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NCOBPS Fifty Years
Some Reflections

ABSTRACT This personal narrative recounts the experiences of an NCOBPS founder, who discusses significant events in his life from student to faculty that motivated his professional journey, including his participation in the founding of NCOBPS. It reflects on what it meant to be a black student, and later, a black faculty member teaching at a predominantly white institution in the political science discipline in the 1960s. It also provides a glimpse into how the freedom movements shaped his fight for fundamental rights as a citizen. Finally, it gives credence to the importance of independent black organizations as agents for political protest and vehicles for economic and social justice. KEYWORDS political science teachers, fundamental human rights, independent black organization

I had the privilege of serving as the third president of NCOBPS from 1972–73. Attending the recent 50th anniversary of NCOBPS, I was reminded of the extent that I continue to learn from my NCOBPS colleagues and how NCOBPS immeasurably contributed to my professional career. I retired from academic administration and teaching in 2004.

Serendipitously, the early years of NCOBPS coincided with my early development as a teacher of political science. This is relevant because my blackness infused my early education, informed my college and graduate training, prescribed my teaching perspective, inspired my approach to scholarship, and oriented my relationship with the discipline of political science.

I am the product of a totally segregated primary and secondary education on the South Side of Chicago, notably referred to as “Bronzeville.” My high school is the historically renowned Du Sable High School, now designated a Chicago landmark. At Du Sable, I had the good fortune to have been taught and guided by Timuel D. (Tim) Black, Jr., a long-standing NCOBPS member. Tim, currently 100 years old, remains a friend and colleague.

As an undergraduate at Upper Iowa, a small liberal arts college, I was the only black student during my initial semester. My master’s and doctorate degrees were earned at the University of Iowa. Three other black political science graduate students at Iowa during the time were Ed Jackson and Alex Willingham, both founding members of NCOBPS, and Joe Penson. Joe was a senior faculty member on sabbatical from Southern University and was an invaluable mentor to me. (Jewel Prestage, also a graduate of the University of Iowa and a founding member of NCOBPS, was the first black female to earn a doctorate in political science in 1954.) In a sense, my graduate instruction was segregated: the curriculum in political science was based on the experiences of whites, the research was

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Insensitive to the repression of blacks, and the discipline glossed over systematic institutional discrimination of blacks in the political system.

My first teaching position, in 1966, was at Union College where I was one of two black professors on the faculty and the only black social scientist. With my segregated educational background, I felt the need to introduce my students to materials that included black political perspectives and to begin a personal program of research and scholarship that addressed black experiences in the American political system.

My predilection toward “racial” scholarship was shaped early in my life. I was in high school in 1954 when the Brown v. Board of Education decision was announced, and the prolific legal work of Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP leading up to this opinion was etched into my consciousnesses. Marshall’s jurisprudential philosophy about legal rights and social justice in America served as a lynchpin for my professional career. In my scholarship I sought to highlight the disparity between democratic “rhetoric” and the contrary “experiences” within presumed democratic institutions concerning matters of race, gender, equity, and fundamental fairness.

The 1970 NCOBPS meeting in Atlanta provided me as a young professional an opportunity to engage in thoughtful discussions with Jewel Prestage, Mack Jones, William P. (Bill) Robinson, Sr., and Bob Holmes. (I fondly remember lodging at Pascal’s and experiencing their acclaimed fried chicken.) They and other founders had met in April of 1969 at Southern University to address concerns of teachers of political science at historically black colleges. Additionally, in particular Mack Jones sounded a clarion call for transformative approaches to search for the key to African unity, and the founders agreed that a new approach was essential to address root causes of racism and advance the struggle to end racial oppression in the United States and around the world.

A significant aspect of a new approach would be the creation of a separate and independent professional organization that would, from that moment, become the infrastructure for recruiting, training, and mobilizing resources for the growing community of black political scientists. With this approach, a prime issue receiving attention was whether aligning with and allegiance to NCOBPS would or should require disassociation from the American Political Science Association (APSA). Questions were raised about best interests or best practices for members of the new organization and whether commitment to the new organization would be diminished by continued affiliation with APSA. The passage of time, the diversity of membership and leadership of NCOBPS, and some resources offered to NCOBPS by APSA such as the Committee on Status of Blacks in the Association and the APSA Oral History Project mitigated the intensity and visibility of this issue for many members.

Recalling my election as one of the first members of the Executive Council, it is difficult now to convey the excitement and anxiety I felt about the enormous task we had undertaken and the role I was expected to play. This nascent organization seemed ideally suited to my needs as a young faculty member. Nonetheless, an implicit challenge associated with my position as a black faculty in a historically white college was the necessity to convince my colleagues that membership in this newly founded organization
that addressed the professional needs of black political scientists was important for my professional growth and development. For the college administration, the explicit choice for me was to affiliate, along with my departmental colleagues, with the respected APSA. Further, not only had I affiliated with NCOBPS, in my position as a founding member I sought support as a member of the council and later president of the group. Fortunately, my department members were supportive, and Union College generously provided essential financial resources in the form of telephone, postage, and copier access, and research support as well as travel stipends to attend annual and other meetings.

Subsequent to the Atlanta meeting, council members, along with President Mack Jones, worked on matters associated with advancing this emerging national professional academic organization. For example, members worked diligently to write a constitution and by-laws, frame the organizational structure, and establish membership classifications, outline membership dues, and outline major committees. These organizational matters were certainly not settled in that inaugural year. The second year, I was president-elect during the term of Bill Robinson, Sr. During this year there were sustained conversations in which Bill related his conviction that NCOBPS would become a significant professional organization attending to professional concerns facing black political scientists. I respected his accomplishments and his resolve. Bill Robinson informed my thinking and his encouragement and friendship invigorated my efforts during my presidency.

As president, I do not recall having a compilation of platform planks to guide my service to the organization. There were instead a host of customary issues associated with moving an up-and-coming organization forward. Bill Robinson and Bob Holmes (following my term) both assisted with me during my tenure as president on a myriad of unsettled matters that were important to the future of the organization. These, along with routine matters such as locating the next annual meeting site, planning a program theme, and requests for program participants, had to be worked on each year. During the year, ongoing attention was given to the format of a journal for the organization and generating revenue for a Graduate Assistantship Program. These were ongoing priorities for the first few years of the organization, especially growing the membership base, particularly from northern colleges and universities. My overriding objective as president was to keep the organization growing. The implicit priority was to make it better. Clearly, the efforts of my successors, including those who are no longer with us, saved the plan.

A reading of our fifty-year history shows the impressive resolve of our leadership, obstacles they have endured, obstacles they have overcome, and their progressive solutions that have helped NCOBPS become a mature independent professional organization. Our professional networking, collaborative research, and innovative scholarship connecting economics and politics have enriched undergraduate and graduate education and enlightened all faculty who have joined our ranks.

Research and scholarship by NCOBPS membership have enabled the discipline of political science to become better equipped to address omissions and deficiencies posed by democratic institutions and governance. As teacher-scholars we can serve as guardians of
fundamental human rights—for example, we must reject the view that the right to vote is merely a privilege, we must challenge growing efforts to systematically suppress voting, and we must counter the notion that money is speech.

Our impressive national convention in Baton Rouge is testimony that the future of NCOBPS is in good hands. We must rekindle our resolve to reveal and repudiate the domination and repression of blacks in the America political system and around the world. Advancing our mission remains a daunting but worthy objective, but no one said the journey would be easy.

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