The Mississippi Christmas Miracle: Explaining the Success of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982

“The greatest piece of civil rights, national security, and economic recovery legislation enacted this year does not bear any of those labels and did not come out of Congress. It is the bill enacted by the Mississippi Legislature to spend $106 million to give children of that state a more reasonable chance at a decent education and lift Mississippi out of the ignominy of being the worst-educated and most backward state in the union.”

Carl Rowan, December 1982

“Mississippi has now reached the point in her history where we must face the plain and sober fact that if we are to have a proper share in the great adventures and opportunities of today’s world, we are going to have to junk some of the old slogans and shibboleths that we have used for so long and substitute in their place a determination that nothing will be permitted to hold us back.”

William Winter, Vicksburg, MS, January 18th 1965

Chapter 1: Introduction

On December 20, 1982, the Mississippi State Legislature passed the single greatest piece of education reform legislation in its history. The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 established publicly funded kindergartens and a compulsory school attendance law, among other things. However, the most notable aspect of this legislation lies not in the specifics of the law, but in its very passage. Before this, education was never a priority of the state legislature, even though Mississippi had by far the worst public education system in the country. Many commentators have rationalized this apathy towards education in the state legislature through a race-based explanation. Before the 1980’s, White males from the Delta region of the state held the power in the state legislature.¹ These men held the belief that when education was given to the Blacks it would forever ruin them for the hard labor needed to sustain Mississippi’s agricultural economy,

and therefore they would never support any sort of reform in public education.\textsuperscript{2} However, since this bill was passed in 1982, improving public education has remained one of the most important policy priorities in every session of the Mississippi state legislature.

In Mississippi today, the story told about MERA revolves around its former Governor William Winter, who served from 1980-1984. Winter is one of the state’s most revered men because of the progressive changes that took place in Mississippi during his time in office. He made it known from his first day as governor that his priority was to build the foundations for a better public school system for Mississippi’s school children. Good public schools were viewed by Winter and his staff as a fundamental change that needed to occur in Mississippi before the state’s economy could improve.\textsuperscript{3} At this time, Mississippi ranked 50\textsuperscript{th} in the nation in both student performance and per capita income. In its push for education reform, the Winter Administration conducted a statewide public support campaign in the summer of 1982. Education suddenly became an issue for which every citizen felt they had a stake in. Because of this visible campaign, Winter and his staff are given much of the recognition for the passage of MERA. However, the evidence I will present here suggests that the credit for MERA’s success should not be entirely given to William Winter. Instead, this thesis will be devoted to offering an alternative if not contradictory narrative about education reform.


Although Winter’s role in education reform cannot be underestimated, I believe that there are other sociopolitical factors that account for the behavior of the Mississippi state legislature. I will show that MERA’s passage should not be solely contributed to the leadership of William Winter. The 1980’s were a turning point in Mississippi’s history. The state became aware of its relative backwardness and many social changes began to take place that would make Mississippi a more equal society. The passage of MERA is just one example of the steps taken by the state to distance itself from its troubled past. Two of the social changes that I will focus on in this thesis that I believe to be particularly critical to the passage of MERA are 1) the formation of a legislative Black caucus which focused its efforts on improving education in Mississippi, and 2) a press that took a more active role in monitoring the activities of the state legislature and publicizing the need for education reform in the state. Through an examination of these factors I will offer a more inclusive narrative of how the state of Mississippi reformed its education system and offer this story as a potential model for successful education reform efforts undergone by Southern States in the 1980’s.

Broadly, I see the passage of MERA as a useful case study of how to achieve progressive social reforms in the South during the post-civil rights era. In my conclusion, I will draw parallels between the story of MERA and what was occurring in other Southern states during this time. After the passage of MERA, many Southern states including Tennessee, South Carolina, and Arkansas passed their own education reform packages. This suggests that there were similar social forces in these states that allowed for them to pass these laws. However, like in
the case of William Winter and MERA, the credit for these efforts have largely been given to the governors that served when the laws were passed. I believe that these viewpoints ignore the significant social changes that were occurring in the American South during this time. My analysis puts more emphasis on the role of new political and social forces, and puts less faith in the “great man” narrative of MERA that has been widely accepted since its passage.

**Outline of the Thesis**

The next chapter of this thesis will be devoted to giving the context needed to understand my overall argument and how I conceived of it. The first section of Chapter 2 gives a historical overview of Mississippi, its schools, and the passage of MERA. I then turn my attention to the relevant literature that frames the arguments I wish to make in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The chapter then ends with the methods I will employ to test the hypotheses I make in these chapters.

In Chapter 3, I will assess the validity of the traditional narrative of MERA through quantitative methods. It is generally accepted that the political shift in the state legislature that was needed to pass MERA in the special session of 1982 was due to the very successful public support campaign conducted by Governor Winter and his staff. This public support campaign is believed to have changed the way legislators viewed the importance of public education to their constituents; therefore, they became more responsive to these needs and ultimately voted for MERA. However, I do not believe that the political changes in the Mississippi State Legislature during this time that allowed for MERA’s
passage can be summarized so neatly and succinctly. Instead, I postulate in this thesis that there were two sociopolitical developments, which I describe in detail in Chapter 4 and 5, which facilitated the passage of MERA. Therefore, this chapter will be devoted to seeing if there is any clear quantitative evidence that the public support campaign produced a significant change in how legislators voted on education legislation based on their constituent demographics.

Chapter 4 is a detailed assessment of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus and how it affected the passage of MERA. The chapter will mostly rely on historical and anecdotal data collected from field research in Jackson, Mississippi. From primary source data obtained from archival research and interviews I conducted with MLBC members and the Winter administration, I piece together the story of the MLBC in its early years and how this young body could have influenced the passage of MERA. I believe that the establishment of the MLBC and its members had a sizable impact on the passage of MERA because of the visibility of their advocacy for education reform, the procedural power they were able to exercise, and the strong influence that certain members had on the education reform process.

In Chapter 5, I examine a more commonly cited political force in the passage of MERA: the press. The role of the press in Mississippi, especially Mississippi’s state newspaper the Clarion-Ledger, has been noted in the past by historians and the Winter administration as an integral component in the success of MERA. However, I wish to broaden the scope of this observation through an investigation of what was happening with the local and national news media and
their coverage of education reform efforts. The key observation I make in this chapter, which I believe is a vital reason why MERA passed, was a convergence of the interests of the local, state, and national press when it came to the reporting of Mississippi’s education system and the need for reform. Prior to the 1980’s these three levels of the press had drastically different views of Mississippi and therefore, the newly founded unity among them strengthened the collective message of the dire need for improving Mississippi public schools. To assess this claim, I will be turning to primary source data in the form of the actual news pieces produced by the press during this time. These sources were gathered from the education reform files of Winter’s Staff housed in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Chapter 6 serves two purposes in this thesis. First, it highlights the general trend of Southern states undergoing comprehensive education reform in the 1980’s and describes the future research that could be done on this movement, utilizing the model of MERA I have presented in the thesis. The social and political changes that Mississippi witnessed, which I believe made MERA possible, were not exclusive to Mississippi, and therefore I posit that it would be useful to conduct future research on how Black caucuses and a changing news media affected education reform across the South. The second part of Chapter 6 will be a summary of my findings and concluding thoughts I have after completing this research.
Chapter 2: Context, Theory, and Methods

Context

The History of Mississippi and its schools

To the rest of the nation, Mississippi evokes three classic images: the magnolia-scented, antebellum plantation; the segregated Black-White dichotomy of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement, and the current poverty-stricken communities of the Mississippi Delta. These three images all reduce down to the same issue: race. Mississippi’s history has been defined by the relationship between White and Black.

