Women In Politics

By Ethel Payne

At the recent National Urban League Conference in Washington, one of the most stimulating sessions was the panel on "Black Women In Politics." The six participants were Dr. Ethel Allen, a physician turned politician and now a City Council member in Philadelphia; U.S. Rep. Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, vivacious, new gentlewoman from the 37th Congressional District in Los Angeles and Rep. Shirley Chisholm of New York, already a legend in her time.

A newcomer to Congress is Rep. Cardiss Collins of Illinois. She was elected to fill the vacancy of her late husband, George Collins of Chicago who was killed in a plane crash last December. Rep. Barbara Jordan of Texas comes out of the strong mould of Texas politics that has the unmistakable brand of Lyndon B. Johnson who was her mentor. Senator Verda Welcome of Maryland is a veteran of politics at the state level. She was first elected to the House of Delegates in 1958. Four years later, she won a seat in the Senate and has held it continuously since.

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The lively performance of this sextet of formidable political and woman power was like setting off simultaneous Andreas Fault tremors across the country. There were yelps of protest from some black males, charging that they had been victimized by ism. On the other hand, the loudest hosannas came from the women of all ages in the overflow audience.

New Trend Produces Emerging Force In Politics

The reaction was notable in that it reflects a new trend in the country. Despite their miniscule numbers, black women are decidedly an emerging force in the political process. There are two areas to be examined to support this contention: women in elected positions and those non-elected women who exert influence through organized activity, or in rare instances through the appointive system. For example, Ms. C. Delores Tucker was named secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania three years ago by Governor Milton Shapp.

A study on Black Women in Elective Offices has just been released by the Joint Center for Political Studies, a non-profit, non-partisan research group in Washington. It was prepared by Dr. Herrington J. Bryce, director of research, with the assistance of Don E. Warrick.

The report concludes that "sexism and racism cripple the black woman as she grasps for elected positions of responsibility and power in the American political system." It finds that black women seem to develop little tenure in elective offices, or upward mobility to higher offices. There are approximately seven million black women of voting age in the United States today, but they hold only 336 of the more than 520,000 elective offices in the country.

Dominate School Boards

According to the study, the majority of black elected women are members of boards of education. They are also concentrated in municipal offices throughout the country. There are 17 black women in county offices and just four in federal elective office — the U.S. House of Representatives. Yet, by comparison with figures of four years ago, there has been a 60 per cent increase in the number of black women officeholders from 131 to 337 today.

Black women share in common with white women, the ages-old taboos against female entry into male-dominated occupations. It took women nearly half a century to win the right to vote. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920, giving women suffrage at long last.

In 1927, Mrs. E. Howard Harper was appointed to succeed her late husband in the West Virginia State Legislature, making her the first black woman to reach the plateau of elective office. It was not until 1938, however, that a black woman, Mrs. Crystal Bird Fauset was elected to the Pennsylvania State Assembly. It made her the first of her race and sex to achieve a major public office by the direct electoral process.

Today, there are four black women mayors in the country: Lelia Foley, Taft, Oklahoma; Doris A. Davis, Compton, California; Ellen Walker Craig, Urbancrest, Ohio and Sophia Mitchell, Rendsville, Ohio. Mrs. Mitchell was former president of the City Council and was appointed by the council following the resignation of the previous mayor.

High Percentage In South

The center report notes that about 45 per cent of all black women in elective offices are in the South. The continued concentration of black female as well as black elected officials in the South undoubtedly reflects the concentration of blacks in small southern communities and the impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The bill originated under the administration of John F. Kennedy. When Lyndon B. Johnson became President, his first order of business was to push the bill into law. That opened the door for millions of disfranchised blacks in the South to become registered and to vote.

It changed, literally overnight, the whole political and social structure of the South and had far-reaching economic ramifications. Blacks entered public offices long considered the exclusive domain of Southern white Protestant males — sheriffs, magistrates city councils, county seats, state and federal offices.

Barbara Jordan who moved from the Texas State Senate to the U.S. House of Representatives and Andrew Young of Atlanta are the first blacks elected to Congress from the old confederacy since Reconstruction days.

New York state with 37 has the greatest number of black women elected officials. In 1969, there were just three. Michigan is next with 30 and Mississippi ranks third with 22 black elected women.

The fact that black women are concentrated in education is related to the high proportion of educated black women who are teachers and the traditional concern of women with the welfare of children, so the Joint Center report says.

336 Out of 7 Million Voters Hold Elective Offices

It is also related to the perception by the electorate that education outside of the university is primarily a female function. Only 27 per cent of black male elected officials are in offices related to education, the report adds.

In summation, the study says that "the easier access of black women to fund-raising mechanisms, their increased educational attainments and their developing sensitivity to 'political socialization' are likely to lure black women into the electoral process in unprecedented numbers in the coming years."

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