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Author(s): Cherisse Jones-Branch

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**“TO SPEAK WHEN AND WHERE I CAN”:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S
POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE 1940S AND 1950S**

CHERRISSE JONES-BRANCH*

HISTORIANS HAVE DONE MUCH EXCELLENT WORK in exploring black political participation in the South (or the lack thereof, as it were), but they have not been as conscious about examining political activism on the part of black women.¹ They have been even less mindful about highlighting black women’s impact on political changes through African American mixed-sex and female political and social organizations. That said, black women in South Carolina were critical actors in African Americans’ epic struggle—from emancipation through the civil rights movement—to obtain access to electoral politics in the state. During Reconstruction, after black men gained the right to vote, black women assumed important roles in African American political participation. After the vast majority of African Americans in South Carolina were disfranchised by the Constitution of 1895, this was no less the case.² Well into the twentieth century, black women in South Carolina worked as leaders and followers at the grassroots level to enact political change for African Americans. This article examines the collective and individual parts they played in South Carolina in the 1940s and 1950s as they fought for greater access to the political arena for all African Americans through such gender-integrated and female organizations as the South Carolina Progressive Democratic party, the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, and the Columbia Women’s Council.

In August 1940, in the upcountry courthouse town of Gaffney, Lottie Polk Gaffney, teacher and principal of Petty Town School, went with four other women and several ministers to register to vote in the Cherokee County general election.³ When their turn to register came, the registrar

* Cherisse Jones-Branch is assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University.

¹ One recent exception is Peter F. Lau’s *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920s,” in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 135.

³ John McCray, “Democracy Is Costly,” *Lighthouse and Informer* (Columbia, South Carolina), June 28, 1942.

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informed Gaffney and those with her that “darkies ain’t never voted in South Carolina and especially Cherokee County. I will not register you.”⁴ Gaffney and her party promptly went to see the county attorney, who told them that they should have no trouble voting. Despite the county attorney’s reassurance to the registrar that African Americans were eligible to vote, Gaffney and her party were still not allowed to register. In fact, when they returned on this second occasion, a member of the registration board slammed and locked the door before they could enter. Gaffney then wrote to NAACP officials in New York, who forwarded her letter to U.S. Attorney General Robert H. Jackson, asking that black voting rights be protected during the registration period. On September 2, 1940, the group returned to the registration office for a third time, where they were asked why they wanted to vote. Gaffney recalled:

One member said that some God damned son of a bitch Republican put us up to want to vote. If the board would register us it would be dangerous for us—that our houses would be burned; that our heads would be scalped, etc. That if they would register us their heads would be cut off before night. If we registered it would do no good. If we are seeking social equality and a right to vote we had better go North.⁵

Gaffney and the women who had accompanied her, with the assistance of the NAACP, brought suit against the Cherokee County Registration Board in March 1942 in the case of *United States v. Ellis et al.* Their efforts were to no avail. The Spartanburg County federal jury acquitted the officials of the charge of refusing to register African Americans, citing insufficient evidence.⁶ It is also likely that Gaffney and her group did not receive justice because the U.S. district attorney who represented them during the trial, Oscar H. Doyle, wanted to run for the U.S. Senate from South Carolina and was disinclined to jeopardize his political career by arguing the case too vigorously.⁷

⁴ Bryant Simon, “Race Relations: African American Organizing, Liberalism, and White Working Class Politics in Postwar South Carolina,” in *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 241; “State NAACP Conference in Columbia: Interesting Program Planned,” *Palmetto Leader* (Columbia, South Carolina), June 7, 1941.

⁵ “Negroes Barred From Voting in South Carolina,” September 9, 1940, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 10; letter, no date, *ibid.*

⁶ *United States v. Ellis et al.*, No. 8626, District Court, W.D. South Carolina, Spartanburg Division, 43 F. Supp. 321; 1942 W.S. Dist. LEXIS 3203, March 2, 1942.

⁷ Lottie P. Gaffney to Thurgood Marshall, July 10, 1941, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 10.

This court decision had further repercussions for Gaffney. For a time, local post office officials refused to deliver her mail.⁸ Even worse, because she had appeared as a witness in the case, Gaffney lost her position as a teacher and, despite an excellent record, was unable to gain employment in any South Carolina school district. When local black leaders learned of Gaffney's predicament, they asked school officials for an explanation and were told that the children's parents, displeased with her performance, had demanded her removal. They refused to accept this explanation and returned the following day with a petition supporting Gaffney that had been signed by the parent of every child in the school. School officials then told black leaders that Gaffney had been fired because she had "faked" the number of credits necessary for her college degree and had been receiving five dollars per month more in pay than she should have. Gaffney and her friends immediately went to the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural, and Mechanical College of South Carolina (now South Carolina State University) at Orangeburg to check her credits. She had 150 units, thirty more than were necessary for a college degree. It was only after black leaders produced this evidence that school authorities were finally forced to admit that Gaffney had lost her job because she had taken part in the "voting case."⁹ Lottie Gaffney may have lost her case and her job, but by the early 1940s, black efforts to gain access to South Carolina's political arena were beginning to build momentum. Indeed, black leaders in South Carolina were well aware of court decisions and black political activism around the country that were presently reversing the tide of longstanding black political impotency in the South.