Public education is an issue in Mississippi that has been especially racially charged. Historically, Blacks had been denied access to equal public education because of the fear that knowledge would give them the power to become serious economic and political threats to Whites.4 This is not to say that White schools in Mississippi were enviable institutions, but Black schools were even worse than the poorly funded White schools.

The 1954 Supreme Court Decision Brown v. Board transformed Mississippi public schools in both positive and negative ways. The federal mandate to desegregate public schools was met by huge opposition in Mississippi from both the state government and the citizens themselves. As in many other places across the South, Mississippians in the Delta founded their own Citizens Council to fight the “all out war being waged against the White race.” This organization attracted more than 80,000 people in Mississippi. The state

legislature reacted by ratifying a constitutional amendment that gave them the power to dissolve the public schools. When integration did take place, it was violent. One of the more famous instances of integration was the acceptance of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi, more commonly known as Ole Miss. In September of 1962, Meredith, accompanied by the Justice Department and U.S. Marshals, was met at Ole Miss by a wall of state troopers. Governor Ross Barnett had denied him entrance to the school. After the governor yielded to pressure from the national government, White students at Ole Miss and other Mississippians rioted and clashed with U.S. Marshals and military police, leaving 2 dead, and almost 200 injured.

When integration finally did come to Mississippi’s public schools in 1970, White families began to leave these schools in droves. They formed private schools, often referred to as “segregation academies.” Some of these schools, like Jackson Prep, became some of Mississippi’s best educational institutions, but others, especially those in poorer areas of the state, merely served as a means of separation from the Black race. At this time Mississippi had no compulsory attendance law, no public kindergartens, and the worst education system in America. Only 45 percent of first graders in Mississippi would finish the twelfth grade.

Observing these conditions, William Winter, a veteran Democratic state legislator from Grenada, Mississippi, decided to run for the office of governor in 1975 with education as the number-one issue on his platform. The state proved

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5 Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 16.
6 Wilkie, *Dixie* 110-112.
not to be ready for the education debate that Winter desperately wanted to spark. His opponent, Chuck Finch, was elected governor based on a platform of creating better-paying jobs for Mississippians. Seeing that the economy was what Mississippians cared the most about, Winter ran again for governor four years later with education as a component of his “Action Plan for the 1980’s.” In this action plan, Winter made a connection between better economic opportunities for Mississippians and better schools. On November 6, 1979, Winter was elected governor of Mississippi with 61 percent of the popular vote.  

*The Passage of MERA*

Upon taking office, Governor Winter set to work on his campaign promise to bring a better public education system to Mississippi. However, Winter’s first year in office brought him little policy success. Nevertheless, he was able to establish a Special Committee on Public Schools Finance and Administration, whose recommendations would become the basis of the policy points in MERA. Before the opening of the 1982 Legislative session, Winter and his staff spent nine months trying to garner support for education reform. They reached out to citizens and big business, advocating a special tax on oil that would fund needed reforms. With all this outreach, Winter felt optimistic about the chances for reform bills in the upcoming legislative session.  

Despite Winter’s optimism, the 1982 regular session, which lasted from January to March of that year, failed to produce a victory for education reform. Bill after bill died in committee and on the floor of the Mississippi House and

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8 Ibid 5  
9 USA. Mississippi Department of State. Elections. 1979 General Elections Returns.
Senate. The session had a dramatic ending when the Speaker of the House, Buddie Newman, adjourned the House without a clear majority in favor of adjournment. This prevented House Bill no. 936, which proposed the establishment of publicly funded kindergartens, from being voted on by the state legislature before the end of its regular session. Unsatisfied with these results, Winter called a special session of the state legislature to meet during December. During the months between the regular and special sessions, Winter and his staff traveled extensively throughout the entire state, speaking at countless town halls, organization meetings, and churches. They wanted to form a grassroots campaign around education reform. Indeed, the turnout for these events was staggering and the participation at these events was highly publicized by newspapers across the state.

In his opening speech of the special session, Winter issued a call to action to the state legislature, stating: “to do nothing or to enact halfway or piecemeal measures will be received as a message that Mississippi does not care about its future.” Work then began in committees to draft bills and funding measures for education reforms. The House and the Senate bickered over proposed tax increases and the issue of public kindergartens. Although it was clear that there was a greater support among legislators for the proposed reforms, there were still vocal and influential opponents making the passage of any sort of reform quite difficult. The bill itself was finally passed on December 20th, 1982 by vote of 96-

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11 Mullins, *Building Consensus*
12 Ibid 155.
25 in the House and 37-13 in the Senate.\textsuperscript{13} Its passage is viewed as a historic moment for Mississippi and inspired other Southern states to pass education reforms of their own.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{What MERA did for Mississippi Public Schools?}

Although the Mississippi public school system is still one of the worst in the United States, the schools would be in much worse shape if it were not for the provisions in MERA. As a piece of legislation, MERA had four goals for Mississippi public schools: higher student achievement, professional development of education personnel, better school management, and stronger school governance.\textsuperscript{15} Most notably, the legislation provided for the establishment of public kindergartens and a compulsory school attendance law.\textsuperscript{16} MERA also provided for a statewide testing program, revised high school graduation requirements, performance-based accreditation system, and professional development programs for teachers.\textsuperscript{17} These programs were funded by the largest tax increase in Mississippi’s history, a combination of increases in sales tax, corporate tax, and state income tax.\textsuperscript{18} Although none of the policies developed in MERA were particularly innovative or novel, they were extremely important in establishing higher achievement standards and monitoring mechanisms within the state public school system.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13} Treyens, Cliff, and Fred Anklam. "Historic Education Bill Passes." \textit{Clarion-Ledger} (Jackson, MS), December 22, 1982.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid 160


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid 7

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid 15

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid 18

\textsuperscript{19} See Appendix C for more details about the policies provided in MERA
In addition to these more concrete educational improvements, MERA changed the landscape of Mississippi politics. Its passage signified that the Mississippi state legislature was starting to let go of its racist tendencies and embrace the need for change in the state. After the passage of MERA, improving public education has consistently remained one of the state legislature’s top priorities. The *Clarion-Ledger*, Mississippi’s most widely read newspaper, described MERA’s passage as a time when the state legislature overcame itself. According to Dick Molpus\textsuperscript{20}, the passage of a comprehensive education reform package signified that democracy was finally achieved in the Mississippi state legislature. This was a time when legislators began to think about the needs of their constituents, rather than trying to retain their own power.\textsuperscript{21} The passage of MERA represents more than just better classrooms, but a turning point in the way politics is conducted and laws are made in Mississippi.

The rest of this chapter will give the theoretical background of my research question and describe the research methods in which I test my three hypotheses. I will summarize the current literature and theory available on the validity of the Great Man Theory, the effectiveness of legislative Black caucuses, the agenda-setting role of the press, and the mechanisms behind legislator responsiveness. The last section of the chapter will describe how I plan to test these theories in regards to MERA.

