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Political Activism: Chicago Politicians' Silence When Black Lives Matter

Alison Hill

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has pressured Democratic politicians on the national stage to take a hard stance on police brutality, excessive force, and misconduct, yet the BLM network has not endorsed one candidate for president.¹ The presidential campaign acts as an easy avenue for BLM to get their message to the masses by forcing a national discussion.² Police reform is topical during the Democratic primary due to BLM's strength in forcing the candidates and prominent Democratic leaders to take a stance.³ For example, BLM activists rushed the stage at a Bernie Sanders speech, forcing the candidate to develop an anti-police brutality policy in the national spotlight.⁴

However, effectuating noticeable police reform turns to local communities, where the question becomes: has BLM done enough locally? BLM pressures political officials to take action when unarmed black people are shot by police while also fighting against those who fail to prosecute officer misconduct.⁵ BLM activists pressured the City of Chicago to fight for black lives when Rekia Boyd was shot and killed in 2012 by an off-duty Chicago detective who was not subsequently convicted of a crime.⁶ Rekia's name has been placed alongside other high profile police brutality cases such as Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray.⁷ Chicago has recently seen a heightened level of politi-

¹ Jesse J. Holland, *AP Interview: Black Lives Matter Skipping 2016 Endorsement*, WEEKLY CITIZEN, Sep. 30, 2015, <http://thechicagocitizen.com/news/2015/sep/30/ap-interview-black-lives-matter-skipping-2016-endo/>.

² *Id.*

³ Wesley Lowery, *Elizabeth Warren Just Gave the Speech that Black Lives Matter Activists Have Been Waiting For*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Sep. 27, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/09/27/elizabeth-warren-just-gave-the-speech-that-black-lives-matter-activists-have-been-waiting-for/>.

⁴ Holland, *supra* note 1.

⁵ Kaleb Autman and A'mani Howard, *Why Did Chicago Activists Shut Down an International Police Conference?*, TRUTH-OUT, Oct. 31, 2015, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/33465-why-did-chicago-activists-shut-down-an-international-police-conference>.

⁶ Tony Birscoe and Jeremy Gorner, *Hundreds Gather in Chicago to Protest Police Violence*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, Apr. 28, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/chi-police-protest-chicago-20150428-story.html>.

⁷ *Id.*

cal activism, and state and local political officials have been forced to take action.⁸

CHICAGO POLITICIANS' RESPONSE TO POLICING

The Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA),⁹ the agency established to investigate Chicago Police Department complaints, should be the body to act as a check on the police, yet it retaliates against investigators when they go too far.¹⁰ Lorenzo Davis, a recently fired IPRA investigator, was let go when supervisors claimed he had “a clear bias against the police” because he found six police shootings unjustified out of his twelve total investigations.¹¹ The IPRA has investigated almost 400 police shootings of civilians and has found only one to be unjustified since 2007.¹²

The lack of focus on police misconduct in the political realm was apparent when the Police Board Executive Director, Max Caproni, attended the City Council's annual budget process in October 2015 and was asked only five questions.¹³ Fewer than half of the city's 50 aldermen attended.¹⁴ In contrast, when the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) held their annual conference in Chicago, Mayor Emanuel and Chicago Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy met them with a warm welcome.¹⁵ Due to the silent acceptance of police misconduct in the city, the IACP conference was interrupted by protesters from a number of black activist groups, including Black

⁸ Bill Ruthart and David Heinzmann, *Emanuel Dismisses Top Cop Gary McCarthy Amid Pressure for Change*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, Dec. 4, 2015, available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/politics/ct-chicago-police-superintendent-garry-mccarthy-20151201-story.html>.

⁹ Will Cabaniss, *The Origins of IPRA*, SOUTH SIDE WEEKLY, Oct. 13, 2015, <http://southsideweekly.com/the-origins-of-ipra/> See also: Chip Mitchell, *City Fires Investigator Who Found Cops At Fault In Shootings*, WBEZ91.5 (July 20, 2015), available at <http://www.wbez.org/news/city-fires-investigator-who-found-cops-fault-shootings-112423>.

¹⁰ Chip Mitchell, *City Fires Investigator Who Found Cops At Fault In Shootings*, WBEZ, July 20, 2015, <http://www.wbez.org/news/city-fires-investigator-who-found-cops-fault-shootings-112423>.

