

The Great Migration and the Democratic Party: Black Voters and the Realignment of American Politics in the 20th Century, by Keneshia N. Grant, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2020, pp. 214, \$74.50 (hardback), \$27.95 (paperback), \$27.95 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-4399-1746-6 (paper)

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Between 1916 and 1970, more than 6.5 million Black Americans left rural southern homes for cities across the North and West. This Great Migration was transformational for Black migrants themselves, who sought jobs, housing, and the ballot which they were denied in the Jim Crow South. (We should, of course, not romanticize the limited opportunities northern cities offered in these regards.) But political scientist Keneshia N. Grant’s *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party: Black Voters and the Realignment of American Politics in the 20th Century* urges scholars to recognize the Great Migration not only as a process through which Black Americans were shaped, but as a vehicle through which Black Americans themselves actively reshaped the nation. Focusing on Detroit, New York, and Chicago, Grant argues that Black migrants harnessed political power to decisively shift the calculus for Democratic politicians in northern cities to address Black interests, as well as altering the make-up of party elites and officeholders to secure Black representation.¹ The political agency of Black Americans manifest in the Great Migration is a case study, for Grant, in “how people change the politics of a place” (5)

Central to Grant’s analysis is the claim that the growing Black population in northern cities wielded greater influence over the Democratic Party because they more frequently stood as the *balance of power* in municipal and state elections: the Black voting age population was often

¹ Grant’s focus on the Democratic Party is driven by the party’s dominance of politics in her three case-study cities (25).

larger than the margin of victory in an election, so that a decisive win among Black voters could decide a race. (Here Grant builds on prior work that examines the Black balance of power in national elections during the Great Migration (2019).) Politicians and parties were more responsive to the Black electorate— adopting policies Black voters widely supported and cooperating with Black candidates— when victory hung in the balance.

This core idea has intuitive force. Moreover, it was an idea, Grant observes, developed and deployed by Black intellectuals in the period (26-27). Grant traces the claim that Black people held a balance of power in American electoral politics to journalist T. Thomas Fortune's 1886 pamphlet "The Negro in Politics," in which he urged Black voters to temper their loyalty to the Republican Party for the sake of combating post-Reconstruction white retrenchment. W. E. B. Du Bois inserted the concept into public discourse around the 1920 presidential election, noting that "the Negro voter easily holds the balance of power" in a number of pivotal states— if they voted as a bloc. Henry Lee Moon's *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (1948) provided the touchstone scholarly treatment of the concept, which he used "to persuade political parties and candidates that the Black population should be a top priority in parties' strategies" (Grant, 27).

Yet Grant's analysis shows that important puzzles arise when we apply a traditional balance-of-power analysis to northern cities in this period. For instance, among Grant's three case-study cities, Black voters in Detroit held the balance of power in their city's mayoral elections more frequently than in New York or Chicago, but Black voters in the latter two cities were more successful in extracting favorable policies from candidates and putting Black representatives on the city council.

To address these empirical complications, as well as analytical challenges to balance of power explanations such as (Stone 1970) and (Walters 1988), Grant develops a sophisticated

refinement of how the balance of power drove a growing Black population's influence over their political environment in these cities. While Grant's account is multifaceted, four elements in particular stood out to this reviewer.

First, Grant shows that Black migrants had greater impact in cities where political parties or the electoral system were highly fragmented (35). In New York, a highly factional Democratic Party and a tradition of fusion politics enabled Black voters to consistently assert themselves as coalition partners, increasing Black voters' influence over candidates even when they did not strictly hold the balance of power by themselves (109-10). In Chicago, a ward-based electoral system gave de facto segregated Black voters control over discrete elements of the electoral system (135). Detroit's nonpartisan, at-large city council elections, by contrast, enabled candidates to circumvent Black voters and cater exclusively to white majorities (59-62). Holding the balance of power, Grant demonstrates, depends not only on having the numbers, but on having the numbers are organized in the right way.

Second, Grant holds that the response of parties to Black voters holding the balance of power could be positive *or negative* (10-12). Parties at times sought to suppress Black voters and marginalize Black candidates; these efforts were nevertheless ways in which political actors recognized and responded to the growing political power of their cities' Black populations and are appropriately characterized as impacts of Black voters holding the balance of power.

Third, Grant observes that the connection between the balance of power and policy is mediated by the beliefs of politicians. What affects party platforms and politicians' campaigns was not the mere fact that Black voters held the balance of power in an election, but that political actors *believed* that they held it (15). Grant thus incorporates documentary evidence about politicians' beliefs into her balance of power analysis (77-78, 109-111, 136-37).

Fourth, the realignment process through which Black voters shaped the Democratic Party in northern cities was distinctive. On the one hand, it was primarily a process of mobilizing Black migrants who had been blocked from electoral politics in the South (17). On the other hand, Black migrant voters came to northern cities with sophisticated political views (21-22). Black migrants mobilized themselves into the Democratic Party in pursuit of political aims that were part of their motivation to migrate in the first place, and they exhibited nuanced judgment in identifying the factions that would further these interests.

In this reviewer's estimation, Grant's elaboration of the factors involved in holding the balance of power in an election is compelling, and lays the groundwork for future applications of the concept not only in the Great Migration period, but in American politics more generally. Moreover, Grant's detailed political histories of Detroit, New York, and Chicago in chapters 3-5 are assets to students and scholars alike.

The book does not, however, fully deliver on its promise to illustrate the robust political agency of Black Americans throughout the Great Migration. To be sure, Grant emphasizes the contributions of a number of Black politicians and organizations in shaping the political landscapes of these three cities. But, while Grant demonstrates *that* politicians believed Black voters often held the balance of power in elections, readers are left asking *how* these beliefs were generated—and what role Black political actors played. Moreover, while Grant rightly emphasizes that Black migrants came to the North with well-formed political preferences that laid the basis for a robust Black voting bloc, the account does not examine in detail how (migrant and non-migrant) Black voters were in fact organized to vote in concert consistently. This question is underscored by the moments at which the Black vote fractures, as in Chicago's 1947 mayoral election, where the predominately-Black Second and Third Wards were decided by 285

and 35 votes respectively (132-33). Consensus among Black voters was a contingent fact accomplished by the work of Black activists, organizers, and politicians. Grant's account at times obscures this, as when she writes in the book's conclusion that white politicians who believed Black voters held the balance of power "strategized to *manage* the increasing number of Black voters in the electorate" (154, my emphasis)

The issue here is not with a single rhetorical choice, nor with Grant's decision to focus on "elite-level changes" in Democratic Party politics (16). What is striking is that, as Grant herself notes in passing, the concept of a balance of power was developed by Black intellectuals both to help forge a shared Black political consciousness and to influence the beliefs and judgments of politicians. For Fortune and Du Bois, the assertion that Black voters held the balance of power in American politics was a premise in an argument that Black Americans *ought* to vote as an independent bloc for the sake of collective interests. For Moon, the fact that Black voters often held the balance of power in elections was a reason for politicians and parties to be responsive to their demands. The efforts of Black Americans in this period to conceive of themselves as the balance of power in American politics, and to bring others to recognize this, was an integral aspect of the agency that they exercised. Grant demonstrates decisively that the balance of power was a main character in the political history of the Great Migration— but it played this role as a political idea and social science fact at the same time.

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