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\textsuperscript{20} A list of important actors mentioned in this thesis can be found in Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{21} "Dick Molpus." Interview by author. August 18, 2010.
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Theoretical Background

The Great Man Theory and its Criticisms

The goal of this thesis is to add more depth to the story of MERA that has revolved around the figure of William Winter. The emphasis on the impact of William Winter in the passage of MERA is an example of a common practice in historical analysis to exalt the contributions of a single charismatic and influential leader. The Great Man Theory was popularized by Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle analyzed the influence of great historical figures such as Napoleon, Shakespeare, Muhammad and Luther, concluding: “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”22 Carlyle and many historians after him took this approach to analyzing great events in history. They believed that the outcome of important events were contingent on the main actors present. This is the historical lens in which most people view the passage of MERA. The sociologist Herbert Spencer presented a famous counterargument to Great Man Theory. Spencer states:

“[Y]ou must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown....Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”23

This thesis will be devoted to proving Spencer’s assertion about the importance of social climate in facilitating the actions of great men. The election of such a strong education advocate like William Winter is undoubtedly central in the


passage of MERA. However, one must ask: how was his election made possible by social changes in the first place and how did the sociopolitical climate facilitate his fight for education reform once he was in office?

*Legislator Responsiveness*

According to the common story told about the passage of MERA, the public support campaign conducted by William Winter and his staff forced legislators to reckon with the fact that their constituents were strongly in favor of education reform even if they were not. This story plays off of the generally accepted model of representation in democracy. Ideally, elected legislators vote and make policy decisions based on what their constituents need and want so that they can be reelected. It is questionable to what degree legislators accurately represent their constituents’ interests in practice. Therefore, my analysis will see how legislator responsiveness on education legislation changed over the course of 1982 to see if there was any real changes to how legislators voted on education legislation based on the needs of their constituents.

There has been a lot of research on how well elected legislators represent the interests of their constituents because this is seen as the basis for democracy in modern society. One of the most cited studies that deals with constituency influence on legislators’ decisions is an article entitled “Constituency Influence in Congress” by Warren Miller and Donald Stokes. In this article, Miller and Stokes investigate the relationship between constituent opinion and the voting decisions legislators make during roll call votes. They find that the highest predictors of how a particular legislator in Congress will vote in a roll call is the legislator’s
own attitude and how he or she perceives the attitudes of their constituents. Additionally, “the Representative has very imperfect information about the issue preferences of his constituency, and the constituency’s awareness of the policy stance of the Representative ordinarily is slight.” This makes sense when looking at the example of Mississippi because legislators did not begin voting for education reform until they could not ignore the fact that there was incredibly strong support for education reform among most of their constituents. Moreover, Erikson, Wright and McIver argue in their book *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States* that state legislators are actually highly responsive to the opinions of their constituents. Their findings are based on a study of state-level opinion surveys of state policies since the 1930’s relating to issues of social programming like welfare, Medicaid, and education spending.

Paul Sabatier and David Whiteman find in their article “Legislative Decision Making and Substantive Policy Information: Models of Information Flow” that constituents are the third largest source of consultation for state legislators after interest groups and government administrative agencies. There is a general consensus that constituents are a significant source of influence and consultation, but they are usually less influential than organized interests.

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Historically, White males had always held power in the Mississippi state government. Between the end of Reconstruction Era politics in 1896 and the first election after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, there were no African-Americans serving in the Mississippi State Legislature. The election of Robert G. Clark to the state House of Representatives in 1966 then started the reemergence of Black political power in Mississippi. By 1980, there were seventeen Black state legislators, with fifteen serving in the House and two serving as state senators. This group of Black politicians formed the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus (MLBC) and decided to make education reform a top priority because low-quality public schools disproportionately affected African American students.

Though the MLBC comprised less than 10 percent of the state legislators in Mississippi, I believe that it formed an influential voting block and was a natural ally for Governor Winter and his staff. In his paper “Black Legislative Politics in Mississippi”, Byron O’Rey describes the political power of Black state legislators in Mississippi from 1970-1988. O’Rey finds that though “Black legislators were limited in their ability to pass self-sponsored legislation, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus was capable of influencing the legislative process with such efforts as swing votes, co-sponsorship, and committee influence.” 27 This could explain why a bill sponsored by Robert Clark, who was chairman of the House Education Committee, failed in

the regular legislative session in 1982, but MERA, which was sponsored by the Governor, White legislators, and Clark, passed. Frank Parker shares a similar view of Black legislative politics in Mississippi in his book *Black Votes Count*. Through interviews and qualitative analysis Parker concludes following:

“Both Black legislators and interested observers believe that the Black membership of the Mississippi Legislature has made the legislature more responsive to Black needs in the enactment of legislation for educational reform, the establishment of state financed kindergartens for the first time in the history of the state, improvements in the state education financing system, the enactment of salary increases for public school teachers, improvements in the provision of health care under Medicaid, and the blocking of an increase in the state sales tax.”

O’Rey’s analysis supplements these conclusions made by Parker by doing a thorough quantitative analysis of the success that the Black legislators had in passing legislation in the state legislature.

It is also interesting to compare the activity of African American state legislators in other states to the MLBC’s activity in Mississippi. In Tennessee, Mississippi’s neighbor to the north, the 1980’s also brought a sharp increase in the number of Black state legislators. Sharon Wright describes the LBC in Tennessee as one of the most influential ethnic caucuses in the United States, despite its small size, because it has been formally institutionalized and its members have served in leadership positions in the legislature. However, according to Janine Parry and William Millar, Arkansas did not have a legislative Black caucus that

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had much control over the policy agenda, though their voting patterns were much more unified than their White counterparts.\textsuperscript{30}

Another important Black caucus to consider is the Congressional Black Caucus, which in the 1980’s had a larger membership and longer history than state Black caucuses. In their article “Congressional Racial Solidarity”, Roxanne Giles and Charles Jones describe the voting patterns of Blacks in Congress between the years of 1971-1990. They find that Black members of Congress show more unity in voting than almost any other subgroup of Congress. They also show the most unity in social issues like education.\textsuperscript{31} In 1980, three members of the CBC were also members of the House Education Committee.\textsuperscript{32} This suggests that education was a priority for elected Black officials nationwide.

Recently, there have been some doubts about the quality of the substantive and descriptive representation that Black legislators offer to their Black constituents. In 2001, Kerry L. Haynie found that African-American legislators are at a disadvantage relative to non-Black legislators. His findings reveal that African-American legislators tend to be viewed as less effective by their fellow colleagues in the legislature than their non-Black counterparts, even after controlling for positions of power. According to Haynie this has a profound impact on how legislators are able to represent the interests of their constituents.


Bryan O’Rey and L. Martin Overby have a slightly more positive view of modern Black representation. In their investigation of Black leadership in the state legislature they find the following:

“African Americans are not significantly underrepresented as chairs of the important legislative committees that shape the states’ fiscal policies and legislative processes…African Americans are considerably overrepresented as chairs of committees dealing with issues of health care and social services, traditionally areas of strong interest to the Black community. This indicates that in policy areas of greatest interest to their constituents, Black state legislators have been able to move beyond the symbolism of merely holding elective office into real positions of power where they can provide significant substantive representation.”

In general, the consensus among scholars over time seems to be that Black legislators do have an effect on the overall responsiveness of a legislature to Black needs and interests.