By the time Lottie Gaffney was prevented from registering to vote in Cherokee County in 1940, African Americans had been effectively excluded from participation in South Carolina politics for over four decades. For a time following the Civil War, black Republicans had enjoyed some political successes in the state. South Carolina had a black majority in the state assembly from 1868 through 1873, and the legislature was 40 percent black from 1874 to 1878. Even after the end of Reconstruction, blacks continued to hold political power in locales where they predominated. Black Republicans controlled Beaufort County politics through the mid 1890s, and the county sent five African American delegates to the state constitutional convention in 1895.¹⁰ But at the constitutional convention,

⁸ Roy Wilkins to Thurgood Marshall, September 16, 1940, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 10.

⁹ McCray, "Democracy Is Costly," *Lighthouse and Informer*, June 28, 1942.

¹⁰ Cassandra Maxwell Birnie, "Race and Politics in Georgia and South Carolina," *Phylon* 13 (Third Quarter 1952): 237; George B. Tindall, "The Campaign for the Disfranchisement of Negroes in South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History* 15 (May 1949): 212. There was also one African American from Georgetown County.

U.S. Senator-Elect Ben Tillman installed a new plan for voting requirements: resembling the Mississippi Constitution of 1890, it was specifically designed to disfranchise African Americans and restore white supremacy.¹¹

After the Constitution of 1895 went into effect in South Carolina, the Republican vote dropped precipitously from between 15,000 and 20,000 ballots to less than 5,000. In addition, the statewide primary instituted in 1896 replaced the state convention that had formerly nominated Democratic candidates for office. In due time, African Americans were excluded from Democratic primaries and were only able to vote in general elections, which, considering Democratic dominance, were virtually meaningless.¹²

Despite black Carolinians' long association with the Republican party, factionalism and a return to “lily-white” Republicanism also limited their political participation in the late nineteenth century. Having been disenfranchised by the Democrats, African Americans increasingly found that Republican party leaders paid them only scant attention. Indeed, Republicans often imitated Democrats in their calls for white supremacy in politics. The number of black Republicans in South Carolina continued to decline after the turn of the twentieth century. By 1944 there were barely 500.¹³

In this same year, the Texas State Supreme Court ruled in *Smith v. Allwright* that blacks could not be prohibited from voting in the Texas Democratic primary. The immediate reaction among white Democratic leaders in South Carolina was a resolution declaring that “this party shall continue, as it is now, a party of and for white Democrats only, and that no Negro shall be admitted to membership in our party.”¹⁴ To counteract statutes dealing with primary elections, the South Carolina Democratic party responded with what became known in the national press as the “South Carolina Plan.” South Carolina’s state legislature converted the Democratic party into a private fraternal organization to preserve its racial exclusivity. This move also meant that the party would be legally immune to federal judicial interference.¹⁵ The position of State Representative John

¹¹ Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 42.

¹² *Ibid.*; Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 239.

¹³ Hanes Walton, Jr. *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), 115; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 168.

¹⁴ “Confusion in South Carolina,” *Southern Frontier*, June 1944, front page. This resolution was passed during the state convention.

¹⁵ Miles S. Richards, “Osceola E. McKaine and the Struggle for Black Civil Rights: 1917-1946” (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1994), 166.

D. Long, from Union County, was shared by many white South Carolinians: "As for the Negro voting in my primary, we'll fight him at the precinct meeting, we'll fight him at the county convention, we'll fight him at the enrollment books, and, by God, we'll fight him at the polls if I have to bite the dust as did my ancestors!"¹⁶

Marginalization and exclusion from the state Republican and Democratic parties made it clear to African Americans that the right to vote would not be easily won in South Carolina. Hence, they responded with an organization of their own to counteract such adamant denial of their rights. The Progressive Democratic party (PDP) was founded in May 1944 in Columbia by activist Osceola E. McKaine and John H. McCray, editor of the *Lighthouse and Informer*, a black newspaper, to counteract black exclusion from the state Democratic party. The PDP, which was open to all regardless of race, provided a necessary forum for African Americans in South Carolina to cultivate their increasing political activism. Three months after its founding, the PDP claimed 45,000 members in forty-four of the state's forty-six counties.¹⁷

Pledging to work "for the elevation of all our citizens, whatever color or race, from the depths of political and economic despair," the PDP held its first convention in late May 1944 to elect delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where their goal was to contest the seating of the "regular" delegates and to support President Roosevelt's reelection.¹⁸ Although their efforts in Chicago failed, the PDP's bold stand against racial exclusion from South Carolina politics embarrassed the state's white power structure by further exposing the hypocrisy of the American political system.¹⁹ Black political leaders wasted little time in using the power of the PDP to change the political destiny of black South Carolinians. From 1944 to 1947, PDP members encouraged black South Carolinians to register to vote and even joined forces with the NAACP in a suit against the all-white state Democratic party.²⁰

¹⁶ "White Primary vs. Democracy," *Southern Frontier*, November 1945, front page, 4.

¹⁷ Explanation of the plan for "Beating the Primary," April 2, 1944, John Henry McCray Papers, 1929-1989, Reel 1, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia (hereinafter cited as John H. McCray Papers, SCL); Kari Frederickson, "'Dual Actions, One for Each Race': The Campaign Against the Dixiecrats in South Carolina, 1948-1950," *International Social Science Review* 72 (Spring 1997): 15; Edmund L. Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism and Race Relations: Charleston's Avery Normal Institute* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 238.

¹⁸ Frederickson, "Dual Actions, One for Each Race," 4.

¹⁹ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 519.

²⁰ Frederickson, "Dual Actions, One for Each Race," 15.

Previous scholarship acknowledges Osceola McKaine and John H. McCray as the leaders of the PDP, but the roles of black women were no less important in the party's founding and activism. Such women as Lottie Gaffney, Sarah Z. Daniels, Annie Belle Weston, and others helped establish and support the PDP, in addition to heading its auxiliaries.

