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## **Blacks: A Minority Within a Minority**

Everyone is talking about the winners of 1994: Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, George Pataki. But no one is talking about the losers, perhaps because the biggest loser, Bill Clinton, cleverly scheduled a 10-day trip to Asia right after the election. However, the 1994 election is also bad news for African Americans, who have lost almost all their power in the House of Representatives. With the notable exceptions of Marion Barry's resurrection in D.C. and Carl McCall's election as New York State comptroller, 1994 was an unmitigated disaster for black politicians.

In recent years, African Americans developed considerable power in Congress. Even though they failed to stop the expansion of the death penalty, they did successfully fight for crime prevention programs, the U.S. invasion of Haiti and the earned-income tax credit for low-income households. Like the white Southern conservatives of an earlier time, blacks benefited from the seniority system, since they never faced serious opposition in overwhelmingly Democratic districts. African Americans such as Harlem's Charles Rangel, Oakland's Ron Dellums and St. Louis' William Clay acquired substantial power in the House, while relative newcomers such as John Lewis, Kweisi Mfume and Queens' Floyd Flake were well on their way up the political ladder. Now, with the Republican takeover of the House and Senate, they're back at the bottom rung.

Gingrich - whose rhetoric makes Barry Goldwater sound like a raving liberal and Bob Dole a warm-hearted moderate - intends to cut the House staff and restructure the entire committee system, so that the loci of liberal influence, such as the Education and Labor Committee, are effectively reorganized into oblivion. Simply put, African Americans are now just a minority within a minority, with little influence on the legislative process.

Ironically, the rise in black congressional power had compensated for the erosion of black, political power in the nation's cities. During the 1980s, African Americans converted their numerical strength into urban electoral power. Black mayors, such as Philadelphia's Wilson Goode, Chicago's Harold Washington, Los Angeles' Tom Bradley and New York's David Dinkins, fought in vain with municipal unions, tried to stanch the outflow of jobs and cope with the excessive expectations of their own constituencies. Today, the three largest U.S. cities are led by white moderates - Giuliani, Richard Riordan and Richard Daley - trying to stimulate economic growth while struggling with homelessness, teenage crime and overcrowded schools.

While losing their congressional power in 1994, African Americans pursued remarkably different political strategies at the state and local levels. Forty percent of Michigan's African Americans supported the winning Republican gubernatorial candidate, John Engler. Here at

home, the Rev. Calvin Butts welcomed George Pataki to Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, while Rev. Al Sharpton criticized Mario Cuomo's record. Carl McCall demonstrated that a "moderate" Democrat who appealed to all races could win in New York State. Only a local candidate could afford to woo black voters exclusively: Marion Barry proved that it's possible to ignore white voters, provided they're overwhelmingly outnumbered by African-Americans.

As Republicans prepare to dismantle the welfare state, African-American politicians face new threats. Just this past September, Adam Clayton Powell III did better than expected against Charles Rangel in the Democratic primary. Rangel's campaign platform was based on his power as the third-ranking member of the Ways and Means Committee. Now that Rangel's clout is diminished, are his days in office numbered? Perhaps a new generation of African-American politicians will emerge from the ashes of 1994.

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