*The Press as an Agenda Setter*

Mississippi was and is still one of the most racially charged places in America. Because of scars from slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement, education was still a very racial issue because of the old plantation farmer’s fear that educating the Black man would forever spoil him for hard labor. However, in the 1980’s, we begin to see a shift in the attitudes of the public towards education. Mississippians began to view public education as a necessary component of the action plan needed to bring Mississippi out of last place. The main motivation for Mississippians to reckon with the fact their state was falling behind because of their inadequate and backwards education system...

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33 O'Rey, Byron D., L. Martin Overby, and Christopher W. Larimer. "African-American Committee Chairs in U.S. State Legislatures." Social Science Quarterly 88, no. 3 (September 2007).

34 Wilkie Dixie
was the press. The local, state, and national press helped to focus the attention of Mississippi on education for the first time since the integration of schools and were instrumental in establishing the public sense of urgency for education reform.

Mississippi’s state newspaper, the *Clarion-Ledger*, won the Pulitzer Prize in public service for their coverage of education reform efforts throughout 1982. In her book, *The Role of the Clarion-Ledger in the Adoption of the 1982 Education Reform Act* Kathleen Wickham describes the influence of the *Clarion-Ledger* on the passage of MERA. The *Clarion-Ledger* was able to inform citizens about the importance of education reform and offered a stark progressive contrast to the rhetoric that had previously existed about education. The staff of the newspaper was committed to helping Winter to achieve education reform for Mississippi. They covered almost every town hall meeting that his staff organized. Over half the pieces written about the fight for MERA were staff editorials about the importance of its passage.35

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw conducted a famous study in Chapel Hill, NC during the 1968 presidential election that found a near perfect correlation between what citizens believed to be the most important issue of the elections and the most covered issues by the press. The authors believe that the media is actually the influencing actor in this relationship because most citizens do not have another way of accessing information about political developments. McCombs and Shaw stated: “The media are the major primary sources of national

political information; for most, mass media provide the best—and only—easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities.” Additionally, the authors assert that the press should not be seen as an entity that simply matches their actions with the interests of voters because the goals of the press are not compatible with goals of the citizens. 36 This study provided the basis for the theory of the press’s role as a national agenda setter.

A more recent book, News that Matters by Shanto Iyengar and David Kinder discusses how the press sets the public policy agenda by having a “framing effect” and a “priming effect” on the public.37 These two mechanisms give the public the ability to prioritize and craft opinions on the many issues that must be deliberated upon in American society. The “framing effect” is described by Iyengar and Kinder as the ability of the press to choose the American public’s political priorities. To prove that the press has this power, they ran experiments that examined how subjects viewed the importance of a particular social problem issue in relation to the amount of coverage it has in the media. Through these experiments, Iyengar and Kinder concluded that the media has a large effect on how the public constructs their public policy priorities.38 The priming effect describes the way that mass media has an impact on how the public assesses elected officials. The authors assert that “by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which

38 Ibid 33
governments, presidents, policies and candidates for public office are judged.”39

These two mechanisms described by Iyengar and Kinder show that the press had the potential to have a dramatic impact on how Mississippians prioritized education reform and how they judged their public officials based on their position and involvement in education reform.

Methods

In this thesis I will be testing three separate hypotheses designed to demonstrate the power of two sociopolitical factors in the passage of MERA beyond the leadership of Governor William Winter.

Showing How State Legislators Responded to their Constituents

The goal of Chapter 3 will be to find a correlation between how a legislator voted on education legislation over time and the demographics of their constituents. This will be done quantitatively through the use of legislative voting records on three education bills that were voted on by the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1982 including: House Bill 1162, a bill that increased funding for vocation schools; House Bill 936, a bill that proposed the establishment of public kindergartens, and finally MERA itself. By examining how legislators voted on these three bills, one can assess if legislators became more responsive to their constituents after the efforts of Governor Winter and his staff to demonstrate constituent support for public education reform.

The first step in this process is to summarize the demographics of each house member’s district. This will utilize the computer program ArcGIS, which allows for the spatial overlay of a census map of Mississippi from 1980 and a

39 Ibid 63
Mississippi State Legislature district map from the same time. These two maps will be layered on top of one another to view how individual census tracts were dispersed among districts. Since the boundaries do not coincide with one another, data from the individual census tracts had to be assigned to each district. Therefore, a process will be run in ArcGIS to find the center of each census tract, which can then be placed into a district. The district that each centroid falls into will then be assigned with the corresponding census tract’s data. Next the data will be summarized so that each house member is assigned one value for every independent variable.

The independent variables of interest in this study will be the percentage of Blacks in the overall population, the percentage of private school enrollment, and the median household income of each district. The dependent variable will be the votes of the legislators on the three aforementioned bills. Two different sets of regressions will be calculated. First, each independent variable will be correlated with each dependent variable in single variable regressions. Second, multivariate regressions will be calculated with all three independent variables with a single dependent variable. These regressions will assess both the individual effect and the combined effect of different constituent demographics on how legislators voted on education legislation.

*An Examination of the Legislative Black Caucus*

To study the effect the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus (MLBC) had on MERA’s passage, I will draw from a variety of sources including secondary literature, interviews with politicians present at the time of passage, and primary
source documents. These sources will be used to gain insight into the power of the MLBC during this period of time. Specifically, I wanted to investigate how successful the Black legislators were in championing legislation that would disproportionately benefit Black constituents and how much influence they could exert on their fellow legislators.

To assess the success of Black legislators, I will draw on newspaper articles, secondary literature, and legislative data from the period. Newspaper articles will give important information about the activities of Black legislators, their priorities, and how the public viewed them. This qualitative data will allow me to assess the performance of Black legislators in both drawing attention to and passing legislation on issues that mattered to them. Furthermore, newspaper articles will provide important detailed historical information on the activities of the MLBC during the period of interest. Secondary literature will be consulted to give overall survey information about the MLBC. Multiple authors have written about the activities of the MLBC as a whole, though none have focused on the MLBC’s activities on education. These sources give an important framework in which to examine their activities related to MERA.

In order to ascertain the influence that the MLBC had over White legislators and politics in general in Mississippi, I will turn to interviews that I conducted with William Winter and his staff members, Robert Clark, and Fred Banks. The interviews from Winter and his staff will give information about how useful they found the Black Caucus to be when they were building coalitions among education supporters. These former staff members also have a very in-
depth knowledge of the power dynamics of the Mississippi State Legislature because such a large part of their job during Winter’s term was the creation of strategy to pass MERA. The interviews with Robert Clark and Fred Banks will shed light on how the MLBC interacted and dealt with White legislators on the issues of education. Clark was the first Black to be elected to the Mississippi State Legislature after Reconstruction and was chairman of the House Education Committee and the MLBC during the time of MERA’s conception and passage. He also had a very close working relationship with William Winter and the leadership of the House of Representatives. Fred Banks was Vice Chair of the MLBC at the time of MERA’s passage. He would later become Chair of the MLBC and a justice on Mississippi’s Supreme Court.

*Understanding How the Press Set the Policy Agenda*

To show how the press played an active role in making education reform an important issue and pushing for the eventual passage of MERA, I will be examining dozens of new pieces printed and distributed locally, state-wide, and nationally. It is important to categorize news sources by their coverage area because this will give a better sense of what unique roles each type of news source had and what type of message about education reform they were sending to their readers. This close examination of articles, editorials, and features will be used to elucidate how the press influenced the public and legislators.

