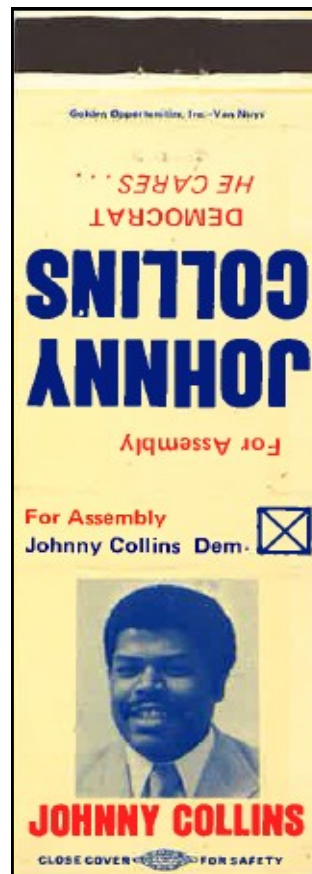


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# Black Political Covers

by  
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A few issues ago, I remarked on the seeming absence of Political covers featuring Blacks. As I happened to be leafing through an album of Minor Political covers which Loren Moore had recently acquired, I was struck by all those *white* faces....Oh, there were a few Oriental faces here and there, but the absence of Blacks was noticeably obvious and, as you could already guess, significant.



*A little History lesson:* Prior to the Civil War, of course, the vast majority of Blacks were in the South, and your chances of running into a Black politician anywhere in the U.S. were nil. But, Black Southerners were important in Southern politics as voters and officeholders from approximately 1870 until the turn of the century. During Reconstruction, federal troops protected black political participation. Even after the withdrawal of troops in 1876, Blacks voted in large numbers and were elected to positions ranging from local ones up to the U.S. House. This doesn't help us, though, since matchbooks didn't take hold in the country until after that period. And, from 1900 until mid-century, Black participation was rare and Black officeholders almost nonexistent.....what happened?

The South learned to disenfranchise Black voters and thus defeat Black candidates. For example, in the South at the turn of the century, and well beyond, illiteracy was rampant among both races. Registrars in many localities, however, waived this requirement for illiterate whites. The same registrars rejected literate Blacks on picayune technicalities. Some states adopted 'grandfather clauses' which obviated the literacy requirement for voters, whose ancestors had been registered at some earlier period, such as 1860, and which eliminated all Blacks from waiver. When the racially motivated provisions of the Mississippi Constitution were upheld by the United States Supreme Court, other states adopted them so that by 1910 some of these impediments had been incorporated into the voting requirements of all southern states.

Another especially effective strategy was the white primacy. The presumption here was that the Democratic Party was a private organization which could establish criteria for membership. If it chose to restrict participation to whites, this was no different than private clubs that limited their membership to males or social organizations for particular religious groups. For more than sixty years after the turn of the century, Democratic candidates in most of the South had no Republican opposition; therefore, officeholders were selected in the Democratic primary. Excluding Blacks from that stage of selection process rendered ineffectual the votes of those few who could participate in the general election.

Still later, some states reinforced the barriers to Black participation by adding interpretation requirements and/or good character tests. Interpretation requirements allowed registrars to select a passage of the state constitution which the prospective voter must explain to the registrar's satisfaction. Instances were recorded in which Blacks with advanced degrees failed while illiterate whites passed in droves. The good character test, which was premised on the notion that individuals not of good character might contaminate the political process, required that prospective voters have two registered voters vouch for them. In the Black Belt counties where no Blacks were registered, whites refused to endorse Black applications.

Initial steps to enfranchise Blacks came in the courts. The white primary was struck down in 1944, after twenty years of litigation. Active involvement of the federal government to facilitate Black registration did not come until Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1957. By authorizing the United States attorney general to sue on behalf of Blacks wrongfully kept from registering, this legislation brought the resources of the federal government into play and helped offset the paralyzing fear which dissuaded many Blacks from filing suit as private citizens. The Justice Department became proficient in marshalling the data to prove that the application of registration requirements often discriminated against Blacks.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 produced the most important breakthrough. This act authorized greater federal involvement in the registration process and sent federal registrars into recalcitrant counties to sign up qualified Blacks to vote, thereby circumventing local officials. On election day, federal poll-watchers might be present to see if the newly registered Blacks were allowed to participate.

Only about 5% of the South's voting age Blacks were registered in 1940. In 1960, when the second Civil Rights Act was passed, less than one-third of the Black voting age population was registered. Only after

passage of the Voting Rights Act did a majority of the eligible Blacks register. By the mid-1980s, almost two-thirds of the South's Blacks were registered which approximates the white registration rate--actually exceeding white registration in 1986. By 1986, there was virtually no difference between Black and white turnout in the South, but the region remains somewhat less likely to vote than the rest of the country.

Thus, not surprisingly, Black Political covers are few and far between, and those that exist all come from the Post-War era...or can someone actually come up with Pre-War cover?....something to keep an eye open for at the very least!

*[My thanks to Mike Samuels, Washington, D.C., for sending in the four B&W scans shown here, plus another I didn't have room for]*