

Introduction

The Gentleman from Memphis

ROBERT REED CHURCH JR. (1885–1952) often spent his evenings reading in his study at the family’s residence on 384 Lauderdale Street in Memphis, Tennessee. Church, a successful businessman, enjoyed going to the theater and occasionally betting on the horses at the race-track. His favorite pastime was quail hunting on the family farm, located near the outer edges of the city. The farm was his sanctuary. He could escape the daily pressures of being a black leader during the Jim Crow era and strategize about his next attempt to organize the black vote. The latter consumed his imagination and became his lifelong passion. His efforts placed him in the discussion of the nation’s most influential leaders. Most of his achievements, however, remain largely unheralded.

Church stood at the center of nearly every major black political movement during the first half of the twentieth century, despite his often being ignored by historians. At the height of his career, he possessed as much power and influence as many of his better-known contemporaries. Specifically, as a black political leader, he had few rivals. Presidents, congressmen, labor organizers, NAACP officials, businessmen, entertainers, and intellectuals all corresponded with Church and sought his advice about uplifting the race. So, *how is it that we know so little, about someone who has accomplished so much?*¹

In many ways, Church’s legacy is perhaps a victim of his leadership style. He rarely sought attention and instead chose to lead from behind the scenes. Church had a pleasant personality but was naturally a quiet man. A white reporter once described his manner: “courteously frank, his

actions bespeak a fair candor. His voice is soft, and his English perfect. While very democratic in his manner, it sometimes is not the easiest thing in the world to gain an audience with a man of national prestige.”² Church was a complex person. A member of the black elite, a politician, an institution builder, and an activist, Church combined these characteristics to forge a career that helped change the American democratic process. In 1953, the *Journal of Negro History* commented that Church “was always alert and a watchman on the wall in behalf of civil and human rights for Negroes.” No person before him had more success in ushering black people to the polls. Throughout his career, he never stopped advocating on behalf of African Americans.³

For Church, politics presented the best possibility for black people to fully realize the promises of American Democracy. He interpreted the ballot as the highest representation of freedom, and used the Republican Party as a tool for social change. Historians and other scholars have unfairly categorized Church as blind follower of the Grand old Party (GOP). He saw politics as a way of challenging the status quo and forcing white Americans to live up to the promises of the Constitution. America’s constitutional framework guarantees the fundamental concept of human equality and human rights. “It is within this conceptual milieu, inherited from the American Revolution, that the Negro has carried on his struggles for social, political and economic emancipation,” wrote Ralph Bunche.⁴ Church believed the most deliberate approach to obtaining these rights was by challenging the very people who had the authority to interpret, amend, and enforce the Constitution. His lifelong affiliation with the Republican Party demonstrates his pragmatism. Church recognized that African Americans did not have a true advocate from either faction, but he chose to embrace the romanticized myth of the “Party of Lincoln” to convince whites to live up to the ideals of the party, and to inspire African Americans to remain loyal to the party that freed the slaves. Church recognized that black people needed a stage to voice their concerns, and only then could they make their issues a national problem. For most of his career, the Republican Party seemed to be the natural political home for African Americans, since the Democratic Party was not a feasible option for blacks in the South.

Church’s role within the party was always as more of an agitator than a supporter. He fought tirelessly to get white Republicans to recognize the plight of African Americans and to serve as their political advocate.

Church's political organization, the Lincoln League of America, represents more of a protest organization than a collection of black GOP loyalists. He founded the Lincoln League as a response to the false promises of party leaders, but more importantly to confront the lily-white factions of the party. In reaction to the league's founding, the *Cleveland Advocate* wrote, "To Robert Church it appeared the time was propitious for a protest voiced by Negro voters."⁵ It continued, "Possessing the fighting blood, inherited, a contempt for habitual ignoring of his people by the party managers, he threw himself into the breach." The Lincoln League would grow to serve as essentially the black Republican National Convention throughout the 1920s. Its meetings and conventions showcased the diversity of black leadership. It provided a platform for relatively obscure black Republicans like Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Perry Howard, Henry Lincoln Johnson, and Ben Davis to elevate as leaders in the GOP.

Church's influence and wealth further enabled him to challenge white policymakers without fear of repercussions. Church's political machine allowed him to negotiate basic concessions for the black community on a local level, while continuously challenging the racial consciousness of white Americans nationally. His relentless pursuit of equality helped bring about gradual change. Early on, he identified the political potential of the African American community, and he turned this innate political energy into a solid voting constituency. By enfranchising thousands of African Americans, Church helped hold their elected officials accountable. Church often warned Republicans of the consequences of ignoring their black constituency. During the FDR years, when blacks' political loyalty started to shift, Church blamed the Republicans' lack of concern, not black voters, for their defection from the party. He once remarked that he never intended for all African Americans to be Republicans, "but the majority of Negroes [to] become politically alive."⁶ His activism demonstrated the power of black cohesion, and the importance of developing a united stance against white supremacy. As a reporter once wrote, "be of good cheer brother church, you have this day lighted a candle in america which we hope, by god's grace, may never be put out."⁷

Robert R. Church Jr. and the African American Political Struggle serves as a lens into the political activity of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. It focuses on the strategies that Church used to organize and empower black people through the vote. Church believed that voting served as the most practical approach for African Americans

to obtain full citizenship in this country. He remained active until his death in the 1952; however, this book focuses mainly on his activism during the 1910s and 1920s. Through his activism, Church demonstrated the political power of African Americans on a national level. By enfranchising thousands of black southerners and developing a substantial voting constituency, black voters could have their voices heard. Specifically, this book focuses on the incremental victories achieved by black voters, and argues that the activism of Church and his colleagues served as the catalyst for the modern civil rights movement.