Printed articles will be used to show what information was given to the public and what sort of information the press prioritized that they had not before. The sheer number of articles, the kind of information the press was providing, and
the tone of press coverage are all important in the role that the press played in MERA’s passage.

Editorials will be used both to show both the opinions of the press and the public. By examining the viewpoints of both the readers and the press, I will show that local and state newspapers became a forum for citizens to discuss issues with education that had never existed before. This became an important way for citizens to participate in the debate going on in the state legislature and for support to build among citizens who had only quietly supported reform efforts. These editorials were also crucial in demonstrating the desire for education reform among constituents to state legislatures.

Finally, features from media sources will be examined to show how the press chose to portray the need for education reform and what types of story they prioritized. In examining the role of the press in this instance, it is important to find out how they chose to portray education reform and if this was consistent throughout Mississippi and the rest of the nation. What narrative did these news sources want to tell about Mississippi? What types of events and stories did they find more compelling? How did these features fit into and guide the broader discussion of education reform in Mississippi? An in-depth examination of feature pieces will give the answers to these questions.

Summary

The goal of this thesis is to give a closer examination to the passage of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982. Because MERA is important to understanding post Civil Rights politics in Mississippi and the rest of the South, it
serves as an interesting case study in how progressive legislation was passed in states with histories of systematic racial oppression. Prior attention given to MERA has focused on the story of the great triumph of William Winter and his staff in passing MERA. Although the Winter administration deserves a great deal of credit for their efforts, I believe that this story of MERA is incomplete and must be examined from a more sociopolitical perspective if we are to use it to make broader conclusions about progressive reforms in the American South. Therefore, I plan to examine MERA in terms of two important sociopolitical developments: greater Black political power in state legislature and a more active press that took a larger role in agenda setting. I will also be conducting a quantitative assessment of the common story that is told about MERA by showing the effects that Winter’s public support campaign had on the behavior and responsiveness of state legislators. The story I tell about MERA is not necessarily in opposition of any narrative that has already been told, but rather an important addendum that will to the understanding of what was necessary for progressive legislation to be passed in a state like Mississippi.
Chapter 3
The Effect of the Winter Public Support Campaign on Legislator Responsiveness: Testing the story of MERA

“The overriding question is this: Will rank-and-file legislators speak out in this special session or will they cower in the corner and a few bullheaded leaders make the rest of the legislature look bad?... Mississippi is at a crossroads. The direction we take depends on how our legislators respond to the urgent call for education improvements. If there are legislators who don’t understand the urgency of that call or the sensibility of it, then it high time the public learned their names. The governor is ready… The public is ready. Is the legislature ready?”

-The editors of The Clarion-Ledger

When William Winter became governor of Mississippi in 1980, he was faced with the challenge of dealing with a stagnant, antiquated, and almost hegemonic legislature. The political power of the state was in the legislative branch. The governor had little executive power. At the time, each governor could only serve one term, and thus had an inherent political disadvantage to the legislature. Not only did Winter lack political clout with the legislature, but the legislature had a history of being actively destructive towards public education after the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954. MERA was the first time since 1954 that the Mississippi state legislature voted in favor of raising taxes to increase funding for public education and since its passage, education legislation has remained a top priority for the state legislature.

This chapter will be devoted assessing the rapid changes seen in 1982 in the attitudes and the actions of the Mississippi House of Representatives that ultimately led to the passage of MERA in 1982. Specifically, I am interested in seeing if the state legislators became more responsive to their constituents after the Winter administration conducted their public support campaign around the
state. The objective of this campaign was to make it known to legislators that there was a substantial amount of support among their constituents for improving public schools. Therefore, if the Winter administration’s public support campaign was the primary reason why MERA was a success, we would expect legislators to be more responsive to their constituents.

**The Mississippi House of Representatives and its Members**

The Mississippi State Legislature is a bicameral body, comprised of both a House of Representatives and a Senate. Both representatives and senators serve four-year terms without term limits. For the purposes for this chapter, I will be focusing on the House of Representatives for a few key reasons. First, there are more members in the House, which gives more data points to work with. These members are also more diverse in terms of race, gender, party, and background. More importantly, however, the House has played a more active role in both improving and dismantling public education in Mississippi.

As discussed in previous chapters, the House of Representatives in Mississippi began to diversify in the 1980’s. However, it would be an overstatement to call Mississippi’s state legislature diverse. Out of the 122 state representatives, 106 were White males. There was only one woman serving in the House. There was also very little political diversity, with only a handful of Republicans serving in the House.\(^{40}\) Indeed, the average representative serving in 1982 could be characterized as a White male, in his mid 50’s, who worked either as a lawyer, farmer, businessman or some combination of the three. For years these were the people with the political power in the state and they were the ones

that eventually had to approve MERA before improvements could be made to the public schools.

**Power Structures in the House**

When William Winter was first elected as a member of the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1947, he knew that something had to be done to challenge the existing power structures in the legislature if he wanted to bring change to Mississippi. A famous anecdote that he tells about his challenges in contesting the old guard of legislators involves him running for Speaker of the House against the long-time speaker Walter Sillers, who was known for his “iron fist” grip on the House. Winter only received sixteen votes in his bid for speaker of the house. The day after the vote, he walked into the house chambers to find that his desk had been moved behind a column, making it nearly impossible for Winter to be recognized to speak when the House was in session. This anecdote displays two key qualities of the Mississippi House: the strongly engrained power structures and the incredible disdain for any disruption to the status quo. The Winter administration and its allies for education reform had to challenge these power structures and resistance to change within the state legislature in order to persuade house members to finally vote for MERA in the 1982 special session.

**The Committee Structure**

When I asked Dick Molpus what the Winter administration’s biggest challenge was in passing education reform in the Mississippi legislature, he answered that it was getting the actual bill out of committee to be voted on. Similar to most legislatures across the United States, the majority of work on a

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piece of legislation is done within committee and most bills never make it out of committee to be voted on by the entire legislature. Education reform bills had a particularly difficult time passing committee. According to Molpus, the Committee Chairs wielded an unbelievable amount of power and could essentially dictate what bills made it out of committee. The vast majority of committee chairs, with the obvious exception of Robert Clark, were long-serving house members who had little interest in working to improve public schools.

