

Beyond the Crossroads: Memphis at the Threshold of Non-Racial Politics?

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Abstract

In their account of Memphis' 1991 and 1995 mayoral elections, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, Marcus Pohlmann and Michael Kirby describe the transition—by a plurality of 71 votes—of Memphis' government from control by conservative whites to control by African Americans. They find strong evidence that support for the two major candidates in 1991 was highly contingent upon race, with African Americans overwhelmingly supporting the eventual winner, W. W. Herenton¹. While the 1995 election was much less conflictual, owing mainly to token opposition from three weak white candidates, 1999's election included five serious challengers, creating a much different dynamic. In the end, Herenton was re-elected to a third term as mayor, although (as in 1991) he failed to secure a majority of the votes cast.

This paper presents an analysis of the precinct-level results of the 1999 election. It also tests five hypotheses about elections in post-1991 Memphis that Pohlmann and Kirby advance, finding that, contrary to their tentative conclusions from the 1991 election, that Herenton has failed to build a broad interracial coalition; instead, the results of the 1999 election can best be seen as the outcome of the continuing failure of whites to advance a consensus candidate who could also attract some black crossover voters dissatisfied with both Herenton and the Ford family.

¹Dr. Herenton has alternately gone by "W. W." and "Willie" over the past 20 years; he is currently using the latter, but used his initials at the time of the 1991 election.

The 1991 election of Dr. W. W. Herenton as mayor of Memphis has been viewed as a “crossroads” in the municipal history of that city. However, unlike other elections that first brought black mayors to power in America, there was an absence of significant support from white liberals² for Herenton (Pohlmann and Kirby 1996: 189). In the intervening eight years, observers have argued that Herenton built something of a cross-over following among whites, particularly within the business community. However, the 1995 election did not really test whether Herenton’s support was due to active support from whites, or just the lack of any meaningful alternatives. The 1999 election, by contrast, appears to have produced candidates for all tastes: the six leading candidates were the incumbent, Herenton (black); a member of the Shelby County Commission, Shep Wilbun (black); a former county commissioner, Pete Sisson (white), who received the endorsement of the county Republican committee; a city council member and funeral home director, Joe Ford (black); a former city council woman, Mary Rose McCormick (white); and a professional wrestler, Jerry “The King” Lawler (white). Do the results of this election help us to decide whether Memphis has truly moved beyond racialized politics? The outcome of this election are ambiguous on this point, though it is safe to say that Herenton’s most recent victory rested on substantial support from within both the white and black communities.

²White liberals, for historical reasons, are relatively uncommon in Memphis; see Pohlmann and Kirby 1996: 13–14 for much of the background.

1 Hypotheses

In Chapter 9 of *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, Pohlmann and Kirby advance five “possible scenarios” of future elections in Memphis. They are summarized here as follows:

HYPOTHESIS ONE: (“Reversal of 1991”) The 1991 election was an aberration in which African-American voters were highly mobilized by the Ford machine and a black community that was unified behind a particular candidate. Even without a split in the black community, turnout within the community could fall in subsequent elections, leading to the victory of a white conservative candidate due to poor black turnout.

HYPOTHESIS TWO: (“Black Disunity”) The 1991 election was an aberration because blacks decided to support a consensus candidate. Future elections could lead to the victory of a white conservative if two or more strong black candidates emerge and fragment the black vote; even though the white conservative would receive a minority of votes, he or she could win because Memphis no longer has a runoff provision in mayoral elections.

HYPOTHESIS THREE: (“Return of a White Majority”) Due to annexations of predominantly white suburban areas, or a successful effort at city-county consolidation, whites return to majority status within the city. This leads to a return of the pre-1991 pattern of victories by white conservatives.³

³As a point of historical fact, annexations by Memphis have resumed due to the 1998 settlement of the Hickory Hill annexation lawsuit and a more favorable (to cities) annexation law passed by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1998. However, this scenario is no longer likely, because “white flight” has occurred from areas under annexation threat by Memphis (including Hickory Hill, which is likely to become majority African-American in the coming few years) to neighboring Tipton and Fayette counties (which are off-limits under the 1998 legislation), northern Mississippi, or to the annexation reserve areas of the predominantly white suburban municipalities. There are almost certainly too few remaining whites in unincorporated Shelby County to allow the return of a white majority, unless the suburban municipalities were to be abolished by the legislature. Hence, this hypothesis will be disregarded in the subsequent analysis.

