The Black "Better Class" Political Dilemma: Philadelphia Prototype Isaiah C. Wears

ROGER LANE'S RECENT STUDY, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900*, admirably describes how black saloonkeepers such as Gilbert Ball and white Republicans employed "machine politics" to manipulate the black vote to Republican advantage. Lane's further contention that the black "better class" could be bought by whites without concessions to black issues or even to black patronage is, however, unsupported by the use of Octavius V. Catto as a representative example. Because Catto was murdered on the day most of Philadelphia's black voters cast their very first ballots in a municipal election, his career simply did not last long enough to encompass the period of black adjustment to the American political system. In addition, while charging that better-class blacks succumbed to Republican bribery and manipulation, Lane leaves unexplored, and thus unanswered, the important question of just what alternative opportunities were available for those better-class blacks to have influenced more forcefully the politics of Philadelphia. In short, Lane's work points up the need for a more thorough study of how black Philadelphians used their "virgin vote" as a political tool.[1]

[1] The phrase "better class" black first appeared in W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899). Roger Lane uses the same term in his *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900* (Cambridge, 1986). To both, the term means blacks with respectable earnings "sufficient to live well; not engaged in menial service of any kind; the wife engaged in no occupation save that as housewife except in a few cases where she had special employment in the home. The children are found in school, the family living in a well kept home." Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 310-11.

The best recent study of Philadelphia black politics is Lane's *Roots of Violence*. In a chapter entitled "Octavius Catto and Gil Ball: The Politics of Race and the Politics of Philadelphia," Lane establishes the importance of Gil Ball and his political club to Philadelphia politics. Lane agrees with Du Bois that Republican "trickery" and patronage made the black vote impotent. See also W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Black Vote of Philadelphia," reprinted in Miriam Ershkowitz and Joseph Zikmund, eds., *Black Politics in Philadelphia* (New York, 1973), 39.

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Few historians have examined or appreciated the opportunity for black political advancement that presented itself in Philadelphia during the period from 1871 to 1884. In 1870 blacks entered a voting population that two years earlier had elected Democrat Daniel Fox mayor over his Republican opponent by a scant nineteen hundred votes. When the best estimates of the period predicted a "virgin" black vote of five thousand, all Republican, blacks came into city politics with a good deal of clout. Indeed, the black vote was important to every local mayoral election from 1871 until 1884, when the defeat of Mayor Samuel G. King combined with the increase in Jewish and Italian immigrants in the years that followed to spell the end of black political influence in Philadelphia down to the 1960s.[2]

It is the life of Isaiah C. Wears that best illustrates the possibilities and limitations better-class blacks found in late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia politics. Wears's struggle for the right to vote began in the 1840s, and once the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in 1870, he sought to use it as a means to improve the conditions of his race. Although Wears himself was never elected to office, his career readily exemplifies black politics in Philadelphia from 1870 to 1900. In addition, Wears's story highlights the dilemma facing blacks who favored the Republican party as the party that had eliminated slavery yet wanted to use their votes to elect individuals who now helped them most. Wears resolved the issue in favor of loyalty to Republican candidates. Once elected, these same Republicans did not support Wears and other better-class blacks for public office and instead put forth lesser candidates, but Wears still held tenaciously to his beliefs

[2] The generally accepted authority on nineteenth-century black politics in Philadelphia is still Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* and "The Black Vote of Philadelphia," *Charities*, Oct. 7, 1905. James Earl Miller's "The Negro in Pennsylvania Politics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1945) deals with state issues, as does Edward J. Price, Jr., "Let the Law Be Just: The Quest for Racial Equality in Pennsylvania 1780-1915" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1973). Dennis Clark's "Urban Blacks and Irishmen: Brothers in Prejudice" in Ershkowitz and Zikmund, eds., *Black Politics*, is too brief and does not discuss Wears at all. Frank B. Evans, *Pennsylvania Politics 1872-1877: A Study in Political Leadership* (Harrisburg, 1966), has but nine scant references to blacks in the state, while Lawrence Grossman, "The Democratic Party and the Negro: A Study in Northern and National Politics, 1868-1892" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1973), is national in scope. For information about the "Virgin Black Vote," see *The Press*, Oct. 10, 1870.

in the equality of man and in the value of the Republican party to all blacks.

Isaiah C. Wears's background resembles that of most men from the black better-class. He was born free in Baltimore in 1822 and during his youth moved to Philadelphia with his family. Family life was centered in the religious activities of the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church. Young Isaiah's political career began at his father's knee as Josiah C. Wears became a member of the Vigilance Committee during 1838, joining well-known Philadelphia black activists, Robert Purvis, James Forten, Jacob C. White, Sr., and the Reverend Daniel A. Payne. Josiah Wears's friendship with Purvis led in turn to his son's entrance into public life. In 1846 Isaiah was elected to a committee headed by Purvis that represented Philadelphia blacks at the Pennsylvania State Negro Suffrage Convention. Eight years later the younger Wears attracted attention outside of the state when he attended the National Negro Suffrage Convention in Syracuse, and the Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reported that "He is not only an elegant and vigorous speaker but one of the best debaters in the house."[3]

In September 1860 Isaiah Wears became president of the newly created Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, circulating petitions and gathering statistics to document the needs and abilities of Philadelphia blacks. During the early years of the Civil War the Association met monthly in the house of William Still, clerk of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and under Wears's presidency advocated the right of blacks to vote.[4]

In 1864 Wears joined the Philadelphia branch of the Republican-sponsored Equal Rights League, led by William D. Forten, son of

[3] *Philadelphia Tribune*, "Pencil Pusher Point," written by black historian William Carl Bolivar, Sept. 6, 1913; broadsides in the Gardiner Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania) (hereafter, HSP); *The Press*, May 5, 1900; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 145; "Notebook of Isaiah C. Wears," pp. 30-33, Wears Papers (HSP); Letter, from *Frederick Douglass' Paper* concerning Brooklyn correspondent Ethop, 1855, ibid. In response to the article, Wears wrote Douglass that he was not the leader of the Philadelphia delegation because "no conduct on my part could be so construed." Isaiah C. Wears to Frederick Douglass, Oct. 29, 1855, ibid.