The Speaker of the House

The Speaker of House of the Mississippi Legislature in the 1980’s was a man named C. Buddie Newman. According to his official biography in the 1980 Mississippi State Handbook, Newman was a soybean farmer from the Delta who had been serving in the legislature since 1948. Newman was a continuation of the political power held by the “Delta Bourbons”, a group of men elected from the Mississippi Delta that essentially enjoyed unchecked political power due to their longevity in the legislature. For example, one of Newman’s predecessors, Walter Sillers served for fifty years in the state legislature and acted as speaker of the house for twenty-two years. Sillers was a very vocal and ardent segregationist. In order to avoid integrating Delta State University, of which he was an influential patron, Sillers led efforts in the legislature to found a new vocational college in the Delta with the hopes that Black students would enroll there instead of Delta State. More importantly, Sillers was also instrumental in the passage of a

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42 Ibid
43 Ibid
constitutional amendment allowing the closure of the state’s public schools if necessary to preserve segregation.\textsuperscript{44}

Buddie Newman, though not as outwardly racist as his predecessor, also had his hand in sabotaging public education reform in Mississippi. A very well known instance of this occurred in 1982 right before the end of the regular session when the legislature was asked to consider House Bill 936, a law that would establish public kindergartens in Mississippi. On February 10\textsuperscript{th}, Robert Clark and Tommy Walman motioned for House Bill 936 to be moved to the top of the legislative calendar for immediate consideration so that it could be voted on before the end of the legislative session. However, they were not recognized and Representative Jim Simpson moved to adjourn. At this time, it was highly probable that HB 936 had the votes needed to pass.\textsuperscript{45} Newman then proceeded to ask for a voice vote on adjournment, and despite a clearly louder “no” vote Newman adjourned the House. People were outraged by Newman’s blatant disregard of the rules and abuse of power. In an opinion piece produced by \textit{The Sun Herald}, a newspaper published in Gulfport, MS, the editors bashed Newman, citing his ties to the oil and gas industry which would be hurt by HB 936 because of the proposed increase in oil/gas taxes to fund kindergartens. They claimed Newman and his “henchmen threw up all of kinds of smokes screens to defeat the


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid
William Winter was deeply troubled by Newman’s actions as well and issued a public statement that expressed his disappointment:

“It is unfortunate that a parliamentary maneuver has denied the people an opportunity to have kindergarten decided on its merits. This procedure does not serve the people of Mississippi.”

In years to come Newman would defend his decision to Andrew Mullins, stating that he was “raised to respect the Speaker’s office” and his actions were done to protect the house members who did not want to be recorded as voting yes or no. Additionally, Newman also claimed that he did education supporters a favor by killing a nonfunctional bill. Even if this defense was sincere, it is still hugely problematic in terms of how representative democracy was carried out in Mississippi and how much power the Speaker of the House viewed they could wield.

The Governor and the Legislature

The political power of governors in the public policy arena differs from state to state, but the executive branch in Mississippi suffered from a large disadvantage to the state legislature. In 1979 when William Winter was elected, the governor was only allowed one four-year term in office. However, both state representatives and state senators could serve indefinitely. In an interview with Governor Winter, he described the dynamic between the legislature and the governor as he following:

“The state legislature was the dominant branch of government in the state and had been for many years. The governor was limited to one four year term, so there was no continuity of the leadership in the governor’s office,

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47 Mullins, Building Consensus, 78
48 Ibid 77
whereas in the legislature, the leadership was the people who had been there the longest. The governor was at a distinct disadvantage in the advocacy of public policy making... Any aggressive governor who would try to impose different attitudes usually was unsuccessful. This was the political reality I faced when I was elected governor. I recognized it would be a difficult effort to drastically improve the system of education. For the first three years of my four-year administration I got next to nothing productive from the legislature.49

Another key power that the state legislature had over the governor was the ability to appropriate all state funds. This is especially critical in terms of education policy because the legislature had to approve all funding for the schools and any sort of statewide improvement that Winter wanted to implement. Therefore, in order to get education reform passed in the legislature Winter had to appeal to the only institution that had any sort of power over the state legislature: the Mississippi public.

The House and Education Issues

The Mississippi House of Representatives did not view improving public education as an issue worth their attention. Public education was viewed as an institution that only benefited African-Americans in Mississippi. In an interview with Governor Winter he described the atmosphere as the following:

“We did not have a single state supported public kindergarten, and had low achievement levels and high dropout rates. Over and above all that, there was a sense of general indifference and apathy about our education system. It was not a politically favorable issue, and there were still a lot of racist feelings about public education.”50

Very few politicians in the state were willing to acknowledge the connection between improving the economic and social climate in Mississippi with improving education. While a house member, William Winter often made this

50 Ibid
appeal to his colleagues, and would eventually run for governor on a platform of improved education for Mississippian. However, he would lose twice and had to tweak his platform to focus on a stronger Mississippi economy before his ideas became attractive enough for him to be put in office. As governor, Winter would see three unsuccessful legislative sessions before finally seeing victory in education reform in the special session of December 1982.

Reactions to Brown v. Board

Although the landmark Supreme Court decision has the legacy of almost single-handedly desegregating public schools, the forced integration of public schools actually made the Mississippi education system even more segregated and unequal. First, there was the massive White flight from public schools. Wealthier White families would either send their children to preexisting private schools or establish new schools in order to avoid sending their children to the same school as Black students. Private school enrollment in Mississippi doubled from 1979 to 1981. The state legislature also responded with strong indignation to the federal mandate for integration and therefore did everything in their power to keep the legacy of Jim Crow alive in Mississippi. Actions taken by the state legislature included repealing a compulsory school attendance law, even though Mississippi was the last state to put forth this type of law. The state legislature also went as far as passing a constitutional amendment in 1956 that gave themselves the power to abolish all public schools. The people of Mississippi then voted with a two-

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52 Ibid.
thirds majority to approve this amendment, but luckily the power has never been utilized.  

Racism and Opposition to Education Reform in the House

There was no doubt that many of the legislators in Mississippi state government were racist during the time of MERA’s passage. However, by the 1980’s it was no longer socially acceptable to be blatantly racist in public and so state legislators channeled their prejudice into symbols of change and hope for the African-American community, the most prominent example being the public schools. During his campaigns for improved education, Winter often cited Mississippi’s relative backwardness to the rest of the nation in terms of economic wealth and educational achievement. However, these statistics failed to hold weight with much of the Mississippi public and elected officials. To them, the state was behind in all of these social measures because its large Black population was keeping them down. According to Andy Mullins, this misconception proved to be a huge impediment for any sort of progressive legislation being passed because all of these policies were seen as something that would disproportionately benefit African-Americans.

The Road to MERA’s passage

Having served as a state legislator for decades in Mississippi, William Winter knew that it would be difficult to get meaningful education reform passed in the state, particularly since there would have to be tax increases to fund these education improvements. In one of his first meetings after being sworn in as

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53 Mullins, Building Consensus, 4
54 “Andy Mullins.” Interview with author. August 11, 2010
governor, Winter met with his Lieutenant Governor Brad Dye and Speaker of the
House Buddie Newman to discuss the delay of tax cuts that would be a
continuation of $100 million dollars in tax reductions done in the 1979 legislation
session. Both leaders refused to entertain this idea and the notion of raising any
sort of tax revenue for education.55 This reluctance was reflected in the attitudes
of the rest of the state legislature throughout the 1980 and 1981 legislative
sessions. The legislature rejected any legislation that embodied the
recommendations of a Special Committee on Public School Finance and
Administration, formed by Winter to research the state of public schools in
Mississippi and what would be the best policy solutions to improve them. 56
Robert Clark was one of the main driving forces behind most of the legislation.
There were a few small victories like modest teacher pay raises, but nothing
addressed the overall systematic problems that were facing the Mississippi
schools.

