

**D**espite an all-out attempt by presidential candidate Bill Bradley to make racial justice a mainstay of his campaign, the black electorate remains solidly behind Vice President Al Gore. But as Bradley's political insurgency gains momentum, the black electorate gains importance. Newly esteemed, the black community may take another look at this lanky challenger to the presumptive favorite.

Gore's connection to President Clinton is the primary reason he's popular in the black community, argues David Bositis, senior analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington-based think tank that focuses on African-American issues. "Gore has Clinton's blessings and the president is still extraordinarily popular among African-Americans," he says. "As far as I can see, Bradley's not even on the radar in the black community, except in a few northern states."

But Gore's poll numbers have been falling lately and most analysts attribute this decline to the widely diagnosed ailment of "Clinton fatigue." The vice president is being tarnished by his proximity to an impeached president who has been the focus of intense national debate for several years. There is a general consensus that the voters' desire for change is troubling Gore's candidacy. This creates an acute dilemma for the vice president—touting his Clinton connections bolsters his status in the black community, but hurts him among the general electorate.

Bradley faces no such dilemma. The former New Jersey senator and New York Knicks forward has focused consistently on the need to improve race relations since his latter days in Congress, where he served from 1978 to 1996. He first gained public notice for this commitment in a 1991 speech he made on the Senate floor following the police beating of black motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles.

But such candor has done little to up Bradley's profile in most of America's black community. A recent Zogby International poll found Gore with a 71-percent to 10-percent advantage over Bradley among African-Americans. An August poll by the Joint Center found that 69 percent held a favorable opinion of Gore, while Bradley was liked by 41 percent of black adults. However, 42 percent of the respondents said they didn't know who Bradley was or what he represented. "Most black voters are in the South," Bositis notes, "and New Jersey is like a distant country."

# Bill Bradley Courts the Black Vote

By Salim Muwakkil



RICHARD B. LEVINE/NEWSMAKERS

Bill Bradley has found an unlikely ally—the Rev. Al Sharpton.

**H**owever, there are signs that the former senator from that distant country is making inroads into the black community that may transcend his regional base. What's more, Bradley has managed to reach out to the more controversial, yet most passionate, elements of the black activist community without alienating the white core of his support.

Bradley took a considerable political risk when he traveled to Harlem to speak before an audience convened by the Rev. Al Sharpton last August. Sharpton is intensely disliked among New York Jews, a politically active constituency that Bradley needs to mount a successful challenge to Gore's candidacy in the Empire State. Bradley told the audience in the Harlem church that "racial unity

is not for me a political position. It's who I am. It's what I believe. It's what I care most about. It's one of the main motivations for my being in politics in the first place."

Bradley also outlined an agenda he would pursue as president, saying he would institute policies to end discriminatory lending practices by banks, press for tax cuts specifically aimed at helping middle-class and low-income people, raise the minimum wage and push for legislation that would make it easier for workers to join labor unions. His positions don't differ drastically from Gore's repertoire of campaign promises, but the symbolism of the venue added significance to Bradley's presentation. The Harlem appearance was the first by any presidential candidate since Robert Kennedy in 1968.

## The wide range of support for Bill Bradley reveals a large reservoir of discontent with the status quo.

Not only did Bradley gain the respect of Sharpton's National Action Network—an influential coalition of black activist forces—his overall poll numbers continued to rise in New York, and he soon surpassed the vice president. Bradley later gained the endorsement of New York's retiring senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Mark Riley, a popular talk show host on the black-owned radio station WLIB-AM, found that Bradley pulled about 65 percent of the vote in a recent listener poll. "Sure the numbers are unscientific," Riley says, "but it still was striking how Bradley's popularity has soared among our listeners."