In the early stages of the PDP's development, John H. McCray sought out black women willing to work with the organization. When the PDP held its first state convention at the Masonic Temple in Columbia, Lottie Gaffney was not only asked to lead the group in singing "America," but she also was elected as one of the PDP's three vice presidents and to a position on its national delegation selection committee. As further evidence of the PDP's commitment to female membership and active participation, in March 1945, less than one year after its founding, McCray wrote to Mrs. M. A. Morgan, offering his "best wishes to Mr. Morgan" and cautioning her "to get ready for some P.D.P. work which will be offered you a little later."²¹ As far as the leadership of the PDP was concerned, women's participation was critical. According to a 1944 flyer entitled "How To Organize For Voting," all men and women twenty-one years of age and older were urged to become members of the PDP, but women were recognized as particularly important in canvassing members for the organization: "Women should be used perhaps even more freely than men. At least, they should have equal footing in the organization."²² In July 1944, when the PDP went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, three women, including Lottie Gaffney, were part of its delegation.²³

The establishment of a women's auxiliary in 1945 offered black women a new opportunity to serve the PDP. In the same year, Sarah Z. Daniels, president of the Manning chapter of the NAACP, was appointed as auxiliary chairman. She had been working at the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina, a private school for African Americans founded by Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown in 1902.²⁴ For Daniels, helping blacks become

²¹ "Progressive Democratic Meeting," May 24, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reels 1 and 7; John H. McCray to Mrs. M. A. Morgan, March 22, 1945, *ibid.*

²² "How To Organize For Voting," John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

²³ The other two were Annie Belle Weston and Bessie Brown. *Chicago Defender*, July 22, 1944.

²⁴ See Charles W. Wadlington and Richard F. Knapp, *Charlotte Hawkins Brown and Palmer Memorial Institute: What One Young African American Woman Could Do* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). See also Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 99. The state of North Carolina presently operates the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum at Historic Palmer Memorial Institute as a historic site and interpretative center. Brown led the school for fifty years.



The Progressive Democratic party delegation in Chicago in July 1944, where they were denied seats in the official South Carolina section at the Democratic National Convention. Lottie P. Gaffney, state committeewoman, is pictured on the far left of the front row. Annie Belle Weston, state secretary, appears in the front row, third from right. Also standing in the front row are Progressive Democratic party founders Osceola E. McKaine and John H. McCray. McCray, state chairman, is in the center, and McKaine, executive secretary, is beside McCray, third from left. The third female delegate, Bessie Brown, is in the third row, second from left. This photograph appeared in the *Chicago Defender* on July 29. Courtesy of the *Chicago Defender*.

politically empowered was so important that she resigned her post at Palmer Memorial in order to “come back to South Carolina, my home state where my service is needed most.”²⁵

Daniels, who had also been a home demonstration agent and president of the Clarendon County Teachers’ Association, organized two women’s PDP auxiliaries in addition to leading the NAACP’s voter-registration attempts in Clarendon County.²⁶ In fact, she and other members of the auxiliaries made voter registration their “number one objective.” Daniels expressed enthusiasm about becoming the PDP auxiliary chairman, seeing it as a further impetus to encourage eligible blacks to become politically

²⁵ Sarah Z. Daniels to John H. McCray, October 6, 1945, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14.

²⁶ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 196.

involved. "I consider my appointment to speak when and where I can for the Progressive Democratic Party a privilege," she asserted, "and I am glad to accept."²⁷

Daniels and other members of the women's auxiliary planned to do more than work hard for the PDP; they also intended to represent themselves and the organization at national meetings. After she accepted her position, for example, Daniels made it known that auxiliary representatives would attend and address women's issues at the meetings of the National Council of Negro Democrats in Columbia in October 1945. At the conference, Daniels, Annie Belle Weston, and other female delegates held a session entitled "Women's Place in the Political Life of the Democratic Party."²⁸

In 1946 John H. McCray again harnessed black women's skills as political activists. In a general letter to PDP members, McCray told them that he was in "desperate need" of the names and addresses of each member of the club and its women's auxiliaries from around the state in order to prepare for the party's 1947 "Registration and Organizational Campaign," which was designed to galvanize South Carolina blacks and get them registered to vote in the 1948 Democratic primary.²⁹ The PDP once again sent a delegation to challenge the seating of the all-white state party at the 1948 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. Lottie Gaffney was chosen as the national committeewoman of the delegation, which included two other women, Bessie E. Tapps of Summerville and Annie Belle Weston of Columbia.³⁰

The number of women elected to positions within the PDP generally, not just the women's auxiliaries, evinces the importance of their participation to the welfare of the party. Women were often elected as chairmen of city clubs. In Charleston, for example, women were elected as chairpersons of Ward 11 and the Jenkins Orphanage. Additionally, there were female chairpersons in Awendaw, Pageland, Round O, Georgetown, and Richland County. Several women from these clubs were national committeewomen as well.³¹ Black women clearly recognized that exercising the right to vote

²⁷ Sarah Z. Daniels to John H. McCray, March 14, 1945, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

²⁸ Sarah Z. Daniels to John H. McCray, October 6, 1945, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14; John H. McCray to Sarah Z. Daniels, October 10, 1945, *ibid.*, Reel 10.

²⁹ John H. McCray to "Co-Worker," November 8, 1946, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

³⁰ "Progressive Democratic Meeting," May 24, 1944; Lottie P. Gaffney to John H. McCray, July 7, 1948, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reels 7 and 10.