The debate on public kindergartens, which peaked with early adjournment
of the House by Newman, was particularly contentious. Many people viewed the
opposition to public kindergartens as a function of long-standing racist attitudes,
but Andrew Mullins, Winter’s former special assistant, asserts that opposition to
kindergartens represented something larger than just racism. According to
Mullins, public kindergartens were seen by the legislature as a “serious challenge
to the long-standing hegemony of the old guard of Mississippi politics”, but by

55 Mullins, Building Consensus, 6
56 Ibid 79
1982 kindergartens had gained considerable broad-based public support and the legislature had to figure some way to grapple with this fact.\(^5^7\)

After the disappointment of three legislative sessions that yielded no substantive results for education reform, William Winter charged his staff members with the creation of an action plan to pass education reform in the state legislature. They came back and proposed that the Winter administration put every effort into conducting a grassroots public support campaign for education reform in the summer and fall of 1982.\(^5^8\) The governor and his staff members traveled all around the state hosting open town halls and speaking to local civic organizations. The response from the general public was astounding. Thousands of people gathered in town halls to show their support for improved Mississippi public schools. According to Dick Molpus, the goal of this public support campaign was to organize a coalition of African-Americans, progressive Whites, and those who were just interested in improving public schools. When these forces were all assembled, they were the majority of the state. Molpus describes the legislators as being stunned at the outpouring of support for education by the public.\(^5^9\) Given the spotlight put on the state legislature because of this public support campaign, legislators almost had no choice but to vote for education reform if they did not want to risk their re-election.

**The Public Support Campaign**

In between the end of the regular session in March of 1982 and special session in December of 1982, Winter and his staff traveled around the entire state

\(^{57}\) Ibid 57
\(^{58}\) "Dick Molpus." Interview by author. August 18, 2010.
\(^{59}\) Ibid
in an effort to gather public support for their education reform efforts. Ultimately the Winter administration wanted to do three things: alert the public about the need for education reform, create a strong coalition for education reform, and demonstrate the popularity for education reform among constituents to state legislators. The public support campaign consisted of speeches made around the state by William Winter, his staff members, and his wife Elise Winter. There were also letter-writing campaigns from the Governor’s office and occasional political advertisements made in local media sources. However, it was the hundreds of speeches made by Winter and his staff that truly created the grassroots support for education among Mississippians. According to Dick Molpus and Andy Mullins, no gathering of citizens was considered too small for them to talk to. They would drive for hours just to speak to a gathering of a dozen people.\(^60\) \(^61\) Thankfully, Winter and his staff were not only speaking to a room of a dozen people. During the public support campaign, Governor Winter held a series of town halls in Mississippi’s major cities. These town halls were a risk because it was uncertain how many citizens would actually attend and what type of feedback there would be for these events. The first of these town halls was held in Oxford Mississippi. Thousands showed up at the local high school where the forum was being held and the crowd overflowed into the cafeteria and the hallways. The response was overwhelmingly supportive of the proposed policies.

\(^60\) Ibid.
\(^61\) Andy Mullins.” Interview with author. August 11, 2010
Research Question and Hypothesis

Given the political atmosphere and structures existing in the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1982, the passage of MERA is quite a political feat for its supporters. There was strong opposition that had to be weakened in order for such a comprehensive education reform package to be passed in the state legislature. This shift has been traditionally accounted for by the success of the public support campaign conducted by Winter and his staff. The goal of the campaign was to bring the amount of public support for improving public schools to the attention of state legislators. This chapter is devoted to answering the following question: to what extent did the Winter public support campaign change the way that legislators respond the needs of their constituents when voting on education legislation? Because I think that there were other crucial factors that led the legislators to vote for MERA, I predict that these regressions will show no significant difference in how legislators voted on education legislation before and after the public support campaign.

To assess this claim, I will run regressions that will elucidate the relationship between how legislators voted over time on three separate pieces of education in relation to three key demographic characteristics of their district: the median income, private school enrollment and percent of African Americans in their district. If legislators become more responsive to their constituents, representatives that come from districts with lower median household incomes and private school enrollments, and higher percentages of African Americans should be more likely to vote for education reform in general. This is because
people that are poorer, not enrolled in private school, and African American have a larger stake in improved public education in Mississippi. These were also the groups of people that were targeted in the grassroots public support campaign conducted by Winter and his staff members in the spring and summer of ’82. However, as explained before, the Mississippi House of Representatives was not responsive to the needs of their constituents before 1982. Therefore to show the change in legislator responsiveness, I will run regressions using three different pieces of education legislation that were voted on by the House in 1982: House Bill 1162, a failed bill that was meant to raise funding for vocational schools, an earlier roll call vote on House Bill 936, Robert Clark’s contentious public kindergarten bill, and MERA itself. I predict that there will be no significant change in how legislators vote on education legislation based on the demographics of their constituents through the course of 1982.

Data

The data for this research is comprised of voting records from the 1982 Mississippi House Legislative session and the December 1982 special session and census data from 1980. The voting records were collected from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History from the Winter Education Reform files and the State Legislature’s official minutes from the 1982 House Records and Minutes. The census data was collected from census maps produced and distributed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

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62 The last vote taken on HB 936 showed 50 legislators in favor and 72 against. The final vote taken on HB 1162 showed 48 legislators in favor and 72 against.
Methods

The first step in this research was aggregating the demographic data and mapping it to the Mississippi state legislative districts. Census data is geographically organized into census tracts, which usually are segments of counties in a state. However, the geographic boundaries of state legislative districts often cross county lines. Therefore, geospatial analysis using the program ArcGIS 10 was conducted to assign each house district with the census data that fell within it. First, the map of Mississippi containing the census data and the map with the House of Representative district lines were overlaid and georeferenced so that they were both on the same scale and represented the same geographic areas. Then, polygons were drawn that traced the house districts so that data could be entered into each district and centroids were calculated for each polygon. The census-tract-level demographic data was aggregated up to the legislative district, based on whether the centroid for the census tract fell within district boundaries.

The quantitative analysis in this chapter is comprised of two sets of linear regressions. These regressions were calculated in StataSE 11. The dependent variable in these regressions is how a legislator voted on a particular piece of legislation while the independent variable are the three demographic characteristics of interest: percentage of African-American constituents, median income, and percentage of private school enrollment. The first set of regressions

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63 The state house district map and the map that I created in ArcGIS can been seen in the appendices.
64 In the regressions roll call votes were coded as “0” for a “no” note and “1” for a “yes” vote. Percentages were expressed as a decimal and median household income was divided by one thousand. For the purposes of this chapter, percent Black will refer to the percentage of African-Americans in a legislator’s district. Percent Private will refer to the percentage of school age
correlates each individual demographic characteristic with the votes on each of three pieces legislation. This set of nine regressions will give an idea of how important each individual demographic factor’s impact on education legislation on the nature of that impact. The second set of regressions will be multivariable regressions that will use all three demographic characteristics to examine how these factors concurrently influenced how legislators voted.

Results

The results of the regressions can be found in the following tables. Table 1 summarizes the results from the single variable regressions while Table 2 gives the results from the multivariate regressions.