¹¹ Mitchell, *supra* note 10.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Robert Wildeboer, *Chicago Aldermen Have Few Questions About Police Discipline*, WBEZ, Oct. 2, 2015, <http://www.wbez.org/news/chicago-aldermen-have-few-questions-about-police-discipline-113168>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Chicago Tribune Staff, *66 Protesters Arrested At Police Chiefs Convention*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, Oct. 24, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-police-chiefs-protest-20151024-story.html>.

Youth Project (BYP) 100 and We Charge Genocide.¹⁶ While this conference continued, in the following weeks, activists won major battles in the fight against police misconduct and city corruption.¹⁷

THE CASE OF LAQUAN MCDONALD

Laquan McDonald's October 2014 killing garnered national attention and increased local activism following the release of dash cam footage showing his shooting by Chicago police on November 23, 2015.¹⁸ This video shows 17-year-old McDonald being shot 16 times in under 15 seconds by Chicago Police Department Officer, Jason Van Dyke while other officers looked on and did not come to the aid of the teenager.¹⁹ It took State's Attorney Anita Alvarez 13 months to file first-degree murder charges against Van Dyke, who had been on desk duty since the shooting.²⁰ The city fought to withhold the footage citing ongoing federal investigation into the shooting.²¹ However, a judge ordered the release of the footage after a freelance journalist filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.²² In preparation of the video release, both Emanuel and McCarthy called for peaceful protests knowing the graphic nature of the video.²³

The response before and after the release of this footage shows the impact activists have on city officials. If not for activists, such as the freelance journalist, many say that this footage would have never been released.²⁴ It was because of the release that the city's black aldermen renewed their called for McCarthy's resignation or termination.²⁵ "We as leaders of this city have to demand better of our elected officials who are charged with protecting us all equally. It

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Ruthart and Heinzmann, *supra* note 8.

¹⁸ Bill Ruthhart and John Byrne, *Emanuel Condemns "Hideous" Actions of Police Officer In Shooting Video*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, Nov. 23, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-chicago-cop-shooting-video-laquan-mcdonald-rahm-emanuel-20151123-story.html>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Journalist on Shooting of Laquan McDonald By Chicago Police Officer: "It Was An Horrific Execution"*, DEMOCRACY NOW!, Nov. 24, 2015, http://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/24/journalist_on_shooting_of_laquan_mcdonald.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Mary Datcher, *Press Conference Following Video of McDonald Shooting* (quoting Howard Brookins, Jr.), Facebook (Nov. 25, 2015) available at <https://www.facebook.com/marydatcher/videos/10153295106210745/?permPage=1>.

is no excuse for this type of behavior,” declared freshman Alderman Howard Brookins of the 21st Ward alongside the Chicago Aldermanic Black Caucus. “This has gone on and on and enough is enough. The official position of the black caucus is that we have called for the resignation or termination of the Superintendent of Police McCarthy.”²⁶

ACTIVISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Activists have the power to change the system.²⁷ They are the groups that hold our elected officials to a high standard.²⁸ Jedidiah Brown, the National President of Young Leaders Alliance (YLA), states, “[p]ower concedes to nothing but more power.’ You have to show them you are a threat that they don’t want to agitate.”²⁹ Brown’s YLA promotes the need for cohesiveness amongst activists.³⁰ He asserts that the culture of activism must be strengthened at the local level in order to maintain longevity: “[o]n the national scale, you have these movements that are well-oiled machines but when you come to the local backing it is chaotic, unorganized, and unfocused.”³¹

To obtain longevity, BLM demands to be heard.³² The Democratic Party has historically obtained the black vote and Presidential candidates understand that to win the election they need the black vote.³³ “African Americans overwhelmingly back Democratic candidates in presidential and congressional elections—averaging about 88 percent support since 1980.”³⁴ Chicago has been a historically Democratic city: all of the city’s mayors since 1931 have been Democrats.³⁵ While it may be presumed that Chicago Democrats run the city,

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Autman and Howard, *supra* note 5.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Phone interview with Jedidiah Brown, National President, Young Leaders Alliance (Oct. 9, 2015).

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² Autman and Howard, *supra* note 5.