Bradley's growing buzz is an example of how support from the most passionate elements of a movement reap dividends far beyond mere crowd size. Organizers from Sharpton's group have relayed their enthusiasm to activist colleagues in cities across the country, and suddenly Bradley is gaining the attention of a diversity of grassroots leadership. Wallace "Gator" Bradley, an African-American leader of United in Peace, the gang truce movement, says local leaders in several big cities—including Cleveland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles and Philadelphia—have jumped on the Bradley bandwagon, and there is an increasingly organized effort to marshal support for him. "I'm very attracted to Bradley's courage in speaking out about racial injustices," he says, "and his willingness to say things other politicians don't dare to say."

The reformed gang member's concerns are focused on criminal justice issues, and he sees little difference between Gore's proposals and the present administration's failed policies that have boosted the prison population to record levels. "I believe that Gore's Justice Department will be the same as Clinton's, which selectively prosecutes minority offenders. With Bradley, I see a willingness to re-examine failed policies and an openness to new ideas."

Although this support may not translate directly into votes, the Bradley campaign is gaining credibility—and visibility—with an increasingly influential segment of the community. This "street credibility" is contagious. In Chicago, for example, Bradley now is gaining strength among Latino activists. State Sen. Miguel Del Valle, one of Illinois's most progressive legislators and a well-respected Latino leader, recently announced his support for Bradley.

Aside from cultivating grassroots appeal, Bradley needs to gain endorsements from respected black politicians. Although most black Democratic officials reportedly are keeping their options open, it's an open secret that most are with Gore. The majority of the 38-member Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), for example, supports the vice president, although influential members like Maxine Waters of California, John Conyers of Michigan, John Lewis of Georgia and 15 others remain technically neutral.

The presidential preference of Illinois Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr., is of particular interest to observers of black politics. The young congressman increasingly is seen to exemplify a new, more independent spirit moving among upwardly mobile African-Americans. Jackson says he and other CBC members are holding back because they have not heard enough from both candidates about their plans to address issues important to African-Americans. "Are either of them willing to put a progressive African-American on their ticket as vice president?" Jackson asks. "That would really do something to energize the sluggish electorate."

But hard-nosed analysts like Bositis are not impressed by Bradley's symbolic inroads in Harlem. He puts more stock in what CBC chairman James E. Clyburn of South Carolina told the *Boston Globe*: "I have talked to people in the caucus who are not yet ready to make it formal. But I have not talked to anybody who tells me they do not plan to be for Gore."

Bositis says Gore's operatives have been cultivating these political allies for many months and that they are solidly entrenched. Bradley could score an upset in the early primaries in New Hampshire, California and Iowa. But once the race shifts to the South in the March 14 "Super Tuesday" elections, Gore's dominance will be overwhelming. "The South belongs to Gore, and that's the region where the primaries will be won," he insists.

Still, the wide range of support being marshaled on behalf of Bradley reveals a large reservoir of discontent with the status quo. Clinton's popularity among African-Americans always had more to do with style than substance; his charming persona diverted attention from his many questionable policies. Gore can never expect the same level of personal support.

In his Harlem speech, Bradley insisted his concern for improved race relations is not an attitude he's wearing just for the presidential campaign. His media description as an advocate for racial unity is well founded. He is a rare combination of physical grace and intellectual gravity.

Yet even in his left-leaning campaign, Bradley remains in favor of the death penalty and is a strong supporter of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization. But these breaks with the progressive catechism are not significant given his competition. Even committed progressives like Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and Harvard Professor Cornel West are willing to give Bradley a pass on his death penalty sacrilege.

What had promised to be a snoozer of an election that offered African-Americans a choice of lesser evils between two Southern politicians with four-letter names could turn out to be a much richer affair. It's a good development. Bradley's surge has increased the currency of the black vote, and upped the ante for black support. ■

# Debt Wish

By Chris Rasmussen

There are some things money can't buy," MasterCard's current television advertisements remind us. Thankfully, "for everything else, there's MasterCard." Spending a romantic evening with your spouse, or attending a family reunion or a best friend's wedding, according to the 30-second spots created by McCann-Erickson, is "priceless." Although these ineffable moments cannot be reckoned in dollars and cents, they are accompanied by a veritable spending spree— theater tickets, airline reservations, restaurant meals, new clothes. A few weeks after the glow of these priceless experiences has subsided, their cost will be tabulated to the penny and billed at an exorbitant annual interest rate of 19.8 percent. A typical American household now carries several thousand dollars of consumer debt. Priceless moments, it seems, can be awfully pricey.