[4] Minutes of the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, Sept. 5, 1860, Gardiner Collection; broadside *The Executive Committee of the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania*, ibid.

the famous sailmaker and abolitionist James Forten, and by Octavius V. Catto, a charismatic teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth. Begun as a national organization in Syracuse in 1864, the League's primary goal was the national enfranchisement of blacks, and by 1866 it had fifty-one branches throughout Pennsylvania.[5] Wears, Still, and Catto pooled the efforts of the Statistical Association and the League to win enactment of an 1867 state law granting blacks the right to ride streetcars in Pennsylvania. Despite that remarkable victory, however, the Statistical Association soon became ineffective and debt-ridden, perhaps because of the sharp and sometimes biting personality of William Still or possibly just because of the local nature of the organization. In any case, by 1869 it had been forced to disband, and Wears subsequently turned all of his attention to the Equal Rights League.[6]

In 1869 Republican State Senator Marrow B. Lowry read to the State Senate Wears's letter favoring the immediate enfranchisement of blacks in the state. Complimenting Wears on his ability to present a persuasive argument, Lowry noted that it was the first time "in the history of the state that your race has had an opportunity to be heard in their own behalf on the floor of the Pennsylvania Senate." Later the same year Wears was elected Philadelphia's representative to the National Suffrage Convention, which met in Washington while a special session of Congress was holding hearings on giving blacks the right to vote. Chosen to speak for the Suffrage Convention before the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate, Wears presented the legal grounds for black voting and the moral arguments for unrestricted voting for all peoples in a democracy, winning high praise from the committee.[7]

[5] Minutes of the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, 1869, Gardiner Collection; *A Synopsis of the Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, at Pittsburgh August 8th, 9th, and 10th, 1866* (Philadelphia, 1866), 44.

[6] Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part I) Background and Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973), 261-90, and Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part II) The Victory," ibid., 40 (1973), 355-79; Minutes of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League, 1864-1872, Gardiner Collection.

[7] M.B. Lowry to Wears, March 12, 1869, Wears Papers; "Notebook of Isaiah C. Wears," pp. 33-36. For a complete copy of the letter, see *A Tribute of Gratitude to the Hon. M.B. Lowry* (Philadelphia, 1869), 21-27.

When such campaigning finally had paid off with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, Wears used the League to get out the vote for the October 1870 elections. Although few local offices were on the ballot, state and national Republicans needed the help of black votes and on October 7, 1870, Wears spoke at a meeting in Spring Garden in support of Republican congressman William D. Kelly. Reminding his listeners that Kelly "had always been a champion of the right of suffrage for the colored man," Wears called upon blacks to "go to the polls on Tuesday next and vote the Republican ticket."[8]

The virgin black vote was instrumental in the victory of the Republican slate. Arriving at the polls before the Democrats had a chance to apply street violence, blacks voted quickly. There was a disturbance at Fifth and Lombard Streets, but Democratic mayor Daniel Fox called the state militia to the scene and violence was avoided. In April 1871, when the Rights League and black community groups gathered to celebrate both the Fifteenth Amendment and their successful voting campaign, the event showcased black Philadelphia's future political leadership. As director of the celebration, Joseph Bustill, the aging representative of the better class, organized the assemblage by sphere of influence with Wears leading the Uptown Wards (above Callowhill Street), Catto, the Downtown Wards (below South Street), and Andrew F. Stevens, William Whipper, and Jacob Purnell, the Middle Wards (Lombard Street Section). After each leader was recognized and publicly thanked for the success of Republican candidates, speeches, music, and a banquet followed.[9]

Despite efforts by these better-class blacks to demonstrate unity at the celebration, however, a speech by Frederick Douglass evoked great controversy. Insisting that blacks vote "as they pleased" because "each man must decide what men and measures will be best," Douglass touched on the issue that presented educated blacks their greatest dilemma in the political arena. Should they hold fast to the Republican party because it had helped free blacks from slavery or should they

[8] *The Press*, Oct. 9, 1870.

[9] "Pencil Pusher Point," *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 19, 1913. Fox was criticized by his fellow Democrats for his actions in 1870 and in 1871; during the Catto Riot he refused to call out the state militia. See Ira Brown, *The Negro in Pennsylvania History* (University Park, 1970), 51-54.

use their vote to further their own race—party be damned? Purvis and Catto, although upset with Douglass for uttering anything that detracted from Republican party unity, ignored the remarks and lauded the black community's having raised thousands of dollars for the celebration. Wears, by contrast, would not let the issue die, and for the next month Wears and Douglass debated the issue in letters to the newspapers. Wears felt that no black person could vote Democrat because of that party's past record on race. Besides, in Philadelphia's Fourth Ward politicians led by Democrat William McMullen were openly claiming that the poor blacks in their ward would become Democrats "for a drink of rum," thus offsetting Republican votes. Nevertheless, Douglass maintained that blacks should not blindly follow the Republicans.[10]

