider him as a candidate. This was true in spite of Cermak's refusal to engage in racist campaign

advertising and techniques. Cermak's reputation during his short stint as mayor is proof enough that he was ready and willing to include the African-American voting bloc into his coalition, even if that group was not ready to enter his constituency. Yet, with a broken Thompson following the events of 1931, Chicago's African-Americans were set on a path of political realignment. The changing sentiments of Chicago's black leaders and journalists are representative of the group's sentiments as a whole. That is, that by 1940, Chicago's African-American population felt no remaining loyalty towards the party of the emancipator, and that this ever-more-active electorate began to vote according to its interests as American citizens. This is not to say that either party represented an ideal choice for Chicago's blacks at the time, but that the African-American bloc began to choose based on relatively more beneficial political platforms. As the Republican party in Chicago had begun to manipulate and rely on the African-American vote to further all of its policies, it was a particularly opportune time for such a change to occur. In Chicago, the direction of each parties' agenda during the realignment period had its roots in the campaigns of the 1931 elections. The effect of these directional changes was easily seen in most of Chicago's ethnic groups, but was delayed in the voting behavior of Chicago's blacks. This change was slowed, by the disjointed nature of the national Democratic agenda and by African-American's sentimental and traditional resonance with the G.O.P of Chicago. The change was slowed, but by 1936, it was complete.

Ultimately, the Democratic coalition that was built in Chicago would be a lasting one. As the decades progressed, Chicago was transformed from a city with a two-party tradition to the de facto headquarters of the Democratic party. Today, perhaps the most lasting influential voting tradition in Chicago is that of the city's African-Americans. This group, like Chicago, has been steadfastly Democratic for generations, and is a major influence on both the local and national agendas of the party. Yet, unlike in the 1930s, Chicago's African-Americans have developed a voice that is respected equally in the political landscape. Though racial issues continue to plague Chicago, the days are over

when politicians are able to turn ethnic groups into cogs in the political machine. Instead, Chicago produced the first African-American U.S. President, a testament to how far the formerly disenfranchised group has come.

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