Chapter 3
Mayoral Racial History in Four Cities

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The four cities examined in this research—Detroit, New Orleans, Chicago, and Charlotte—reveal the centrality of mayoral politics in racial polarization. The campaigns and the governance of both the white and black mayors in these cities set the tone for how race and politics were mutually affective and how racial conflict emerged.

Detroit

Detroit prospered economically during World War II by filling government orders for military supplies and equipment. After the war, the Detroit auto industry regained its position as the main economic driver in the city. But, with the advent of automation, and the spread of auto industry jobs to other cities, employment opportunities in that industry eventually decreased. Foreign competition accelerated the decrease, leading to high unemployment rates in the city.

Even before these economic changes, Detroit was already characterized by racial polarization. As was the typical discrimination pattern in rustbelt cities, blacks were concentrated in unskilled, low-paying jobs in the factories and unions. Strong racial discrimination was evident by the fact that many blacks were employed in positions that were below their abilities and skills. In addition, more young African Americans were migrating from the South into the city just as employment in the auto factories and related industries was disappearing. Housing was another area of strong segregation. And Detroit’s political leaders turned a blind eye to long-standing police brutality (Rich 1989), which only increased racial animosity. All of the above created a high level of frustration among blacks which ultimately resulted in race riots in 1943 and 1967.

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Detroit was undergoing demographic changes as a result of white flight and black in-migration. These demographic changes portended political change. The city went from 20 percent black in 1955 to 44 percent in 1970, to 63 percent in 1980 and to 76 percent black in 1990 (Welch 2001; Thompson 2001). Unexpectedly, Jerome Cavanaugh, the city's first liberal mayor, was elected in 1961, defeating incumbent Louis Miriani. Believing that Miriani was a sure winner, the business community and the United Auto Workers of Detroit endorsed him. However, the liberal Cavanaugh won in an upset because he was able to obtain the support of the black community by promising black leaders a role in his new administration (Rich 1991); his winning electoral coalition was made up of black voters and middle class whites.

Cavanaugh's administration was characterized by outreach to help the black community. One example of this outreach was the revived Committee on Community Relations that was charged with enforcing fair employment practices in firms with city contracts. Second, Cavanaugh appointed several African Americans to positions in his cabinet, such as Alfred Pelham, city comptroller and George Edwards, commissioner of police. It is difficult to underestimate the impact of these appointments. The police and city finances are arguably the most critical areas of urban governance, and, in Detroit, under Cavanaugh, blacks headed both. And finally, Cavanaugh was the first white mayor of a large majority white city to appoint a black police chief.

However, even though blacks in Detroit were comparatively better off than blacks in other cities, the huge socioeconomic gap between whites and blacks in Detroit remained. The disadvantaged position of blacks in Detroit was evident in their lower incomes, higher unemployment, and lower levels of education. The reforms of the new liberal mayor could not erase the most basic problems faced by black residents: housing shortages, loss of industrial jobs, and concentrations of poverty in dysfunctional neighborhoods. The result was that many members of the black community felt disenfranchised and impatient about the lack of change in their daily lives. This ultimately led to militancy in the black community (Herman 2002, 6).

Militant leaders like the Reverend Albert Cleague and H. Rap Brown argued that whites would never voluntarily share power with blacks, and called for more aggressive action, including black separatism. At a black power rally in Detroit in early 1967, H. Rap Brown stated that if “Motown” didn't come around, “we are going to burn you down” (Herman 2002, 6). These threats were made in the context of a mayor who was making a genuine effort to improve the lives of blacks and to include them in city government. But the frustrations borne of years of discrimination and