

B_{lack} H_{istory} M_{onth}

BY NORM PARRISH
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

U.S. Rep. James E. Clyburn believes a detriment to black political empowerment exists in a new form today: The rap sheet.

In the early half of the 20th century hindrances like the old "poll tax" or "grandfather clause" kept African Americans from the ballot. But in 14 states, African Americans have permanently lost voting privileges because of felony convictions. And many of these states have large black populations.

For example, one-third of African-American men in Florida and Alabama can't vote because they have felony convictions, said Clyburn, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. The prohibition on felons being permitted to vote is just one challenge facing African-American officials as they seek power in the new millennium.

Black politicians must survive redistricting of legislative districts after the 2000 U.S. Census is taken this year. And some African-American officials, like other politicians, will have to attract Hispanic voters, who are expected to replace blacks as the largest minority group in the United States this century. Interestingly, the demographic changes come as African-American politicians struggle to keep members of their own race happy. In cities with black majority populations, like Gary, Baltimore, and Oakland, whites have replaced blacks as mayors. Still, a record 8,868 blacks held elective office in the U.S. in January 1999, according to the latest data available from the Washington, D.C.-based Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. At the turn of the 20th Century, there were less than 50 African-American officials, estimated David Bositis, senior research associate for the center.

"Every year the number of (black officials) gets higher and higher and higher," Bositis said.

But whites continue to remain in the most powerful political offices. Blacks are absent from seats in the U.S. Senate, governor mansions and of course the white House. Except for a rare Carol Mosley-Braun, who recently served as a senator from Illinois, or Douglas Wilder, the former Virginia governor, blacks usually lack support from whites when they seek statewide office.

"There are a significant number of polls that say under no

circumstances would I vote for a black candidate," said Clayborne Carson, a Stanford University history professor and editor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. papers. "That is not a burden that whites would have to face . . . It takes the right candidate to get over the handicap. It's like playing basketball and saying you are down five to nothing. And 20 years ago, you would have been down 20 to nothing. And 50 years ago, you would have been down 50 to nothing."

During the beginning of the 1900s, black officials were under siege by various laws imposed by white southerners. In eight states, the infamous "grandfather clause" effectively restricted the right to vote to white descendants. In 1915, the U.S. Supreme Court finally declared those laws unconstitutional. But poll taxes, which were arbitrarily placed on blacks when they attempted to vote, weren't declared unconstitutional until 1964 when the 24th Amendment was passed.

"One thing you have to remember is if it happened before, it can happen again," said Clyburn, a Democratic congressman who used to teach high school history in South Carolina. Fearing several new laws threaten black political power, Clyburn is attempting to get support to eliminate laws that permanently prevent blacks from voting if they are convicted of a crime. He said that too many blacks are kept off voting rolls because of such laws, especially in states with large black populations.

However, he said, the four states that don't bar prisoners from voting have large white populations: Utah, Vermont, Maine and Massachusetts. He points out that in Massachusetts, you can be a convicted murderer in jail and vote absentee.

Legislation to change the laws is stuck in congressional Committees, Clyburn says. In a recent debate to grab the Democratic nomination for president, former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley and Vice President Al Gore said they would consider reviewing laws that prevent felons from voting. "I just think it is unacceptable to allow African-American men to lose their right to vote," Clyburn said. The congressman also plans to keep his eye on what happens when districts are redrawn after Census data is collected. Some black officials fear fellow African

Americans will be undercounted in the Census as in the past. A Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies report suggested that Democratic participation in drawing district lines might be affected by the new census. In other words, black officials, who tend to be members of the Democratic Party, could be drawn out of districts that are heavily Democratic into ones that favor Republicans. The report said, "with partisan control in several southern state legislatures shifting to the Republicans many southern black legislators may be serving in the minority party the next time new district lines are drawn."

No matter how the districts are

composed, however, many officials agree that black politicians will have to market themselves to compete in a multicultural society if they want to survive politically.

"I think it is going to be important that we work with other groups," said Michelle Kourouma, executive director of the National Conference of Black Mayors. "We will have to build coalitions."

Carson had a similar view.

"The big question is whether black candidates and white candidates understand the multicultural nature," he said. "I think if I were going to give some advice to someone, I would tell them if you are going to be president of the United States, learn Spanish and

maybe spend some time in Asia." While black candidates are reaching out to other cultures they also must keep their black constituents pleased. If they don't, black voters may turn to white candidates, like some did in Gary, Ind., which along with Cleveland landed in 1967 the nations first black big city mayors. Today, the heavily black populated Indiana steel city has a white mayor—Scott King.

"The electorate is becoming more sophisticated," King said. "They are going to vote for who is best suited to be elected."

Carson was more blunt.

Clyburn said he would like to see blacks integrate the Senate and governors' offices.

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