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The Limits of Political Power

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FREE AT LAST What Really Happened When Civil Rights Came To Southern Politics  
By Margaret Edds Adler & Adler. 277 pp. \$ 18.95

THE VOTING Rights Act of 1965 often has been praised as one of the most powerful and effective laws ever passed by the U.S. Congress. Its firm provisions ended most of the racial discrimination that long had kept hundreds of thousands of black American southerners off the voting rolls and outside the electoral process; in the first 10 years following its passage the number of registered southern black voters jumped from 1.9 million to approximately 4 million, and by 1986 the 11 southern states had some 3,510 black elected officials holding public office, compared to some 72 at the time that the Voting Rights Act became law.

A reporter for Norfolk's Virginia-Pilot/Ledger-Star newspapers, Margaret Edds spent the year 1985 traveling the South to talk with scores of those black officials and other political observers about the 20-year impact of the Voting Rights Act and the changes that have taken place in southern politics over the course of those two decades. Free at Last is an extremely readable and intelligently insightful product of those interviews and of other research, organized around the stories of particular southern black politicians -- Virginia Lieutenant Governor L. Douglas Wilder; Birmingham and Charlotte mayors Richard Arrington and Harvey Gantt; Greenwood, Miss., alderman David Jordan -- and the histories of significant cities and counties -- Atlanta; Richmond; Sunflower County, Mississippi; and Greene County, Alabama.

Edds' thorough and perceptive reporting focuses heavily on the question of just how much of a difference the election of those hundreds of black public officials has made in the lives of their often-needy black constituents. The answer, as she repeatedly makes clear, is that there has been less of a positive effect than many civil rights observers hoped for. As one Richmond activist told Edds, "Either they haven't lived up to expectations or we expected too much."

Edds correctly recognizes that excessive expectations are more of the explanation than is poor performance. To some degree, she notes, the limits on change, particularly in much of the rural Deep South, have stemmed from "the remarkable tenacity of whites in attempting to retain power." Even as of 1985 there remained 15 southern counties with a majority black population where the five-member county governing boards were all-white; in 23 additional black majority counties the governing boards contained four whites and only a single black.

Such counties generally receive far less national news media attention than do southern black political success stories from cities such as New Orleans, Atlanta, and Birmingham, or rural, black-ruled Alabama counties such as Greene, Macon and Lowndes. In both types of locales,

however, Edds correctly explains, it is economic power and opportunities for access to economic resources, and not the skin color of local office-holders, that most significantly determines black citizens' living condition and life opportunities.

LOWNDES COUNTY Sheriff John Hulett, one of rural Alabama's best-known and longest-serving black elected officials, endorses Edds' view very firmly. "Until people become economically strong, political power alone won't do. For most people, it's like it was sixteen years ago," before Lowndes County had elected any black office-holders.

Hulett's point applies not only to depressed rural areas like Lowndes, however, but also to blacks' experience in the South's best-governed cities. Birmingham Mayor Richard Arrington, whom Edds calls "the model for individual success" among major black southern office-holders, also endorses Hulett's view -- "Asked what local blacks had to show economically for his tenure, Arrington replied: 'Quite frankly, we don't have very much.'"

Even in Atlanta, which Edds terms "the unofficial capital of American black politics," economic statistics reflect much the same picture. "Six percent of the city's black households had income of more than \$ 35,000 in 1980, but a dispiriting 25 percent existed on less than \$ 5,000." Randolph Kendall, Jr., executive director of the Richmond Urban League, explained to Edds what the class bifurcation reflected by figures like those has meant for southern blacks in real life terms: "Things have changed for people who have the resources and know-how to get around. Poor folks, they're still looking for a place to stay."

Hence Edds's evaluation of racial and political change in the South since the Voting Rights Act is necessarily mixed. She justifiably celebrates the triumphs of officials such as Wilder, Arrington and Gantt, and concludes that "by the standards of 1965, a region and its people had been transformed." However, Edds also emphasizes "the limits of that act in changing social traditions and long-standing economic patterns" and "how ineffective politics had been at removing economic shackles." No law, she bluntly concludes, "could . . . make political power the major determinant in shaping the quality of life" for southern blacks or any other Americans; in the South as elsewhere the real integration and equalization of American life will require economic changes more far-reaching than the political transformation that the Voting Rights Act has brought to the southern electoral arena over the past 20 years.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," which this year received both the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.