The October election of 1871 was a critical one for the city, and the issues in the campaign were clear. The Republican mayoral candidate William Stokley had been leading a fight in Select Council against the volunteer fire companies while Charles Biddle, a friend of the fire companies, was nominated on the Democrat ticket. At the same time, the Republicans encouraged black voting; the Democrats opposed it. This was the first municipal election in which blacks could vote, and Stokley's law-and-order stance made him popular in the black community. Because blacks were continually put upon by race haters as they walked about, especially at night, while police, who were largely Irish Democrats, did little to defend black rights, a Republican victory by Stokley seemed to offer blacks their best means of protection.[11] Not surprisingly, the black virgin vote caused concern among the Democrats. Two supporters of Congressman Samuel J. Randall tried to advise him of what the black vote would do to his district, and neither was optimistic. D.I. Driscoll warned that Randall's opponent in the upcoming congressional election had said that he was confident of a victory against Randall because of the new black vote in the district. Later, Jonathan Weaver told Randall, "If it were not for the Negroes we would have everything our way."

[10] For the complete Douglass-Wears debate, read *The Press*, May 30, June 2, 5, 9, 20, 27, 1870; *A Tribute of Gratitude to the Hon. M.B. Lowry*, 34.

[11] St. George Joyce, *Story of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1919), 270-80.

Democrats in the First Congressional District feared the black vote more than blacks suspected.[12]

Election day, October 10, 1871, was one of the most violent in Philadelphia history. The Irish of Moyamensing, inflamed by the elimination of their volunteer fire company and appalled by blacks' voting, were ready to act. Believing the demagoguery of the Democrats who claimed that the Republicans looked "upon a working white man as no better than a negro," the Irish unleashed their frustrations on blacks. In the Fourth and Fifth Wards whites attacked blacks who attempted to vote, and police aided the white rioters. As a result, a number of blacks were shot, including Equal Rights League activist Octavius V. Catto, who died instantly from his wounds.[13]

The death of Catto left Philadelphia black Republicans without their youngest and most dynamic leader. Following the hero's funeral accorded Catto, the Equal Rights League became less and less active in the city until, in 1872 under pressure from white Republicans, the League's state leaders, Aaron Still of Reading and William Nesbitt of Altoona, moved its headquarters to Reading.[14]

Catto's death also brought Wears to center stage in Philadelphia politics. William Still, now a wealthy coal dealer, William D. Forten, and Robert Purvis also remained active politically, although only Wears and Forten continued association with the Equal Rights League. Of the four, Wears was the most valuable to the Republican party. Membership at Mother Bethel gave him access to audiences in the largest black church in the city, while throughout 1872 his speeches at ceremonies honoring Catto made Wears the most visible black Republican in the city.[15]

The election of 1874 found the Republican mayor William D. Stokley running for re-election against Independent Republican Alexander K. McClure. Stokley had been elected as a reform candidate in 1871, but McClure, a former Republican, had ample evidence to

[12] D.I. Driscoll to Samuel J. Randall, June 8, 1870; and Jonathan Weaver to Randall, Sept. 29, 1870, Samuel J. Randall Collection (Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania).

[13] *The Press*, Aug. 13, 1866. Quote from a speech made by Governor James Orr of South Carolina at the National Democratic Convention in Philadelphia: *The Press*, Oct. 11, 1871.

[14] Minutes of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League, 1872, Gardiner Collection; *The Press*, Dec. 23, 1871.

[15] *The Press*, Oct. 13, 1870; "Notebook of Isaiah C. Wears," p. 37.

support claims of corruption against Stokley and James McManes, the head of the gas works and organizer of city patronage.[16]

In the opinion of William Still and Robert Purvis, blacks were being used by the Republicans because Stokley did so little to get blacks jobs. By contrast, McClure, the principal speaker at the 1871 public meeting held to honor Catto, represented reform. Leading the attack, William Still boldly declared himself for McClure, but a wave of protest swept the black community. Wears called McClure a Democrat and Still a traitor. Some blacks urged a boycott of Still's coal business; others threatened to burn down his coal yard and lynch him. Republicans accused him of repaying a political debt as he had recently been appointed to the previously all-white Philadelphia Board of Trade. Ultimately, the police had to intervene to protect Still at his home from angry black Republicans.[17]

In a special meeting held at Concert Hall on March 10, 1874, Still attempted to justify his position by facing his accusers. He denied having "played politics," insisting that he favored McClure because his platform offered black people more. He denounced the practice of blacks' retaining loyalty to the Republican party "simply out of gratitude." As he put it, "To my mind the work of our elevation, after all, must come mainly through our own exhortations and self-reliance" and not from one political party. Still charged that when he had approached Stokley about appointing blacks to the city's police force, Stokley had told Still that "he did not need to make any such move because he had the colored vote anyway since colored people always could be counted upon to vote Republican." McClure, on the other hand, had promised Still that the Democrats would appoint blacks to the police force.[18]

The election of Stokley and the Republicans discredited Still and Purvis in Philadelphia's black community and made loyal Republicans Isaiah C. Wears and William D. Forten the most politically influential

[16] Evans, *Pennsylvania Politics*, 59-99; Joyce, *Story of Philadelphia*, 275.

[17] Lurey Kahn, *One Day Lavin . . . He be free—William Still and the Underground Railroad* (New York, 1972), 215-17; Albert S. Norwood, "Negro Welfare Work in Philadelphia Especially as Illustrated by the Career of William Still 1875-1900" (M.A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1931), 105-45; Lane, *Roots of Violence*, chap. 3.