HYPOTHESIS FOUR: (“Whites as Moderators”) In this scenario, blacks remain the majority group but whites “moderate” conflict within the black community by supporting more moderate African-American candidates.

HYPOTHESIS FIVE: (“Interracial Coalition”) White and black political leaders work together to produce an interracial coalition which appeases both communities while downplaying antagonistic sentiments between the groups.

2 Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, several models of turnout and candidate support are estimated using data from the 7 October 1999 municipal elections in Memphis and voter registration data as of 31 December 1999. Data from 227 of the city’s 234 precincts are used. The remaining 7 precincts are partially within the city, but also include unincorporated areas; separate registration data for the portions solely within Memphis are unavailable.

Ideally, a form of ecological inference, such as that proposed by King (1997), would provide the strongest evidence for testing these hypotheses. However, existing software packages incorporating King’s method do not handle situations with more than two candidates particularly well. Therefore, estimates are made using aggregate data, with the caveat that making strong inferences about the behavior of individuals from these estimates is fallacious. What is possible with these estimates, however, is to get a general impression of how voters behaved in the election; due to the high degree of *de facto* racial segregation in Memphis, we can get a fairly reasonable estimate of how whites and blacks

differed in their turnout and support for the candidates.

A number of variables were created from the precinct-level registration and voting data, as follows:

Turnout Turnout was simply operationalized as the percentage⁴ of registered voters who actually voted in the mayor’s race. This measure may miss some voters who abstained from the mayoral contest, but voted in down-ticket races for the city council and other municipal posts; it also disregards the raw voting-age population of the precinct. However, since it has been 9 years since the most recent census, precinct-level populations are likely to be inaccurate, particularly when broken down by race.

Black Population This variable is the percentage of white and black registered voters who are black. Tennessee records voter registration in three racial categories: “white,” “black,” and “other.” However, the “other” category includes whites and blacks who register by mail, in addition to other ethnic groups. Consequently, the “other” category is omitted from this analysis. Although Memphis does have a growing Hispanic population, many are non-citizens; it is also unclear whether they align themselves politically with blacks or whites, or even how Hispanic registrants are coded by the election commission.

Candidate Vote The votes for the six leading candidates (those receiving at least two percent of the vote) are converted to percentages of the six-candidate vote in each precinct. In addition, a “black candidate vote” measure was obtained by adding the percentages for the three leading African-American candidates.

Effective Number of Races This measure is an attempt to estimate the racial heterogeneity of precincts. It is based on Laakso and Taagepera’s “effective number of parties” measure, which is defined as:

$$E = \sum_i \frac{1}{p_i^2}$$

where p (in $[0, 1]$) is the fraction of the vote (or seats) received by that party. For the purposes of this discussion, p is the percentage of the precinct’s registered voters that is of a particular race (white or black); a wholly-white or wholly-black precinct would have an E of 1.0, while a precinct in which whites and blacks are equal in registrants would have an E of 2.0.

⁴All percentages in these analyses are coded on the scale $[0, 1]$.

This variable is included in the models, along with an interaction with the precinct-level black population, to test whether Huckfeldt and Kohfeld's (1989) hypothesis of "racial threat" lead to a mobilization of voters in heterogeneous areas of the city.

Effective Number of Candidates This is a measure of the amount of fragmentation of votes within the precinct. It is calculated the same as the *Effective Number of Races*, but substituting candidate votes for registrant race. A precinct in which all 6 candidates received a sixth of the vote each would have an E of 6.0 (the maximum possible value); a precinct in which everyone voted for one candidate would have an E of 1.0 (the minimum).

Hickory Hill This dummy variable is used to represent the 13 precincts that were annexed by Memphis in 1998; it seems reasonable to assume that politics in this neighborhood would be different than politics in other areas of the city, since residents of this area would be less acclimatized to voting in Memphis elections.

Ford Senate Seat This dummy variable represents 48 precincts that are in the state senate district of John Ford, a brother of one of the candidates (Joe Ford). Since the Ford family has held elected office continuously for 30 years, and electoral districts are often gerrymandered for incumbent protection purposes, it is likely that District 29 is designed to encompass an area of Memphis with the highest level of support for the Ford family.