**Financing the American Dream:  
A Cultural History of  
Consumer Credit**  
By Lendol Calder  
Princeton University Press  
377 pages, \$29.95

The "American Dream" always has been a curious mixture of idealism and materialism. In *Financing the American Dream*, Lendol Calder recounts the origins of our consumer economy, in which many Americans willingly, if not eagerly, spend themselves into debt in order to enjoy the material abundance that characterizes the "American way of life." Calder, an historian at Augustana College in Rock Island, Ill., shows that consumer debt, far from a recent invention, was integral to the creation of consumer society in the early 20th century. Moreover, he argues that consumer debt is not a testament to Americans' lack of self-discipline, but rather a powerful example of their willingness to submit to the rigid discipline necessary to sustain our consumer economy. Credit shapes not only our habits as consumers, but as workers.

Because so many Americans are in debt, they are compelled to work and budget their earnings to meet their seemingly endless credit card bills and car payments, as well as their mortgages and other financial obligations. As Calder notes, the wit compressed into a bumper sticker can be telling: "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go."

Throughout the 20th century, critics of consumer society commonly have grumbled that Americans have become almost devoid of self-discipline. These critics have pined for an imaginary, bygone era when Americans proudly cinched up their belts and went hungry, or sewed dresses from flour sacks rather than shame themselves by borrowing money. Calder debunks this wistful version of history, reminding readers that our credit economy did not first roll off the assembly line after World War II. Debtors always have been with us. Poor and working-class Americans frequently relied on credit from grocers and merchants to tide them over until the next paycheck. Farmers, for instance, lived on credit throughout the spring and summer, awaiting the fall harvest, when they hoped to settle their accounts.

In the 19th century, utilizing credit to finance business ventures was generally considered acceptable. Falling into debt to purchase consumer goods, however, was roundly condemned as a sign of profligacy. In an era devoted to the production of wealth, "consumption" was commonly equated with "waste." Upstanding middle-class Americans prided themselves on paying in cash, and despised the poor for resorting to credit to supply their household needs. Because consumer debt was considered immoral and wasteful, banks refused to extend credit for consumption. As a result, poor and working-class Americans in need of a loan were dependent on a *demimonde* of pawnbrokers and loan sharks, whose shady business practices compounded the unseemliness of consumer credit.

By the 1920s, buying on credit became more respectable as it "trickled

up" from the poor and working class to the middle class. Where their Victorian forebears had been thrifty and devoted to paying in cash, middle-class Americans now began to purchase automobiles, sewing machines, furniture, radios, phonographs and other expensive household items on the installment plan, which entailed a fixed number of monthly payments. Still, "buying on time" was subjected to widespread criticism in the '20s by economists, businessmen and moralists, who decried the rapid growth of consumer debt as economically and morally unsound. Americans had acquired brand new buying habits, but their understanding of the morality of getting and spending was a hand-me-down from the Victorian era.

Given many Americans' persistent antipathy to debt, a good deal of intellectual work was needed to legitimize the extension of consumer

**Today's credit cards charge interest rates that, throughout most of Western history, would have been illegal.**

credit. Calder's discussion of the pitched debates over the morality of credit reminds us that the discipline of economics, which in recent decades has become highly mathematical and market-oriented, was once infused with powerful ethical and political concerns.

In the '20s, economist E.R.A. Seligman coined the term "consumer credit" to replace the pejorative term "consumptive credit," which suggested that purchasing goods for personal use was downright wasteful. Seligman pointed out that the distinction between beneficial, "productive" economic activity and wasteful, "consumptive" behavior was specious, since production and consumption were inextricably linked. He argued persuasively that consumer spending and credit could increase, rather than undermine, American prosperity. Without credit, Americans would be forced to