³¹ "Progressive Democrats Officials," October 1948, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

and leading a movement to do so, both as individuals and through their organizational memberships, was not the sole domain of black men. Through their PDP connections, black women were well positioned to enlighten their communities statewide about the benefits of political access.

But women were expected to serve the PDP in traditional and stereotypical roles as well. In almost every county in South Carolina, women were the secretaries of local PDP chapters.³² This trend was reflected in the state organization. At the second annual PDP convention in 1946, Annie Belle Weston, Mrs. F. M. Thomas, and Mrs. Richardson, were elected as secretary, assistant secretary, and recording secretary, respectively. These same women and others served on the "Committee on Young People," "Committee on Women Workers," and the district chairmen committee.

Black women had a myriad of experiences within the PDP. As secretaries, they were involved in the transmission of important information. This also meant that they were always well informed about the PDP's agenda. Yet black women had to work within the gender restrictions of the era. Because they were expected to serve in traditional women's roles, they almost always performed domestic services for the organization. Annie Belle Weston had been elected state secretary of the PDP in 1946 at its second annual state convention, for example, but she and her committee were also responsible for decorating the hall in which the convention was held.³³

In South Carolina, it was not unusual for women like Annie Belle Weston to be leaders in female and mixed-sex organizations. Weston, born at Fort Motte in Calhoun County, moved to Columbia in 1912 to attend high school. She later earned a B.A. from Benedict College and an M.A. from Columbia University. Weston served as a member of the Benedict faculty for thirty-five years. As a professor of education, she became the first woman to ever receive the Doctor of Humanities from the college in 1962.³⁴

Weston had long been known for her political and social activism. She had received numerous awards from such organizations as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the South Carolina Federation of Women for Education and Community Work, and the National Council of Negro Women. In 1945 Weston, along with students from Benedict College, formed the first Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in South Carolina. The SNYC, organized in February 1937 in Richmond, Virginia, was a

³² "Progressive Democrats Officials," October 1948, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

³³ "Minutes of the Second Annual State Convention of the Progressive Democratic Party of South Carolina," May 1946, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

³⁴ "Dr. Weston Honored for Work in Adult Education and Citizenship," *Palmettoan*, April 1963, 11.

Communist-led organization dedicated to addressing racial justice in the South.³⁵

As secretary of the Progressive Democratic party, Weston exerted considerable influence on black South Carolinians by convincing them of the importance of registering to vote. She also paid particular attention to black women's participation in the political process. At the 1946 annual state convention of the PDP, Weston suggested that women hold a separate convention. In a business meeting during the same convention, some PDP members discussed what should be done to encourage political participation on the part of women, veterans, and young people in South Carolina. At the 1946 biennial convention of the PDP, Weston further gave pointers on ways to organize women as potential voters.³⁶

Weston often traveled throughout South Carolina and abroad lecturing on voter education to African Americans. In June 1947, she was a guest speaker for the PDP's Summerville club, where she discussed the voting rights of African Americans who had just cast ballots for the first time in a municipal election. In July 1947, Weston spoke to the Dorchester County PDP, telling the group that "the ballot is the Negro's only hope in the South." But more than this, she emphasized the responsibility African Americans had to bring about change in South Carolina by exercising their voting rights:

The Negro gained only his first emancipation in being cut loose from the white man's slavery. Today, it is entirely up to the Negro himself to bring about his second and complete emancipation. And the Negro has a simple and easy means at his command. All he needs to do is go to the polls and vote every time anybody else votes.³⁷

Annie Belle Weston's message of political empowerment to black South Carolinians was influenced by her international experiences. In 1949, for example, having recently returned from a tour of Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, and Cuba, she spoke to the Veterans Civil Organization in Charleston concerning her observations of legislative and political processes and their impact on black people in those countries.³⁸ Throughout the 1950s, Weston continued to travel and present lectures for the PDP to get blacks registered to vote. At the 1956 PDP state meeting, she introduced Venice Tipton Spraggs of Birmingham, Alabama, as keynote speaker. Spraggs was assis-

³⁵ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 158, 162.

³⁶ Program, 1946 Biennial Convention of the Progressive Democratic Party of South Carolina, May 22, 1946, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7.

³⁷ "Mrs. Weston Speaks to Dorchester PDP," *Lighthouse and Informer*, June 15, 1947; "Ballots Only Hope, Mrs. Weston Says," *ibid.*, July 5, 1947.

³⁸ "Speaks for Veterans" *Lighthouse and Informer*, May 7, 1949.

tant to Congressman William L. Dawson and vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee.³⁹ Weston also continued to advocate sending women delegates to the Democratic National Convention. In 1956 she asked John H. McCray to "see that I am chosen as a delegate to Chicago."⁴⁰ This trend continued into the 1960s, as increasing numbers of black women members of the PDP were selected as delegates to attend the Democratic national conventions.⁴¹

Black women's roles in the PDP were mere extensions of the duties and responsibilities they held in other organizations. When black leaders organized on a state level, black women's organizations such as the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (SCFCWC) were particularly involved in political efforts, urging black South Carolinians to register to vote at county courthouses.⁴² The SCFCWC was formed in 1909 in Columbia under the leadership of Marion Birnie Wilkinson and others at Sidney Park Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. The SCFCWC's concerns included uplifting African American communities by encouraging black women to improve themselves, their children, and their homes. But their agenda also supported efforts to secure civil and political rights for African Americans.⁴³

Many of the SCFCWC's meetings focused on women as potential leaders and on blacks obtaining full citizenship in South Carolina. Such speakers as Marion D. Wilkinson and Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown of Palmer Memorial Institute urged black women to assume leadership roles in African Americans' campaign for enfranchisement in the state. These women also called upon adults, young people, institutions, homes, schools, and churches to do their part in promoting first-class citizenship for African Americans.⁴⁴

Many of the members of the SCFCWC were also affiliated with the Progressive Democratic party and, consequently, supported its agenda. John H. McCray was often invited to speak to the organization to galvanize support among women for voter registration. The SCFCWC further linked

³⁹ April 29, 1956, State Meeting, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 8.