Ford Council Seat This variable represents the 31 precincts in the council district from which Joe Ford served. As with the *Ford Senate Seat*, this district is likely to have been gerrymandered to the Ford family's benefit.

An interaction term of the two Ford variables is also included, which represents the area of overlap of the two districts.

Some summary statistics about the precincts are presented in Tables 1–2.

To provide evidence for testing our hypotheses, models were estimated using ordinary least squares regression. The first model, presented in Table 4, estimates turnout based on precinct characteristics; the remaining models estimate support for particular candidates based on turnout and precinct characteristics.

Category	Percentage	Minimum	Maximum
Black Registrants	55.12%	0.08%	99.89%
Turnout	42.14%	19.67%	60.95%
Effective No. of Races	1.35	1.00	2.00

Table 1: Registration and Turnout by Precinct

Candidate	City-Wide Vote	Precincts Won
Herenton	45.90%	184 (81.1%)
Ford	25.35%	20 (8.8%)
Lawler	11.52%	16 (7.5%)
Sisson	10.80%	7 (3.1%)
Wilbun	3.49%	0 (0.0%)
McCormick	2.29%	0 (0.0%)

Table 2: Candidate Support

3 Analysis

Differential turnout was definitely a factor in this election. Turnout was significantly higher in predominantly white areas than in predominantly-black areas (though turnout was even more abysmal in mixed-race areas). At first glance, this would appear to confirm at least part of the “reversal of 1991” hypothesis, as there appears to have been a significant demobilization of black voters. However, turnout was positively associated with support for only two candidates, Herenton and Wilbun, both of whom are black. Perhaps black turnout would have been higher if one of the white candidates had been able to wage a more coherent campaign that seriously threatened black control of the city. Since municipal elections in Memphis are low-information affairs, with a non-partisan ballot, most theories of voter behavior (such as Downs 1957) predict a low turnout, particularly among less educated and less affluent voters, who are concentrated in the majority-black and heterogeneous neighborhoods of Memphis.

Surprisingly, turnout was not much better in the “Ford machine” areas of South Memphis than in other predominantly African-American neighborhoods (and, outside of Ford’s council seat, was relatively poor); it is unclear whether this result is due to poor mobilization of the family’s resources or a fragmentation of the Ford base (into Herenton and Ford camps). In any event, it stands in marked contrast to the 1991 scenario in which the Ford family was credited with mobilizing voters for Herenton’s victory. Turnout was not significantly different in the Hickory Hill neighborhood than in other portions of the city. Where people did mobilize, they apparently did so in support of Herenton and (to a much lesser extent) Wilbun; the other candidates appear to have had “hard core” supporters who were drowned out by the pro-Herenton turnout.

Not surprisingly, with the exception of Herenton and Wilbun (who showed virtually no effect), the remaining candidates did better in precincts with higher concentrations of voters sharing their own ethnicity (although this main effect was only significant for Ford, McCormick, and Sisson). Racial polarization of the electorate is also indicated by the coefficients in the effective number of candidates equation, which indicate that fragmentation of the vote was higher in more heterogeneous precincts. We can disconfirm the second hypothesis (“black disunity”) by pointing out that whites were only slightly more unified than blacks; white voters in mixed areas seem to have mobilized for Lawler, with more homogeneous areas mobilizing for Sisson and McCormick. However, Herenton received strong support from both homogeneous white and homogeneous black neighborhoods; if anything, there was a white disunity problem.

The voting results cannot speak to whether Memphis is experiencing a “whites as moderators” condition or a true “interracial coalition.” Predominantly white areas did not support the Ford campaign, perhaps owing to the perceptions of machine politics that have been associated with the Ford family by whites; instead, where they supported white candidates, they mobilized for Herenton and Wilbun, candidates who are perceived as more moderate. This depiction of events seems to reinforce the “whites as moderators” scenario; in any event, evidence of an interracial coalition would probably not be found in the electoral arena. It appears that whites have decided to acquiesce to black rule, at least for the time being; only time will tell if that attitude will continue when Herenton leaves office.