[18] William Still, *An Address on Voting and Laboring* (Philadelphia, 1874), passim; Thomas Wister to Wears, [1880s?], Wears Papers.

blacks in the Republican-controlled city. Wears and Forten were just what the party needed—trustworthy and articulate spokesmen for the Republican cause. Similar in their views of Republicanism, they were often together, but Wears's greatest influence was among the better-class blacks of Philadelphia while Forten was active in state Republican politics, visiting mining towns and attending meetings in Chambersburg, Reading, and Harrisburg. Although Forten knew many upstate politicians and had no peer as black Republican representative to the rest of the state, Wears had far greater influence in Philadelphia's black community and among the city's white leadership as well.[19]

At the same time, Wears was unhappy with the movement among the city's blacks to organize political clubs that gave power to saloonkeepers such as "Sammy" Williams or the even more powerful Gil Ball of the Matthew S. Quay Club. Made up mostly of poor and recently migrated blacks, these clubs simply offered aid to anyone in exchange for his vote. To the moralist and church member that Wears was, political clubs were dens of iniquity that encouraged drinking and immoral behavior at the expense of politics. Also, because they were controlled by white politicians, the clubs enabled whites to select black ward candidates behind closed doors. In turn, the black leaders of these clubs gained power and profit from their association with white politicians instead of fighting for equal rights. Wears never objected to political organizations as such, however, and joined the Citizens Republican Club, whose rules permitted no card playing, drinking, or unseemly behavior. Founded in 1884 by caterer Andrew Stevens, who also belonged to the Equal Rights League, this club became a force for elite blacks in the Seventh Ward, including Stephen B. Gipson, Dr. E.C. Howard, James Needham, William Warrick, and John W. Page, indeed virtually every black man who had social status, money, intelligence, and a desire to pursue politics.[20]

[19] Letter, Unknown to Orrin Evans *Afro-American* newspaper, July 1, 1933. MS Classified Wo-999 (HSP). The letter contains a sketch of William Forten. In his old age William Forten had to draw on his political friendship with upstate Democrat General Winfield Hancock to get in a retirement home.

[20] "Pencil Pusher Points," *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 13, 1912; Wears, "Eulogy for Robert Purvis," April 27, 1898, Wears Papers; Clark, "Urban Blacks and Irishmen," 23;

An important difference existed between the organization of the Equal Rights League and the management of political machines like that conducted by Gil Ball. All the actions of League members were scrutinized closely by party officials, but the saloonkeepers made routine decisions about which white Republicans wished to know nothing. In Ball's case the conduct of the Matthew Quay Club was left to him, provided that he produced votes for white candidates on election day. Those active in the Equal Rights League, a wing of the Republican party, met with and took direction from white Republican leaders.[21]

Mayor William Stokley's re-election campaign of 1877 centered on the return of Frank Kelly, the accused killer of Octavius V. Catto, from Chicago. Addressing a Twenty-Eighth Ward meeting for Stokley on February 16, 1877, Wears decried the street violence of 1871 when black voters were shot in cold blood "by Democrat roughs and refused protection by Democrat policemen." Wears rhetorically asked, "Why is it that our lives are now safe?" Then he answered, "It is because of the Republican Party." For Wears the issue of law and order and the arrest of Kelly were sufficient reasons to elect Stokley mayor.[22]

Although Philadelphia blacks were pleased with Kelly's arrest, there still were signs of growing disillusionment among blacks. To some, racial equality was progressing at a snail's pace under local Republican leadership. Specifically, Stokley had not appointed one black policeman to the force and had neglected to have a black exhibit at the Centennial Exhibition. As James F. Needham of the Citizens Club

Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 379. Du Bois comments, "The Citizen's Club on Broad Street, which has the best Negroes of the city in its membership, allows no gambling and pays its own expenses [meaning no support from white politicians]. This club, however, stands alone." See also William Carl Bolivar's "Pencil Pusher Points," on "Andrew F. Stevens Citizen's Republican Club," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1912. Teacher Gipson became a state representative; Dr. E.C. Howard was a respected physician; James Needham was a member of numerous black literary clubs; William Warrick was the first black athlete at the University of Pennsylvania; and John W. Page was a wealthy supporter of black causes.

[21] Lane, *Roots of Violence*, passim; Harry C. Silcox, "William McMullen, Nineteenth-Century Political Boss," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 110 (1986), 409.

[22] *The Press*, Feb. 3, 1877.

summed up these feelings, "The great trouble was that the colored people had not had the advantage to which they were entitled."[23]

At least one white Democrat saw in the dissatisfaction an opportunity to attract black voters. Isaac M. Birkey, a white living near the black Lombard Street neighborhood, informed Congressman Randall of the Citizens Club's complaint and recommended that Randall propose placing a monument in honor of a black on the Centennial grounds in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. National Democratic leaders could be invited to a "grand ceremony" headed by Randall. "If this is done," advised Birkey, "we will control the Coloured votes in this and other states." All that was necessary was for Randall to "tell them [blacks] we will treat them better than our Republican friends." Randall refused to act, however, for seeking black votes in Philadelphia would not sit well with the majority of local Democrats.[24]

During the 1877 election the black community divided once again over the responsiveness of black Republicans to the needs of their people. At a Convention of Colored Voters held at Liberty Hall both Isaiah C. Wears and William D. Forten were censured for not attending the convention. Yet, on the next day, Wears was proposed as an honorary member because of his past service and his championing of black rights, and the resolution was passed unanimously and cheered. When a similar motion was proposed for Forten, however, a lengthy discussion ensued, and the motion was defeated. Philadelphia's George Cornelius charged Forten "had not used his influence with the municipal government to secure appointments for colored voters." Efforts by Forten's friends to allow him to speak at an evening session failed. For the most part, Forten's unpopularity stemmed from his paying too much attention to issues outside of the city and not keeping in touch with Philadelphia blacks.[25]

A meeting of the Seventh Ward Republican leaders to nominate Philadelphia's first black candidate for Common Council was held during the same election campaign. Levi Cromwell, a black of fine reputation, was initially proposed as the candidate, but at the last minute a closed-door decision by white party leaders gave the nom-

[23] Ibid., Feb. 17, 1877.