⁴⁰ Annie Belle Weston to John H. McCray, July 29, 1956, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Women's Council Push Registration," *Lighthouse and Informer*, April 2, 1949.

⁴³ Cherrisse R. Jones, "'Loyal Women of Palmetto': Black Women's Clubs in Charleston, South Carolina: 1916-1965" (M.A. thesis, University of Charleston, 1997), 40; Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Ladies, New Women: Race, Region, and Clubwomen in South Carolina, 1890-1930* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 9.

⁴⁴ "Woman Leader Hits Adults, Churches," *Lighthouse and Informer*, May 11, 1947.

the push for voting rights to the encouragement of leadership skills and civic responsibilities. Hazel O. Reese, chairman of the program committee for the Orangeburg district of the SCFCWC, invited McCray to speak, citing that "we are desirous of having someone bring a message which would deal with civic affairs which might be of interest to women." McCray, like many black male activists, appreciated black women's enthusiasm for political and civic efforts and acknowledged the clout of black women's organizations like the SCFCWC. In response to Reese, he wrote, "It is comforting to note that our women, 60 percent of the voting population, are giving serious thought to the role they should play in governmental affairs. And it is even more heartening when so powerful and useful and potent an organization as the Federation is pushing the interest."⁴⁵

Throughout the 1940s, as a member of the SCFCWC, Annie Belle Weston reached out to women in particular and urged them to fight for the right to vote. Like many black leaders of the time, she made reference to African Americans who had fought for democracy abroad during World War II, but were denied it at home. She also made connections between black women's right to vote and their roles as wives and mothers, urging them to put the welfare of African Americans generally before their own individual concerns:

Women must think of their people then of themselves. Think what it will mean to our families to help elect those who govern us. Think women what it means to have your G. I. Joe come back from the battle having given Democracy to others, but denied it himself. If this prevails blame yourselves. If they loose hope blame your own lack of integrity. Women, let us register! Women, let us register everyone else that we can. Then let us all vote!⁴⁶

Weston appealed to black women as wives and mothers, because it was imperative for them to expand their domestic responsibilities to help their

⁴⁵ Hazel O. Reese to John H. McCray, January 7, 1947, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14; John H. McCray to Hazel O. Reese, January 10, 1947, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ John H. McCray to Hazel O. Reese, January 10, 1947, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14. Jewish woman Gennie Seidman and her husband, Jules, a Columbia merchant, were both actively involved in the PDP in South Carolina and gave the organization a biracial image. Most of the funds for the PDP came from African Americans, but its first independent contribution of five dollars came from an unnamed white widow in Richland County. Furthermore, the Seidmans were apparently the organization's best fundraisers. They managed to obtain donations from anonymous white backers, presumably members of the small Jewish community that existed in Columbia. John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 228; Richards, "Osceola E. McKaine and the Struggle for Black Civil Rights," 168, 194.

spouses and especially their children, whose futures were tied to obtaining full citizenship for African Americans.⁴⁷

Throughout the 1940s, black women and their organizations had been working to get African Americans to the polls. In fact, the SCFCWC prided itself on its political activism in South Carolina. For example, in 1945 Ethelyn Murray Parker, publicity chairman of the South Carolina and the Charleston Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, invited John H. McCray to speak to the organization about the importance of voter registration. McCray's female audience needed little convincing, however. In extending the invitation, Parker informed McCray that members of the SCFCWC had been given ten thousand bulletins about voter registration to distribute in their communities.⁴⁸ Furthermore, she impressed upon him the depth of black women's and the SCFCWC's commitment to gaining first-class citizenship for African Americans. According to Parker, "The president of every club is being urged to keep before her members the importance of the ballot, and to have every member registered. Some clubs have already registered one hundred percent."⁴⁹ When Judge J. Waties Waring handed down his decision easing formal barriers to black voting in 1947, black women's clubs celebrated, knowing that the part their political activism played in the victory was not small. They also insisted that they not rest on their laurels, instead using this long-overdue right to encourage other blacks to register.⁵⁰

Individual black women like Annie Belle Weston were members and leaders of female-led organizations like the SCFCWC, but they also used their membership and leadership positions in mixed-sex organizations to promote greater political access for African Americans by placing particular emphasis on the potential political strength of black women. In a 1947 speech entitled "Women Fail to Use Their Political Power," Weston focused on women's abilities to make changes in South Carolina, arguing that not only did they have the power to obtain the vote for African Americans, but also to erase the "corrupt the practices of the courts, the sadistic tendencies of the law enforcement officer, the inequalities of the educational systems and the unwholesome recreation conditions."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Rhoda Lois Blumberg, "White Mothers as Civil Rights Activists: The Interweave of Family and Movement Roles," in *Women and Social Protest*, ed. Guida West and Rhoda Lois Blumberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 168.

⁴⁸ Ethelyn Murray Parker to John H. McCray, September 27, 1947, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "South Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs to National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1950," National Association of Colored Women Convention, Minutes, Reports, and Greetings, John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 12.

⁵¹ "Women Fail to Use Their Political Power, 1947," John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 14.

