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The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

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POLITICAL TRENDLETTER®

Perspective

Fighting for the Party of Lincoln

Lugenia Gordon and the Freedom Republicans Struggle for Fair Representation of African Americans in the Republican Party

by Britta W. Nelson

Fighting against the odds is nothing new in Lugenia Gordon's family. The granddaughter of a slave and a Creek Indian likes to recall how her grandmother's tribe freed her grandfather by raiding the plantation of his white owner in the 1840s. At age 73 Gordon continues her family history of fighting racial injustice. For the past 15 years she has been involved in a struggle with the Republican Party over the issue of black representation within the party structure. This month, a lawsuit, which Gordon hopes will result in improved opportunities for African Americans in the GOP, goes to the United States Supreme Court.

This fight began in the late 1970s when Gordon, a Republican for over 40 years, became concerned about the underrepresentation of African Americans in the Republican National Committee (RNC) and the national party conventions. In 1979 she founded the Freedom Republicans, Inc. and became its first president. The goal of this New York-based, interracial organization was to open up the GOP's power structure to blacks and other minorities. For over a decade the Freedom Republicans pleaded with the all-white party leadership to be more inclusive, arguing that the party's rules governing delegate apportionment to its national conventions as well as its process of selecting members to the Republican National Committee discriminate against African Americans and other minorities.

Suit and Appeal

The origins of the GOP's practices that have resulted in racial exclusion began in 1916 when the Republican Party altered its convention delegate apportionment formula which granted each state party the number of delegates that were proportional to the state's population (a system that is still being used by the Democratic Party). The substitute system no longer relied solely on population figures, but instead rewarded states that showed a strong popular voter turnout for a Republican candidate in the previous election with "bonus" delegates which made up 25 percent of Republican national convention votes. Since then, the Freedom Republicans claim that the selection mechanism has discriminated against racial and ethnic minorities who have been disproportionately concentrated in the urban areas of the more populous states throughout this century.

African Americans have also been essentially excluded from the ranks of the Republican National Committee which has only four blacks among its 165 voting members

(one from the District of Columbia and three from the Virgin Islands). Each state and the five territories are entitled to three members on the Committee. By contrast, the Democratic National Committee's black membership is about 20 percent. Throughout the 1980s the Freedom Republicans appealed repeatedly to the party leadership to redress these issues.

The group has also made several recommendations to improve the system of selecting convention delegates and members of the Republican National Committee. For example, they would expand the RNC from 165 members to 538, under a proportional system that parallels the Electoral College, which would raise New York's representation from three to 33 and California's from three to 54. After holding a series of closed hearings, the Republican Party leadership officially rejected this proposition concluding that there was nothing wrong with their delegate allocation process as it related to minority participation. Gordon exclaimed that the leaders of the GOP "are not going to tell me that I can't have a seat in the party that was founded by former slaves and abolitionists."

Frustrated, in December of 1991, Gordon and the Freedom Republicans filed an official complaint to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), urging the commission to terminate funding of the Republican National Convention. They charged that the party's discriminatory practices in selecting convention delegates and members to the RNC violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. The two major political parties received substantial tax dollars from the FEC, about \$11 million each, to run their 1992 national conventions.

When the complaint was rejected by the FEC, the Freedom Republicans sued the commission, and on April 7, 1992, Judge Charles Richey of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia ruled in their favor. He ordered the FEC to issue and enforce clear regulations forbidding any form of racial bias by either party. However, the Freedom Republicans' victory was short-lived.

On January 18, 1994, the Federal Appeals Court reversed the lower court's ruling and dismissed the Freedom Republicans' complaint holding that the Freedom Republicans "lacked standing to advance its claim" under Article 3 of the Constitution. The court reasoned that the Freedom Republicans must prove that federal funding caused the discrimination and that withdrawing the funds would redress the problem.

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Freedom Republicans

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Her disappointment with the decision did not deter Gordon. On June 18, 1994 the Freedom Republicans filed an appeal before the Supreme Court of the United States. After the Court convenes this month, it will decide whether it will hear the case.