[24] Isaac M. Birkey to Samuel J. Randall, July 22, 1877, Randall Collection.

[25] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 3, 1877; *The Press*, Feb. 3, 1877.

ination to Samuel M. Williams. Better known as "Uncle Sammy," he was labeled by one newspaper as an "unscrupulous little demagogue." This criticism meant little to Republican leaders, for Williams gave the party the services of the vocal Sammy Williams Republican Club. However, a black writer to *The Press*, annoyed with the party stalwarts' maneuvering, wrote, "We were very questionably represented in the convention . . . when two of our ablest men—Messrs. Wears and Forten—were ignored and shelved." Although an editorial in *The Press* contended that Wears was by far the best black candidate available, Republicans had another agenda. Men such as Williams seemed to offer sure votes on election day. Remaining loyal to the party, Wears and Forten were spokesmen at a Republican rally at which Sammy Williams sat mute on the stage. Only the Republican leaders were surprised when Williams was defeated in the election that followed.[26]

Nevertheless, the election of 1877 did produce a black-supported victory for one Democratic reform candidate. Robert Pattison was elected over Stokley's handpicked candidate for Controller because of the black vote. Credit for the victory goes to Lewis Cassidy, prominent Democratic lawyer who was well-liked by blacks because of his support on black community issues. For example, as a school director Cassidy had declined to have the black Lombard School named in his honor, insisting that it be named after Philadelphia's most famous black, James Forten. Pattison had studied law under Cassidy, and Cassidy campaigned daily in the black community for Pattison, an effort whose success proved that the black vote could make the difference in local elections.[27]

Wears's support of Republican party policy continued in 1879 even as the removal of federal troops from the southern states resulted in violence against blacks in the South. The Emigrant Aid Society was formed to help thousands of blacks escape this violence by moving to St. Louis and other border cities. At the insistence of Frank C. Hooten, chairman of Pennsylvania's Republican State Committee, Wears spoke before the United States Senate on what had become known as the "Exodus Movement." Despite the many abuses suffered

[26] *New York Globe*, Oct. 18, 1884; *The Press*, Feb. 16, 1877.
[27] *Public Ledger*, Nov. 19, 1889.

by southern blacks, Wears criticized the exodus just as did white Republicans, who feared that blacks would overrun the cities of the North. Claiming to oppose the movement on the grounds that the South could best handle the "Negro Problem," white Republicans recruited Wears and others to add weight to their argument. Wears responded:

> I do not recognize this movement called "Exodus" as worthy of that title any more than the movement of the people of Ireland who have been for the last thirty years . . . fleeing from oppression and starvation. Nor do I believe that this movement of the wealth producing classes of our Southern country is, in any view of the case, a proper solution of the problem of . . . reconstruction.[28]

Meanwhile, the controversy over what the Republican party was doing for blacks in Philadelphia finally forced one white Republican to speak out on their behalf. In December 1880 mayoral hopeful George Keim suggested to a number of black leaders that they should receive jobs in the public sector in return for their support of the party. In response, local black newspaper owner Alexander Davis called a special meeting of Seventh Ward voters to endorse Keim for mayor, and the meeting went on to demand the desegregation of the city's public schools. The next day a group of Democratic leaders from the Sixth Senatorial District met with blacks to make their own bid for votes. Despite, or perhaps because of, Keim's statements early in 1881, the Republican party endorsed not Keim but Stokley, a man undeclared on the issue of race hiring, for a fourth term.[29]

The Democrats and Independents, with the support of the reform-minded businessmen of the Committee of One Hundred, nominated Samuel G. King to oppose Stokley. The issues between Stokley and King were clear—law and order in the streets versus reform in city hall as proposed by the newly organized Committee. Although many blacks respected Stokley's ability to maintain order in the city, others remembered King was the lone Democrat to attend the funeral of

[28] Remarks by I.C. Wears before the U.S. Senate Committee on "Exodus," 1880, Wears Papers.
[29] *Public Ledger*, Dec. 10, 1880; Jan. 11, 12, 15, 1881.

Catto in 1871. In what was viewed as an upset, King defeated Stokley by five thousand votes.[30]

Wears's decade of support for Stokley illustrates the ambivalence in the relationship between post-Civil War Republicans and blacks. Stokley's use of blacks such as Wears to advance the cause of the Republican party, the party that freed the slaves at the same time it was maintaining to whites that blacks were an inferior race, showed how the pervasiveness of racism in American culture affected the Republican appeal for black votes. William Dusinberre's study of racial attitudes in Civil War Philadelphia characterizes Republican politicians as white men who recognized black interest yet whose "demagoguery and deviousness stir one's distrust of their motives and judgments." Almost twenty years later the same characterization still applied.[31]

Why then did black Republicans such as Isaiah C. Wears support men of Stokley's ilk? It is likely that Wears's speeches condoning Republican policies were made out of conviction. He believed in temperance, law and order, civil rights, and opposition to machine politics, and philosophically the Republican party came closest to Wears's beliefs. Republicans had freed the slaves and during Reconstruction had fought against the Democrats' brutality to blacks in the southern states. For Wears, "the Republican party by the unabated energy and faithfulness of its voters, black and white" had performed a great and important work in the South. If it were not for the interference of Democrats, much more could have been accomplished.[32]

Furthermore, as a practical matter, Wears had no choice other than to be a Republican. Politics in post-Civil War Philadelphia revolved around three issues. First was the continuing problem of law and order, and the election of 1871 had allowed the Republicans to capture public sentiment as the party most committed to public order. Using

[30] *The Press*, Oct. 13, 1871, Jan. 27, Feb. 2, 4, 1881; *The Times* (Philadelphia), Feb. 1, 1881.