Teacher and social worker Modjeska Monteith Simkins of Columbia was a well-known civil rights activist who worked to advance the Republican party within the state. Simkins, like other African Americans, found herself a member of the Republican party because it was virtually impossible at the time to obtain membership in the Democratic party. In fact, until the founding of the Progressive Democratic party in 1944, the Republican party was the only option for African Americans who wished to be politically active. Simkins was one of the Republican party’s key organizers in South Carolina and a member of its state executive committee. Although she remained a member of the Republican party until 1952, she also had a close relationship with PDP founders John H. McCray and Osceola McKaine, helped plan the organization’s conventions, and wrote its statements and resolutions.⁵²

Born in 1899, Simkins had sharpened her skills as a leader and fine-tuned her racial philosophy during the 1920s and 1930s when she participated in several regional integrated organizations dedicated to racial, social, and educational improvement such as the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and the Southern Regional Council.⁵³ Locally, she was a member of such all-black and integrated organizations as the Civil Welfare League, the Columbia Women’s Council, and the Columbia Town Hall Congress. She was also an executive member of the Columbia NAACP and the Richland County Citizens Committee, of which she was publicity and public relations chairperson. When the South Carolina Conference of the NAACP was founded in 1939 and its executive board members selected, Simkins was the only female chosen to head a committee. She also served as the conference’s corresponding secretary.⁵⁴

As a member of the NAACP, Simkins found herself involved in court cases like *Elmore v. Rice*, in which African Americans sued for the right to vote in the Democratic primary. In 1946 George Elmore went to the voting precinct office in Columbia and presented himself to John I. Rice, chairman of the Richland County Democratic Executive Committee. Rice refused to

⁵² Barbara Woods Aba-Mecha, “Black Woman Activist in Twentieth Century South Carolina, Modjeska Monteith Simkins” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 204; Interview with Modjeska Simkins in Columbia, South Carolina, July 28-31, 1976, by Jacquelyn Hall of the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in the Modjeska Simkins Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, Reel 1 (hereinafter cited as Modjeska Simkins Papers, SCPC).

⁵³ “Judge Issues Restraining Order in NAACPs Suit Against S.C. Democrats,” July 8, 1948, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 11.

⁵⁴ Maggie B. Robinson was elected secretary. Woods Aba-Mecha, “Modjeska Monteith Simkins,” 167.



Modjeska Monteith Simkins (1899–1992) as a young civil rights activist, circa 1930. Courtesy of South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina.

allow Elmore to vote because he was not a member of the Democratic party and stated that “no Negroes were permitted to vote in the Democratic Primary.”⁵⁵ The following year, a black citizens’ committee from Richland County, backed by the NAACP, sued to participate in the Democratic primary in South Carolina.⁵⁶

Elmore v. Rice was tried before U.S. District Court judge J. Waties Waring, who in 1947 determined that blacks could not be excluded from the Democratic primary and that the South Carolina Democratic party could

⁵⁵ NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 10.

⁵⁶ Lander, *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960*, 169, 195.

not operate as a "private club," thereby restricting its membership as it pleased. He also added in passing, "It is time for South Carolina to rejoin the Union."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, this decision not deter South Carolina whites from using any means necessary to limit black voting rights. In May 1948, the Democratic state convention adopted a new set of rules designed to discourage most black voters. They required all would-be voters to sign a discriminatory oath declaring themselves in favor of "separation of the races" and "States Rights" and opposed to the "proposed Federal so-called F.E.P.C. law."⁵⁸ Some white Democrats opposed this move, however. The Greenville County Democratic Executive Committee broke with the state organization and repudiated the registration oath by allowing blacks to register. Richland and Marlboro Counties also followed suit.⁵⁹ Judge Waring dealt the white primary its death blow in July 1948 with *Brown v. Baskin*, which threw out the registration oath. He further threatened to jail anyone who attempted to keep blacks from voting. As a testament to the significance of the outcome of *Brown v. Baskin*, which was the first step toward genuine African American political participation, the United States Supreme Court refused to review either of Judge Waring's decisions. The following month, African Americans voted in the Democratic primary in large numbers for the first time since the post-Civil War era.⁶⁰

After Modjeska Simkins became secretary of the South Carolina NAACP at its annual state conference in 1948, Thurgood Marshall, general counsel of the NAACP, asked her to pay special attention to the in-court proceedings of the *Elmore v. Rice* case because of her personal knowledge of what had occurred when Elmore attempted to vote.⁶¹ Simkins also gave direct assistance to George Elmore. When he found himself in financial distress and facing foreclosure on his home, Simkins gave him a personal loan and a job managing one of her husbands' businesses.⁶²

Though African Americans had won the right to the franchise in South Carolina, it was not as easy to overturn other long-established racist practices. Modjeska Simkins and other black women activists often traveled to

⁵⁷ "Courts Define the Right to Vote," *New South*, February 1949, 2.

⁵⁸ Howard H. Quint, *Profile in Black and White: A Frank Portrait of South Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1958), 5.

⁵⁹ "The White Primary," *New South*, June-July 1948, 15.

⁶⁰ NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 9; Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, 519; David W. Southern, "Beyond Jim Crow Liberalism: Judge Waring's Fight against Segregation in South Carolina, 1942-52," *Journal of Negro History* 66 (Autumn 1981): 214.

⁶¹ Alice Stovall, Secretary to Thurgood Marshall, to Mrs. A. W. Simkins, April 13, 1949, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 9.