4 Conclusions

This paper presents some preliminary evidence that whites and blacks in Memphis are both willing to support moderate black candidates at the polls. However, it remains unclear whether Herenton’s continued success at the polls is simply based on the poor quality of the challengers he has been presented with. For example, a more prominent member of the Ford family, such as former congressman Harold Ford, Sr., might be more successful and appeal to a broader cross-section of voters than his relatively unknown brother; a more coherent campaign by a well-known white or black, such as a television personality, might also be successful. Herenton failed to get a majority of the vote, despite winning a plurality in over 80 percent of the city’s precincts; he is clearly not universally loved. He

has, however, successfully transformed his image from that of a black liberal to a moderate “friend of business,” apparently without seriously compromising his support among blacks. The key test will come when Herenton steps aside; how will Memphis react then? Only then can we truly decide if Memphis has gone beyond the crossroads.

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Black population	-0.308	0.091**
Effective no. of races	-0.222	0.044***
Black \times ENR	0.244	0.078**
Hickory Hill	-0.022	0.025
Ford Senate	-0.034	0.012*
Ford Council	0.059	0.024*
Ford \times Ford	-0.033	0.033
Intercept	0.700	0.053***
Adjusted R^2	0.2334	
Number of Cases	227	
F	10.83***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 3: Turnout by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	-1.372	0.335***
Black population	1.030	0.466*
Effective no. of races	1.779	0.229***
Black \times ENR	-1.969	0.397***
Hickory Hill	-0.095	0.123
Ford Senate	-0.302	0.085***
Ford Council	-0.110	0.123
Ford \times Ford	0.254	0.165
Intercept	2.052	0.352***
Adjusted R^2	0.7369	
Number of Cases	227	
F	80.12***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 4: Effective Number of Candidates, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	-0.205	0.033***
Black population	0.415	0.046***
Effective no. of races	0.003	0.023
Black \times ENR	-0.046	0.039
Hickory Hill	0.017	0.012
Ford Senate	0.024	0.008**
Ford Council	0.033	0.012**
Ford \times Ford	-0.026	0.016
Intercept	0.134	0.034***
Adjusted R^2	0.9348	
Number of Cases	227	
F	406.24***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 5: Support for Joe Ford, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	0.528	0.082***
Black population	-0.050	0.114
Effective no. of races	-0.078	0.056
Black \times ENR	0.193	0.096*
Hickory Hill	0.031	0.030
Ford Senate	0.031	0.021
Ford Council	-0.018	0.030
Ford \times Ford	-0.014	0.040
Intercept	0.221	0.085*
Adjusted R^2	0.3796	
Number of Cases	227	
F	18.28***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 6: Support for Willie Herenton, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	-0.299	0.057***
Black population	-0.099	0.080
Effective no. of races	0.086	0.039*
Black \times ENR	-0.118	0.068
Hickory Hill	-0.030	0.021
Ford Senate	-0.038	0.015**
Ford Council	-0.001	0.021
Ford \times Ford	0.021	0.028
Intercept	0.221	0.085***
Adjusted R^2	0.6775	
Number of Cases	227	
F	60.36***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 7: Support for Jerry Lawler, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	-0.015	0.036
Black population	-0.230	0.050***
Effective no. of races	-0.022	0.024
Black \times ENR	-0.023	0.042
Hickory Hill	-0.019	0.013
Ford Senate	-0.020	0.009*
Ford Council	-0.006	0.013
Ford \times Ford	0.018	0.018
Intercept	0.290	0.038***
Adjusted R^2	0.8422	
Number of Cases	227	
F	151.74***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 8: Support for Pete Sisson, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	0.021	0.010*
Black population	-0.001	0.014
Effective no. of races	0.008	0.007
Black \times ENR	0.008	0.012
Hickory Hill	0.011	0.004**
Ford Senate	0.003	0.003
Ford Council	-0.006	0.003
Ford \times Ford	0.000	0.005
Intercept	0.010	0.011
Adjusted R^2	0.1698	
Number of Cases	227	
F	6.78***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 9: Support for Shep Wilbun, by precinct

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Turnout	0.345	0.078***
Black population	0.363	0.108**
Effective no. of races	-0.067	0.053
Black \times ENR	0.155	0.092
Hickory Hill	0.059	0.028*
Ford Senate	0.057	0.020**
Ford Council	0.010	0.029
Ford \times Ford	-0.040	0.038
Intercept	0.364	0.082***
Adjusted R^2	0.8406	
Number of Cases	227	
F	150.02***	

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares estimates.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 10: Support for black candidates, by precinct

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