³³ Theodore R. Johnson, *Can the Democratic Party Retain Its Hold on Black Voters?*, THE ATLANTIC (Sep. 7, 2015), available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-changing-outlook-for-black-voters/403975/>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Chicago Mayors, 1837-2007*, ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHICAGO, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1443.html> (last updated 2007).

there has been a conservative response to policing.³⁶ BLM promises that a candidate will not get the black vote without the work required for it.³⁷

AFTERMATH: THE INFLUENCE OF CHICAGO ACTIVISTS

Democratic presidential candidates understand this concept and react to the pressure by those who will elect them.³⁸ By contrast, Brown explains that aldermanic inaction is due to the focus on their reelection.³⁹ “Chicago[’s] climate is territorial as it relates to aldermen. Our elected officials in Chicago are not very supportive [f]or fear of one thing: being challenged at the upcoming election.”⁴⁰

It took the video release of Laquan McDonald’s shooting and BLM activists’ protests, such as shutting down Michigan Avenue on Black Friday, for Chicago politicians to make a major move towards reform.⁴¹ On December 1, 2015, after days of protests by Chicago activists, Mayor Emanuel called for the resignation of Superintendent McCarthy.⁴² The hundreds of activists who walk the streets now call for their aldermen to continue to stand up for those who elect them and demand for the additional resignations of Emanuel and Anita Alvarez.⁴³

BLM has made major political changes in Chicago. Not only will elected officials will face tough reelection campaigns, but the Illinois Attorney General, Lisa Madigan, has urged the United States Attorney General’s office to look into the Chicago Police Department at a structural level.⁴⁴ For Alvarez, her continued role with the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office will be decided in March of 2016 when she runs for reelection.⁴⁵ And while public scrutiny has been focused on Alvarez and Emanuel, activists have insisted that aldermen—especially black aldermen—must also face public accountability. As activist Rachel Williams of BYP 100 stated,

³⁶ Autman and Hoard, *supra* note 5.

³⁷ Holland, *supra* note 1.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Brown, *supra* note 29.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Ruthart and Heinzmann, *supra* note 8.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Staff Writer, *Anita Alvarez Comes Out Swinging As Protestors Call For Her Resignation*, ABC 7 Eyewitness News (Dec. 3, 2015) available at, <http://abc7chicago.com/news/anita-alvarez-comes-out-swinging-as-protestors-call-for-her-resignation/1107905/>.

⁴⁴ Ruthart and Heinzmann, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁵ ABC 7, *supra* note 43.

The black aldermen have been consistently silent on the violence that happens in our communities. . . . The black aldermen who stood here a few months ago [to call for Supt. McCarthy's resignation] are not a reflection of that community either, because they have failed to do their jobs. So when we talk about getting rid of from top to bottom, it also starts with those aldermen. Those aldermen who feel the need to pacify the community, but who do not stand with that community when that community is consistently harmed. We are tired of it and we are no longer standing by, letting it happen.⁴⁶

LOOKING FORWARD

Is BLM the solution to both Chicago and national political silence on police misconduct? Young African-American political activists will and already have changed not only the conversations had by politicians, but the actions taken. What needs to be done to make politicians more accountable in preventing police misconduct? Brown explains that this generation of activists must focus on term limits for politicians.⁴⁷ As Brown states, “term limits . . . would re-direct America back to some of its foundational values.”⁴⁸ Imposing term limits would force aldermen to do the job they were elected to do – care for their communities.⁴⁹ President Obama in his last term in office has visited a federal prison,⁵⁰ made statements after nine black church-goers in Charleston were murdered out of racism,⁵¹ and condemned police brutality after Baltimore went up in flames.⁵² President Obama would not have been nearly as open with his stance on these issues if he worried about reelection, as they are divisive. Being divisive in politics is commonplace; however, we can no longer afford to be divisive about black lives—because black lives matter.

⁴⁶ Andy Thayer, *Press Conference Protesting Sanctions Against Dorothy Holmes* (quoting Rachel Williams), Facebook (Dec. 23, 2015) available at <https://www.facebook.com/andy.thayer1/videos/10207502382694906/>.

⁴⁷ Brown, *supra* note 29.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Steven Nelson, *Obama Goes To Prison*, U.S. & WORLD REPORT NEWS (July 16, 2015), available at <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/16/obama-goes-to-prison>.

⁵¹ President Barack Obama, *Statement by the President on the Shooting in Charleston, South Carolina*, THE WHITE HOUSE, June 18, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/18/statement-president-shooting-charleston-south-carolina>.

⁵² Ben Mathis-Lilley, *Obama Calls Police Violence A “Crisis,” Condemns Mass Neglect Of Poor*, SLATE, Apr. 15, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/04/28/obama_baltimore_press_conference_president_s_comments_on_police_and_poor.single.html?