⁶² Woods Aba-Mecha, "Modjeska Monteith Simkins," 207; "South Carolina Urges Drive for Vote," October 14, 1948, NAACP Papers, Voting Rights Campaign, Part 4, Reel 11.

black communities around the state to advance the NAACP's political agenda. In 1947 Simkins spoke at a meeting of the Sumter NAACP where she urged African Americans to "put up an all out fight for discrimination," positing that "discrimination and segregation are the most poisonous of American life."⁶³ For those who had never voted before, she also distributed literature with instructions on what to do at the polls. Although blacks in South Carolina exercised their newly acquired power of the ballot, this right did not come without a price—after voting, many returned to their homes and holed up in fear.⁶⁴

Like Weston, Simkins also turned to black women as a force for the franchise in South Carolina, particularly because they were not required to pay a poll tax in order to vote. According to a flyer Simkins wrote entitled "Simple Facts About Registration":

Since WOMEN ARE NOT REQUIRED TO PAY POLL TAX, THOUSANDS OF THEM, no matter how poor, can qualify to vote if they can READ and WRITE. WOMEN should REGISTER and VOTE in large numbers. WORK for this!⁶⁵

As a member of the Republican Party, Simkins, the party chairperson in Richland County in 1948, not only encouraged African Americans to vote, but also gave instructions on who to vote for. Before the November 1948 election, she instructed voters to select the party's state chairman, J. Bates Gerald of Charleston, candidate for the U.S. Senate, over Democratic incumbent Burnet R. Maybank. According to Simkins, "When a voter drops the Gerald ticket into the box, he also votes for Thomas E. Dewey, because the Dewey presidential electors are printed on the Gerald ticket." It is very likely that Republican leaders suspected possible ballot tampering, because they forewarned voters to check polling places to ensure that Gerald or Dewey ballots were on display. If they discovered a problem, they were encouraged to report the discrepancy to Republican party officials.⁶⁶

Following a pattern that had been established by her involvement in mixed-sex organizations like the NAACP, the Republican party, and the PDP, Modjeska Simkins and other black women further honed their leadership abilities and their political activism through the Columbia Women's Council (CWC).⁶⁷ Simkins's involvement in the CWC, in particular, illus-

⁶³ Sumter NAACP Minutes, November 23, 1947, Sumter NAACP Records, SCL.

⁶⁴ Woods Aba-Mecha, "Modjeska Monteith Simkins," 209.

⁶⁵ "Simple Facts about Registration," John H. McCray Papers, SCL, Reel 7; Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*, 336.

⁶⁶ "Republicans Tell Voters How To Recognize Ballot," *Lighthouse and Informer*, October 31, 1948.

⁶⁷ Woods Aba-Mecha, "Modjeska Monteith Simkins," 12.

trates the political astuteness and determination of educated middle-class black women. The CWC, which was founded in 1947 under the leadership of Mrs. Horatio D. Nelson of Columbia, was a federation of twenty women's organizations whose aim it was to make "Every Qualified Woman A Registered and Intelligent Voter." Like other black women's organizations, it was a "non-partisan, political action and civic uplift organization."⁶⁸

One of the group's major projects was to increase the number of African Americans registered to vote and to promote voter education. Between 1947 and 1949, the group's activities included mass gatherings for the dissemination of information on current civic and political problems, citizenship discussions with students from such historically black institutions of higher learning as Allen University and Benedict College, special city block drives to increase registration, and an annual social held in May for registered voters who offered proof of registration. Before the CWC could work to increase the number of voting blacks in the city, though, its members had to thoroughly educate themselves on the political process. Thus, as illustrated in advertisements for its meetings printed in the *Lighthouse and Informer*, the CWC agendas placed repeated emphasis on citizenship training and issues related to voter qualification and registration.⁶⁹

In addition to encouraging African Americans to exercise their right to the ballot, the CWC also actively supported black political candidates. In 1948 A. J. Clement, Jr. of Charleston became the first African American to run in a Democratic primary in South Carolina. When the CWC held a mass meeting in October of that year, he was invited to be the principal speaker. CWC members grasped the historical significance of Clement's candidacy and the importance of the upcoming election. Again, too, they recognized that many African Americans had never voted. When the organization mailed the meeting announcement, they included with it instructions on how to vote in the general election scheduled for November 2.⁷⁰

Another of the CWC's projects was the Political Action Mass Meeting held in December 1949 at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbia to encourage pastors of churches in Columbia and Richland County to inform their congregations and the public at large about the upcoming election. The main speaker for the event, the Reverend Maxie C. Collins, was introduced by Simkins and led discussions entitled "South Carolina and the 1950 Election" and "Your Importance in the 1950 Elections." Collins was president of the South Carolina Federated Forces for Temperance and Law Enforcement and the leader of the South Carolina

⁶⁸ "Women's Council Meets Monday," *Lighthouse and Informer*, April 23, 1949.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ "Clement Speaks for Women's Council on Voting Sunday," *Lighthouse and Informer*, October 24, 1948.