[31] William Dusinberre, *Civil War Issues in Philadelphia 1856-1865* (Philadelphia, 1965), 189.

[32] Paper in Isaiah C. Wears's handwriting, entitled "Exodus"; and Wears to J.W. Frazier, [n.d.], Wears Papers. Wears opposed giving recognition to Confederate war veterans; *The Times* (Philadelphia), Dec. 19, 1879.

the death of Catto to demonstrate the brutality of Democrats, Republicans pictured themselves as the party most able to eliminate street violence. Stokley reinforced this belief by preventing violence during the 1877 railroad strike. Democrats—including the street-fighter William McMullen, instigator of the 1871 riot—added to the picture of Democrats as thugs. Second, the issue of alcohol accentuated the differences between the two parties. The Democrats, many of whom were Irish Catholics, favored the open sale of alcoholic beverages on any day of the week, while most Republicans wished to limit the sale of alcoholic beverages. In 1879 Stokley ordered a Sunday raid in McMullen's Moyamensing district that closed a hundred saloons and dramatically reinforced the belief that Republicans were anti-alcohol. Wears, along with others from Mother Bethel Church, opposed alcohol as one of the evils of man and found it offensive to his religion to support a Democratic party that looked so favorably upon drinking. Third, the improvement of city services and the elimination of financial waste in city government required the depoliticizing of public jobs. Bosses grew powerful as they increased their ability to obtain work for their followers, not all of whom were fit for public employment. Deals and corruption followed. Wears agreed with the Committee of One Hundred that something had to be done. But his answer was not to turn away from the Republican party as the Committee had done but, rather, to revise the system for selecting candidates for office.[33]

On November 15, 1881, Wears sent a letter to *The Press* proposing his own Ground Floor System for political reform in Philadelphia. His argument was simple. "The present situation is that the great mass of intelligent voters will have nothing to do with elections . . . in their primary stages." Their disaffection permitted self-appointed bosses and professional politicians to interfere with the will of the people so that two or three obscure men were able to control the nominating process. Wears's solution was to hold public meetings in the neighborhood schoolhouses of the city to give the people an

[33] Silcox, "William McMullen, Political Boss," 389-412; *Ring Rule: What Has the Republican Party Done for Philadelphia? Report of a Committee of 80,000* (Philadelphia, [1881?]); Philip Mackey, "Law and Order, 1877, Philadelphia's Response to the Railroad Riots," *PMHB* 96 (1972), 183-202.

opportunity to know the candidates. Nominations would be made at public meetings. Then, Wears predicted, "Kickers who have personal axes to grind or personal injuries to avenge, and reformers who are ready periodically to mount any hobby . . . will find their occupation gone."[34]

An editorial in *The Press* the same day endorsed Wears's plan, stating, "The scheme proposed has much to recommend it, and if steadily sustained by a few public-spirited, zealous and intelligent men in each district, may readily accomplish all the beneficial results which its author predicts."[35] Beyond dealing with his own political frustrations, however, Wears's proposal accomplished little to reform local politics, for new issues already had burst forth on the Philadelphia scene.

In one of his early acts as mayor in the summer of 1881, King reorganized the police force and surprised his Democratic supporters by appointing four black policemen. There was immediate rejoicing throughout the black community, and in a special meeting organized by William Still black leaders assembled to thank King. Robert Purvis, knowing Wears's dislike of Still, asked his old friend to attend the meeting as a special favor to him. Wears agreed but insisted that the meeting should not turn out to be one which lauded the Democrats. Wears argued there should be no gratitude since blacks had only been given their rights. To those who might charge Wears acted differently in attending the Republicans' Fifteenth Amendment celebration ten years earlier, Wears had a ready response.

> I do not thank the Republican party for any privileges. For myself, I only use it as a tool. It is a knife which has the sharpest edge and does my cutting. I use it as I do the Church to which I belong, as a means to attain something higher. The white man is posted on everything in art, literature and science, but he knows nothing about human rights.[36]

In contrasting Stokley and King as individuals, Wears felt that Stokley had the proper political convictions but was cowardly, not merely cautious, in acting. King, on the other hand, had "convictions

[34] *The Press*, Nov. 15, 1881.
[35] Editorial, in ibid.
[36] Ibid., Aug. 23, 1881; *The Times* (Philadelphia), Aug. 23, 1881.

and the moral courage to enforce them." Nevertheless, Wears warned the black audience not to "make the mistake of believing that Mayor King would have got in if the Democrats had thought he was going to make negroes policemen." Wears called for equal working conditions for blacks in private industry as well as in city government. "I would rather see five drivers and conductors than four policemen." Given the restricted size of the public sector at the time, Wears felt blacks needed equal footing with whites in all employment.[37]

Encouraged by King's appointment of police, a group of black Republicans called a meeting to insist that some provision be made for the blacks who served that party. They decided black Republicans should band together and nominate a black for the office of City Commissioner. After some discussion Frank J.R. Jones, the Eighth Ward school director, was nominated as the black candidate for the post. Immediately a speaker from the floor cried out that the meeting did not represent the will of the blacks in Philadelphia. "The absence of Isaiah C. Wears, the tyranny of the Republican leaders and the wrongs to his race generally" made the nomination of Jones unacceptable. At this point Gil Ball called the meeting a fraud, claiming money had been given to those who nominated Jones. The meeting ended with a mass walkout that dampened the enthusiasm of those who remained.[38]