I Could Never Be a Democrat

Born in Alabama on May 12, 1921, Gordon witnessed how white southern Democratic politicians disenfranchised over 90 percent of all African Americans by using poll taxes, literacy and "character" tests, grandfather clauses, and other mechanisms designed to keep black Americans from exercising their constitutional right to vote. Eventually the Democratic Party gained almost complete control of southern politics, and imposed racial segregation laws which oppressed blacks in every area of public life.

When her father died in 1939, Gordon left the South and moved to New York and registered to vote as a Republican. As she remembers: "I couldn't wait to get out of Alabama... and knowing what the Democrats had done to us I could never be a Democrat." Later, she worked as an insurance broker, married and had a daughter. At the same time, she remained active in Republican politics. The political participation of African Americans was particularly important to her, and through the 1960s she was involved with voter registration and education.

Gordon became one of the founders of the Black Women's Political Caucus (BWPC) in New York, which included Democrat Shirley Chisholm as a cofounder. (Chisholm went on to become the first black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress.) The BWPC worked to strengthen the political power base of black women in New York by conducting regular political education classes. But in the 1970s, Gordon, who witnessed how many African Americans left the Republican Party as a result of its steady shift to more conservative politics in the 1960s, worked to restore trust in the GOP among African Americans, which had been the party of choice for the majority of black Americans until the 1930s.

In the 1960s, large numbers of southern white Democratic segregationists switched to the Republican Party because they believed that the Democratic party was getting too "liberal." These "born-again Democrats" or "Dixocrats," as she describes them, subsequently encouraged Republican leaders to further exclude blacks from the party's councils. Gordon charges that this element of the party was key to the election of Ronald Reagan, whose racially divisive policies and programs only added to the further alienation of African Americans from the party.

Gordon never stopped pushing the white party leadership to do more outreach in the black community. She believes that it is essential for black Americans to be a part of both major parties, because if they pledge their allegiance only to one, their vote will be taken for granted and that party may cease to really work in support of black interests. In her struggle to open the GOP to more African

Americans, Gordon came to look upon Fannie Lou Hamer as a role model and inspiration. Hamer, a black former sharecropper from Mississippi and cofounder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, succeeded after a long hard battle in the 1960s not only in integrating the previously all-white Democratic Party of Mississippi, but also in making the national Democratic Party adopt regulations that would guarantee proportional representation of all minorities in the party at all levels throughout the country. "She did for the Democrats what I am trying to do for the Republicans," says Gordon, who, following in Fannie Lou Hamer's footsteps, founded the Freedom Republicans in 1979.

After 15 years of struggle, there has not been much progress toward increasing black representation in the GOP. Even if the U.S. Supreme Court rules in her favor, Gordon knows that chances for a major change in attitude among the GOP's party leadership are slim. She charges that they have invested much more energy over the past years in trying to get her out of the party than in attracting other African Americans to join.

The Party of My Ancestors

Questions frequently posed to Gordon are: Why does she keep on struggling for the inclusion of African Americans into a party that has constantly rebuffed and disappointed her? Why doesn't she simply leave the GOP, especially since her views on major issues diverge from conservative Republican dogma? For example, she is Catholic, and while she does not personally approve of abortion, she thinks the government has no right to make reproductive decisions for women. Gordon favors affirmative action but opposes capital punishment and was against the North American Free Trade Agreement enacted by Congress last year. She supported the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Brady Bill, and the Motor Voter Bill.

But Gordon, who is a firm believer in the two-party system, has an allegiance to the Republican Party that goes far beyond disagreements over current political issues. She considers the GOP "the party of my ancestors, the party of Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass," and points out that the three abolitionists are featured in the Freedom Republicans logo. "I will not let those people push me out—I will stay in there giving them hell," declares the inexhaustible president of the Freedom Republicans. "As long as I live and breath, I will remain, Lugenia Gordon, a Republican—and I will die one!"

Whatever the outcome of the Freedom Republicans lawsuit, Lugenia Gordon will not relent in her challenge of the Republican Party, and will never give up her hope of seeing African Americans come back to "the party of Lincoln." Her struggle probably won't stop with her. Gordon has a 16-year-old granddaughter who is named after her and seems to have inherited the old family spirit of fighting against the odds. Her granddaughter is one of the youngest members of the Freedom Republicans and has assured her: "Grandma, don't worry. When you go, I will carry on the fight, and they'll still have a Lugenia Gordon to deal with."