Citizens for Truman in 1948. He had also led a protest against the Dixiecrats at the meeting of the Democratic National Committee in Washington earlier that year.⁷¹

Not only was it important to CWC members that ministers and pastors throughout Columbia and Richland County encourage their congregations to register and vote, but also that they themselves become informed political participants. To this end, the CWC and the Columbia Citizens Committee sponsored a seminar for church leaders on registering and voting in preparation for the July 1950 primaries when a U.S. senator, the governor, and other state, county, and local officials were nominated. After attending the seminar, ministers and church auxiliary officers were prepared to carry "precise information" back to their congregations and communities.⁷²

In 1950 the organization sponsored another political action rally at Benedict College that focused on problems in Columbia. CWC members addressed such specific issues as street and traffic lighting, lack of public restrooms and drinking facilities for African Americans, police protection, slum clearance, inferior public facilities for blacks, the lack of paved streets in black areas of the city, and finally, integration in municipal government and services. Utilizing members' connections, in 1951 the CWC presented ex-Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell, an African American from Illinois, at a program at Zion Baptist Church to encourage more black participation in the political process.⁷³ Mitchell had been a Republican at the beginning of the Great Depression. He later switched parties and became the first black Democrat to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁷⁴

Although CWC members did not collect membership dues, they did stage plays in order to raise money for their efforts. These performances stressed black women's contributions as a force for change and conduit for better race relations in South Carolina. In 1950, for example, they sponsored "Women's Role in American Life" and "The Twentieth Century Women in 1951." Modjeska Simkins was an important part of both of these perfor-

⁷¹ "A Political Action Mass Meeting," November 24, 1949, Modjeska Simkins Papers, SCPC, Reel 5.

⁷² "Women's Council Asks Pastors To Join Vote Drive," *Lighthouse and Informer*, May 6, 1950.

⁷³ Woods Aba-Mecha, "Modjeska Monteith Simkins," 350-352; General Report-Columbia Women's Council Political Action Rally, Benedict College Chapel, Friday Evening, April 21, 1950, Modjeska Simkins Papers, SCPC, Reel 5. On the first day of the Seventy-seventh Congress, January 3, 1941, Mitchell, along with six other Congressmen, introduced six anti-lynching bills. "Six anti-lynching Bills Introduced in Congress," *Southern Frontier*, February 1941, front page. Mitchell served in the U.S. Congress for eight years as representative from the First District of Illinois.

⁷⁴ Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey: The Combined Edition* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2006), 475.

mances and chaired a discussion held in conjunction on “Women in Civic and Political Life.”⁷⁵

Like many other women’s organizations, the CWC paid particular attention to the integral role that women played in politics.⁷⁶ CWC members continued to urge black women to register to vote throughout the 1950s. In 1951 the CWC sent out an urgent message encouraging black women to obtain registration certificates. Mrs. Horatio Nelson, CWC president, stressed the importance of this when she asserted, “Perhaps only one thing can surpass in undemocratic behavior the withholding of the ballot for so long from eligible citizens of color, and that is the neglect of those same citizens to register and use effectively the privilege and responsibility of voting now that they have it in their own hand.”⁷⁷ In 1952, when the CWC’s agenda for the year included “an intensive political action program . . . focusing attention upon increased registration and voting by women,” Nelson further said, “We have a heavy job ahead of us, and the organization has no room for the deadwood and the disinterested. The politicians and their friends are always on the alert. We must learn to be too.”⁷⁸ Not only did CWC members seek to obtain more committed members, throughout the 1950s black women like Modjeska Simkins, who by this point was state secretary of the NAACP and acting editor-manager of the *Lighthouse and Informer*, continued to travel around South Carolina emphasizing the importance of women in civil and political activism.⁷⁹

Black women’s political activism in the PDP, SCFCWC, and CWC persisted into the 1960s, when, with the enactment of federal civil rights legislation guaranteeing and protecting black voting rights, they harnessed additional power to ensure black political access and equality in South Carolina. Their organizations continued to advocate equitable access to voting polls by supporting programs like the Voter Education Project (VEP), which had been formed in 1962 to assist thousands of African Americans who felt acute frustration because they lacked the basic skills, such as elementary reading and writing, required for voter registration. In particular, individual black women like Modjeska Simkins remained in the forefront of efforts to further expand political rights for African Americans. In the 1960s, Simkins used the all-black Richland County Citizens’

⁷⁵ Woods Aba-Mecha, “Modjeska Monteith Simkins,” 353.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Women’s Council Urges Citizens to Register,” *Lighthouse and Informer*, May 5, 1951.

⁷⁸ “Girds for Heavy 1952 Program,” Modjeska Simkins Papers, SCPC, Reel 5.

⁷⁹ “Mrs. Simkins to Address Florence NAACP,” *Lighthouse and Informer*, May 1, 1954.

Committee (RCCC) to further promote change in South Carolina's political system. The RCCC had been formed under the auspices of the South Carolina Citizens' Committee, founded in 1944. The local group received its charter in 1956 and adopted as its motto "Leading the effort toward keen community awareness in Non-partisan Political Action in Richland County." Simkins was the public relations director and an official correspondent for the RCCC. As such, she produced written communications for the organization, including its charter.⁸⁰

A close examination of such organizations as the PDP, SCFCWC, and CWC not only reveals black women's political astuteness and desire for change in South Carolina politics, but also the ways in which they were able to navigate male-dominated political terrain. Certainly, black-male leaders recognized their skills as leaders and organizers. Black women like Lottie Gaffney, Annie Belle Weston, and Modjeska Simkins realized that, while they made good leaders in the traditional sense, they were also effective at exacting change as grassroots activists. Black women activists did not limit themselves to addressing the political impotency of blacks generally. They also encouraged women to recognize their strength as a force for political *and* racial equality, using their membership in all-female organizations to reach out to black women as wives and mothers, whom they felt were particularly responsible for helping blacks to obtain the right to vote. Without the traditional and nontraditional leadership provided by these women, male leaders would not have been able to secure the necessary support to obtain political access for South Carolina blacks. When it came to improving conditions for African Americans in South Carolina, black women proved themselves able, in the words of Sarah Z. Daniels, "to speak when and where I can."

⁸⁰ Woods Aba-Mecha, "Modjeska Monteith Simkins," 366.