Editorials the following day in the city papers condemned the gathering as radical. To use blackness as the sole reason for electing a public official was offensive to both white and black. James A. Junior, a friend of Wears, agreed that a racial appeal was wrong. "All who are acquainted with me know my stand as a Republican. I have not advocated nor never will advocate the election of any man on account of color." For its part, *The Press* editorialized that outstanding blacks such as Wears should be urged to take a public office since no "Republican convention could refuse a man of his qualifications."[39]

In the mayoral election of 1884, Samuel King was opposed for reelection by little-known Republican William B. Smith, and for the

[37] Ibid.
[38] *The Press*, Aug. 30, 1881; *North American & U.S. Gazette*, Aug. 30, 1881.
[39] *North American & U.S. Gazette* Aug. 30, 1881; *The Press*, Aug. 31, 1881.

fist time Philadelphia blacks were talking openly about voting Democrat. The Republicans had done little for blacks, but King had not only met with them, he had single-handedly desegregated the police force. During his administration, the schools (1881), theaters (1881), and post office (1883) also had been desegregated; and although King was not directly responsible for these actions, he openly supported the change. His three-year administration featured more positive civil rights action than did those of all the mayors before him. A group of Democrats organized the Colored Citizens to Support King in 1881, and the avid Republican Gil Ball supposedly had said that, given King's actions, he could understand why blacks would vote Democrat. Indeed, Dr. N.F. Mossell, a prominent black physician, went so far as to claim, "The colored people's great love for King will give him two-thirds of their vote."[40]

A leading black politician, H. Price Williams, had still another plan. He secretly wrote Congressman Randall, who was the most powerful Democrat in the city, offering to speak out against Republicans at a black national convention if Randall would support him within the Democratic party.[41]

Nevertheless, the Republican-controlled Equal Rights League had a different message for Philadelphia blacks. William Forten reminded his fellow blacks that because it was a Democrat who killed Catto, a Democrat policeman who helped the killer get away, and Democrats who freed the killer in the courts, no black could cast a vote on that side of justice.[42]

King's liberal stance on the race issue did force a Republican candidate to respond publicly for the first time to blacks concerned about their after-election treatment. When Wears asked King's Republican opponent Smith if he would appoint blacks to public office, Smith guaranteed "justice without consideration as to the color of the appointment" and added that he had never been against blacks' voting or having legal and personal rights and political liberty. Further, he

[40] *The Press*, Aug. 30, 1881; *The Times* (Philadelphia), Jan. 30, 1884; *The Press*, Feb. 20, 1884; William McMullen to Samuel J. Randall, Jan. 7, 1882, and Sept. 8, 1883, Randall Collection.

[41] H. Price Williams to Samuel J. Randall, Sept. 8, 1883, Randall Collection.

[42] *The Press*, Nov. 3, 1883.

was glad that the Republican party was showing support for blacks by running Jacob Purnell for Common Council in the Seventh Ward. Republican sincerity on the race issue was backed by past performance; future promises were unnecessary. Purnell, taking the line of reasoning of his white Republican counterparts, told a reporter, "The appointment of a few colored policemen had not misguided negroes into a Democratic allegiancy. . . . Scratch an independent [like King] and you'll find a democrat."[43]

As president of the Old Reliable Political Club, Purnell knew how to get out the vote. Moreover, his selection at this time was an expedient one for the Republicans. They gained favor with a divided black community by projecting an image in support of blacks for public office which, in turn, counteracted the trend toward King. Still, there was criticism by white newspapers of their actions. The Philadelphia *Times* noted that Purnell's credentials had been found wanting by the Committee of One Hundred and went on to call him "a mere machine dependent, a party hanger-on" and added, "His candidacy is not a credit to his race, to his party or to his city." *The Press* felt that if the Republicans were sincere in wanting to help blacks, they would have nominated Isaiah C. Wears.[44]

William B. Smith defeated King on election day by over eight thousand votes. The black vote, drawn by Purnell, went overwhelmingly Republican. The lack of support by blacks for the liberal Democrat King had a lasting effect upon the blacks of the city who had passed up a chance to reward someone who had helped them while in office. The Republicans' token candidate, Purnell, paid great dividends, insuring the party the black vote, not only in the election of 1884 but in elections for years to come.[45]

The Committee of One Hundred's judgment proved accurate as Purnell, in his first act as a councilman, fought to make black saloonkeeper Edward McCann police sergeant in the Seventh Ward. Rather than furthering black equality, Purnell soon became part of

[43] Ibid.; Ellis Oberholtzer *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1911), 424-30.

[44] *The Times* (Philadelphia), Jan. 30, 1884; *The Press*, Feb. 20, 1884.

