# The Academy of Political Science

475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274

(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · http://www.psqonline.org



## *POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*

Volume 125 · Number 1 · Spring 2010



No part of this article may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or
- with prior written permission of The Academy of Political Science.

*Political Science Quarterly* is published by The Academy of Political Science. Contact the Academy for further permission regarding the use of this work.

*Political Science Quarterly*
Copyright © 2010 by The Academy of Political Science. All rights reserved.

factors explaining the condition of urban public education. From Cosby's perspective, the education system cannot be effective if it is operating in an environment constraining its legitimacy and operation.

*Our Schools Suck* challenges Cosby's contention. The authors argue that, in fact, it is the system that is broken and that is unraveling progress toward lasting integration in public education and in the larger society. They contend that urban public schools are effectively perpetuating a de facto segregated society.

So, what is the evidence presented to support the very strong contentions made by both sides of the argument? In the case of the Cosby side of the argument, *Our Schools Suck* offers few details. Yet, the book's intent is to respond to arguments made by Cosby and others. It would be helpful to have a deeper understanding of both sides of the discussion.

The authors present evidence of the human tragedies of urban public education. The book catalogs the young lives of highly motivated youth who face what the authors contend to be serious institutionally inspired hurdles—faceless, spiritless teachers, inefficient and ineffective administrative systems, crumbling school infrastructures, and limited access to quality textbooks. The authors find that the system erects roadblocks for those who wish to succeed, while the pathway to truancy and eventual exit from formal education is seemingly a wide-open option.

The authors argue that urban public education fails to fully respond to the meaning of *Brown* in terms of building an integrated society. As it is presented in *Our Schools Suck*, it is difficult to determine whether the problems documented are faced solely by urban public schools or are even directly connected to the issues surrounding *Brown*. Rural public schools face similar dilemmas impacting students of all backgrounds. That said, the problems documented in the book are of real concern to students, parents, communities, and schools.

*Our Schools Suck* should be read by students of public policy and individuals interested in democratic theory. The book's greatest weakness is that it limits itself in terms of issue framing. There is a deep and profound message contained within its pages.

CHRISTOPHER A. SIMON
*University of Nevada, Reno*

**The Third Agenda in U.S. Presidential Debates: Debate Watch and Viewer Reactions, 1996–2004** *by Diana B. Carlin, Kelly M. McDonald, Tammy Vigil, and Susan Buehler. Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2008. 283 pp. $64.95.*

The book's title pays homage to the important concept advanced by Jackson-Beeck and Meadow that there are three agendas involved in debates: those of candidates, those of the media, and those of the public. This book is devoted to an appreciation of voters' perspectives on debates. It offers new data and a

perspective (qualitative) on presidential debates that differs from most work in this area. Although some data in the book are from survey research, the heart of this enterprise consists of analysis of quotations from focus groups. Different kinds of data offer different advantages; the strengths of this form of data are seeing things from the participants' (that is, voters') perspective and greater depth of understanding (the corresponding limitation, of course, is that qualitative data are not optimal for supporting generalizations about populations). It is important that we have a variety of forms of data for informing our understanding of presidential debates.

The book reports data from an impressive number of focus groups concerning the presidential debates held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 (for example, 8,376 participants in 824 groups in 1996). Transcripts of the focus groups' discussions were examined by the researchers and deployed to address a variety of topics: debate format, character, issues, vice presidents, third-party candidates, as well as the views of younger citizens and non-voters. The intent of the quotations used to explore each of these topics is to "represent a theme or finding" that reflects "ideas expressed by many others" (p. 6), although occasionally the book diverges from this approach to discuss "unique perspectives" (p. 52) or a "minority viewpoint" (p. 93). The emphasis on data from focus groups is noticeably less in the chapter on third-party candidates, because no specific questions in the Debate Watch protocols addressed this topic, although some participants in focus groups volunteered opinions on it. These are important topics, and the book illuminates all of them with data representing the opinions of citizens.

Two limitations deserve mention. First, the utterances offered in focus groups (and on the limited survey data reported here) are self-report data. Self-report data can be very illuminating, particularly if one is seeking to understand the perspectives of voters. However, the fact that participants believe they learned from debates may not be the best evidence for the claim that viewers in fact do learn from debates (are "better informed" [p. 109]). As it turns out, I believe that political debates do inform (many) viewers; my point is that readers must be aware of the limitations of self-report data.

Second, I believe that the concept of the Debate Watch program—encouraging voters to watch debates in groups and then discuss the debates without (or before) being exposed to comments from pundits—is worthwhile and healthy for democracy as well as for the citizens who participate in this activity. However, most voters do not experience debates in this fashion: too many do not watch debates; too many are exposed to instant commentary from pundits; too few discuss the debates with other citizens. This means we cannot automatically assume that reactions of those who participate in Debate Watch activities are like the reactions of those who are not part of a Debate Watch. Debate Watch is *intentionally* designed to be a different (and hopefully better) experience. Perhaps the book would best be considered an exploration of the potential of presidential debates when voters experience them through the

mechanism of Debate Watch and as an extended (and persuasive) argument for the utility of Debate Watches.

There is no question that this book offers a unique and important contribution to the literature. It merits a place in libraries and on scholars' bookshelves.

WILLIAM L. BENOIT
*Ohio University*

**In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era** *by Richard Iton. New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. 432 pp. $29.95.*

Richard Iton's *In Search of the Black Fantastic* requires the reader to grapple with many questions centered on black oppression and marginalization. The two questions that predominate are: Why have African Americans used the arena of popular culture to politicize their existence? And why have African Americans continued to do so in the post-Civil Rights era when, seemingly, they have acquired both a political and an economic stake in U.S. society? Famed actor Ossie Davis took a stab at Iton's question by suggesting that "art was at one time the only voice we [blacks] had to declare our humanity" (p. 6). Davis's response, captured by Iton, only partly explains what Iton views as black "hyperactivity on the cultural front" (p. 17). In the United States, black popular culture has been at once voice and humanity—proof of black subjectivity; protest and struggle—a site for agitation; triumph and victory—visibility in American public culture; labor and employment—one of the few opportunities for upward mobility; and politics and recognition—an unofficial channel of black redress and progress. Barred from formal political activity (that is, office holding, voting, etc.) for much of the nation's history, popular culture emerged as black America's public sphere, a space where African Americans could advance themselves politically.

Iton takes us through the corpuses and activities of such artists as Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, Nina Simone, and Harry Belafonte, revealing how these cultural workers and the "political" workers of the civil rights community occupied the same "location," despite the desires of Cold War imperatives to pull them apart. Not only were Hansberry's *A Raison in the Sun*, Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, or Belafonte's "Day-O" politically progressive in their meaning, it was not anathematic to find Belafonte partnering with Martin Luther King, Jr. or LeRoi Jones/Amiri Barka corresponding and working with Adam Clayton Powell. This black "counterpublic" both elevated the black freedom movement and fulfilled the political expectations of an oppressed and disenfranchised people. Iton demonstrates how the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and particularly the Voting Rights Act of 1965, altered the structure of black intracommunity politics, reconfiguring the terrain on which black activists, politicians, and creative artists had previously operated.