[45] Smith outpolled King 79,296 to 70,674. In the Seventh Ward where many of the city's blacks lived, Smith won by a vote of 3,161 to 1,829. See *The Press*, Feb. 13, 14, 1884.

the Republican machine, where he, Gil Ball, and Sammy Williams would form the triumvirate of black Republican saloon politics. The black vote remained committed to an unconcerned Republican party until the 1950s even though the party did less and less for blacks with each passing year. By posing the possibility that they might vote Democrat in response to desegregation of the police force, post office, schools, and theaters, blacks gained the leverage that resulted in their first elected councilman but at the same time forfeited it in the mayoral race. Why should Republicans worry about blacks leaving the party when they had not done so for a true friend like King? Taken for granted and neglected by the Republicans after 1884, blacks lost all power and influence as increased immigration added large numbers of Jews and Italians to the party.[46]

As a reward for his unflagging support of the Republican party, Wears was appointed a notary public for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and spent his last years in his home at 514 Poplar Street. His membership on Mayor Charles F. Warwick's Citizen Advisory Committee brought him into close association with such prominent and powerful Philadelphians as John Wanamaker, Justice Strawbridge, William Elkins, William Pepper, and P.A.B. Widener. Thus, Wears was able to observe firsthand the power structure of the city and participate in discussions which ranged from financial matters to arrangements for public celebrations. In addition, his appointment enhanced Wears's stature among the black better class.[47]

In the latter stages of Wears's life he came to be addressed as the Honorable Isaiah C. Wears out of respect for his membership on the most influential committees in the city. He still wrote and spoke publicly on politics and religion but found time for daily carriage rides with his wife in Fairmount Park until tuberculosis confined him to his home in 1899. He continued to keep a private notebook and managed to write one last pamphlet, entitled *Polite and Cultured Conversations*, before he died on May 4, 1900.[48]

[46] Ibid., Feb. 13, 1884; James Mooney, *City Chronicles: Philadelphia the City of Politics* (Philadelphia, 1976), 23; *Taggart's Philadelphia Sunday Times*, March 16, 1884.

[47] "Notebook of Isaiah C. Wears," pp. 1, 2, 6; Wears to General Advisory Committee, Office of the Mayor, Oct. 18, Nov. 26, and Dec. 7 1897, Wears Papers.

[48] *New York Age*, Dec. 5, 1888; Death Record 24330-Isaiah C. Wears, May 4, 1900 (Philadelphia City Archives); Isaiah C. Wears, *No. 1 of a Series of Pamphlet Publications Social and Political*, pamphlet # 1, *Polite and Cultured Conversations* (Philadelphia, 1899), copy in New York Public Library; *The Press*, May 5, 1900; Robert M. Adger to Wears, April 16, 1899, Wears Papers.

Despite the prestige and position of honor he enjoyed during his final years, pervasive racism prevented Wears from changing the views of his white contemporaries. When a whole culture, including its teachings in science, medicine, religion, and history, is based on inequality, that fundamental assumption affects even the victims of discrimination. Consequently, Philadelphia's better-class blacks spent countless hours proving that they were educated and cultured, and Wears was no exception. In the Wears Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania are heart-wrenching notes in Wears's own handwriting discussing equality. The pain and suffering that he experienced because of his blackness pour from his pen. To him, it was obvious that whites could write about equality as Jefferson had done, but they never understood what it meant.[49]

Wears was the one black in post-Civil War Philadelphia whose stature might have made a difference with whites if they had been inclined to respect blacks on merit alone. Generally regarded by his peers as their political spokesman, at the same time Wears had ample contact with the most powerful men in the city. He was never nominated for office, however, nor was he able to convince his white Republican friends to support equal rights. As a result, he is open to criticism, especially for his stand in the crucial Samuel King-William Smith election of 1884. The black vote was a powerful political tool in the 1870s and still significant in 1884. If the vote had been used on behalf of King, his re-election was possible, but Wears, Forten, Ball, and Williams saw to it that this did not happen. Instead, they argued that blacks must remain loyal to Republicanism even though a man with Wears's beliefs in black equality could hardly ignore King's unprecedented record of black appointments.

The nomination and victory of Jacob Purnell and King's defeat at the polls gave the Republicans license to ignore blacks. By not helping King, Wears missed an opportunity to send Republicans the message that blacks would vote for those who acted on their behalf.

[49] "Notebook of Isaiah C. Wears," passim.

When King left office, he promoted two black policemen to lieutenants, but Republican mayor Smith, who had promised blacks "justice," revoked the promotions, claiming that King had made the move only to embarrass the white policemen working under the two blacks. In addition, Smith personally fired Officer Lewis Carroll, one of King's original black appointees. Obviously, by supporting just one political party, Isaiah Wears and other nineteenth-century black Philadelphians had limited their own ability to participate in government and to reward an exceptional candidate who somehow rose above the prevailing racism of the day.[50]

The career of Isaiah C. Wears sheds valuable light on the political behavior of the better-class nineteenth-century urban black population, for it illustrates the political dilemmas facing this population more clearly than Roger Lane's use of Catto permitted. It shows that patronage was not the lone influence on blacks entering the nineteenth-century political arena, but rather, that loyalty for past deeds and Republican ideological support for black rights were more important to blacks of Wears's class. Patronage as a political tool worked with saloonkeepers such as Gil Ball and Sammy Williams, but the better-class blacks were influenced by the issues of law and order, loyalty to the party that ended slavery, social habits which outwardly decried the use of alcohol, the animosity of local Irish Catholic Democrats, and escalating racial violence in the South. Unfortunately, these considerations did combine with a poorly defined political strategy to bring Wears and his colleagues to a stand that reinforced the saloonkeepers' manipulations and severely limited the sphere of political influence for generations of black Philadelphians. The white power structure of both the city and the Republican party simply did not accept on merit blacks who never even threatened to take independent political action.

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[50] Asked why he appointed blacks to the police force, Samuel G. King replied that it was the right thing to do. Unpopular with local Democrats, King had learned this conviction at a Quaker school. Howard O. Sprogle, *The Philadelphia Police Past and Present* (Philadelphia, 1887), 174-77; *The Press*, Feb. 13, 28, 1884; *New York Globe*, April 12, 1884.