Table 1: Summary of Single Variable Regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vocational</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>MERA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>percent Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.41 (.08)</td>
<td>0.46 (.09)</td>
<td>0.6 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>0.022 (.21)</td>
<td>0.25 (.21)</td>
<td>0.16 (.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.0049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| percent Private  |            |              |       |
| Constant         | 0.41 (.048)| 0.55 (.048)  | 0.66 (.047) |
| Coefficient      | -0.28 (.58)| -0.52 (.60)  | -0.72 (.57) |
| R-squared        | 0.0019     | 0.0063       | 0.0139 |
| N                | 119        | 120          | 117   |

| Median Income    |            |              |       |
| Constant         | 0.5 (.13)  | 0.47 (.14)   | 0.54 (.13) |
| Coefficient      | -0.0095 (.012) | 0.0075 (.012) | 0.0088 (.012) |
| R-squared        | 0.0052     | 0.0032       | 0.0045 |
| N                | 118        | 119          | 120   |

children who are enrolled in private schools. Median income refers to the median household income of a legislator’s district.
Note: Rows represent independent variables of the regressions while columns represent dependent variables of the regression. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 2: Summary of Multivariate Regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vocational</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>MERA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.57 (.20)</td>
<td>0.27 (.20)</td>
<td>0.47 (.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percent Black</td>
<td>-0.14 (.24)</td>
<td>0.29 (.24)</td>
<td>0.11 (.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percent Private</td>
<td>-0.35 (.60)</td>
<td>-0.38 (.61)</td>
<td>-.68 (.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>-0.011 (.013)</td>
<td>0.017 (.014)</td>
<td>0.013 (.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.0081</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rows represent independent variables of the regressions while columns represent dependent variables of the regression. Standard errors are in parentheses.

As we can see from Table 1 there was no single factor that had the predicted effect on legislator responsiveness over time with any statistical significance. All of these coefficients are not statistically significant at the p<.05 level, making them indistinguishable from zero. Additionally, the r-squared values for these regressions are extremely low which indicates that the independent variables are not effectively explaining the variation among the dependent variables.

The results from the multivariate regressions can be seen in Table 2 and mirror the results from the single-variable regressions. Overall, these results do not show that legislators were giving greater consideration to the specific needs of the constituents when voting on education reform legislation after the public support campaign was conducted by the Winter administration.
Conclusion

In order to match the narrative of MERA that has been repeated, one would expect to see a large increase in either the coefficients of the regressions over time or an increase in statistical significance. An increase in both these measures would suggest that legislators were paying more attention to their constituents like the trend that Governor Winter and his staff have described in previous publications and interviews. Obviously, the public support campaign brought attention to the issue of education reform. The contributions of William Winter and his staff members to the passage of MERA should not be dismissed from the above calculations. However, the regressions failed to show any significant changes in how legislators responded to constituent demands for education reform over time.

Therefore, this leads us to believe that must be other important sociopolitical factors and changes that contributed to the dramatic shift in the legislature that was necessary in order for MERA to pass in the special session. I plan to explore two such factors in the next two chapters. I believe that by investigating the role of the new Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus and a active and progressive press, I will be giving a more comprehensive view of why education reform was finally passed in 1982 than what has been given before. The election of a man like William Winter to the governor’s seat in Mississippi is undoubtedly a crucial component to MERA being passed in the state legislature. It may even be the most important political factor in MERA’s success. However, the results from the regressions discussed in this chapter suggest there must be an
assessment of other important social and political changes if we are to truly understand what was changing in the state legislature during the time of MERA’s passage.
Chapter 4: Mississippi’s New Legislative Black Caucus and MERA

“I was born a segregationists; I was raised a segregationist. All of us made adjustments. I never would have believed that Buddie Newman, as speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives, would appoint a Black man as chairman of the Education Committee.”

-Speaker of the House Buddie Newman to the Greenwood Commonwealth

Introduction

The state elections of Mississippi in 1979 were critical in bringing change to Mississippi’s elitist political system. Most notably, William Winter was elected to governor after previously being defeated twice. However, another sometimes overlooked, but important change in Mississippi’s political landscape was the election of thirteen new African-Americans to serve in the state legislature alongside four previously elected Black legislators. This was the largest contingent of Black legislators serving in Mississippi since Reconstruction and the second largest group of Black state legislators in the nation. In order to organize these legislators so that they could better advocate for Black interests, a legislative black caucus was formed in January of 1980, consisting of fifteen members of the House of Representatives and two state senators. The formation of this Black Caucus was a victory for Blacks in Mississippi who had seen very few Black leaders in the ranks of state government. After the end of Reconstruction, laws and regulations such as grandfather clauses and literacy tests were established to prevent Blacks from voting in elections. This eliminated any

65 Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politic*, 113.
67 Williams, Brian. "Mississippi Tops in Black Elected Officials." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), December 17, 1980, sec. A.
possibility of Blacks being elected to public office. The Voting Rights Act took away many of these regulations and thus enabled Mississippi’s large Black population to vote for Black leaders to represent them in the state government.  

Although the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus may still have been small in relation to the overall membership of the state legislature, they were politically influential. Because education has been so crucial in the struggle of African-Americans in Mississippi, the MLBC decided to make education reform their most important policy priority. The pursuit of this policy priority was facilitated by the fact that Robert G. Clark, the first chair of MLBC, was chairman of the House Education Committee (HEC), a position that he assumed in 1977. Clark’s position on the HEC made him an irreplaceable ally for the Winter administration. Though the MLBC was not as strong in 1982 as it currently is today, it did exert political power both as individual members and as a group. For the purposes of this chapter, I define political power as the ability to draw attention to a body’s policy priorities and to influence the success of pieces of legislation. Therefore, a politically powerful MLBC would be one that is able to advance its policy agenda by both aiding and preventing the passage of legislation. To measure political power, I will first investigate what type of influence the MLBC had on public opinion and public awareness of issues the MLBC chose to be a priority. I will also look at what type of influence the MLBC had on their fellow White legislators and what type of relationships existed

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68 Nash and Taggart *Mississippi Politics*
between the MLBC and the rest of the state legislature. Additionally, I will assess how the MLBC affected the legislative process both through their voting power and their use of procedural maneuvers. I hope to prove that although Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus was certainly not the most influential group in the state legislature, its members proved to be important allies in the fight for education reform and were a useful voting block to have in the House of Representatives.

**History of Blacks in the Mississippi State Legislature**

The composition of the Mississippi State Legislature in the past few years is more diverse than it has ever been in almost every single measure. Legislators span different backgrounds, races, ages, parties, and genders. In 2009 the state legislature of Mississippi was 29 percent African American and 15 percent female, as opposed to 9 percent African American and less than 1 percent women in 1980. This gradual shift in diversity shows the collapse of what many Mississippi politicians call “the old guard” in Mississippi politics, a group of older White males that based their tenures in the state legislature on how to retain their own powerful status in their communities. The deterioration of this omnipotent power structure had to occur before state-led comprehensive education reform was even conceivable in Mississippi.

**Black Power During and After Reconstruction**

After the Confederacy lost the Civil War in 1865, the South went through a period of federally organized rebuilding known as Reconstruction. One of the primary goals of Reconstruction was to integrate the newly freed slaves into

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71 Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 5.
72 "Dick Molpus," Interview by author. August 18, 2010
society and provide them social and civil rights. It was during this period that the three “Reconstruction Amendments” were added to the Constitution in order to grant enslaved Blacks their freedom, citizenship, and the right to vote. These newly gained rights allowed for both the political participation of Blacks in the state and the election of Blacks to the state government in Mississippi. By the late 1870’s, there were more registered Black voters than White voters in the state.73 This allowed for the election of more than 150 African-Americans into the Mississippi State Legislature. The large number of Blacks in the state legislature facilitated the election of the first Black Speaker of the House, John Roy Lynch. Lynch became of champion of the Black underclass during his tenure as speaker.74 It is also important to note the flourishing of Blacks in academics during this period. Throughout the state new universities and centers of higher learning were built to educate the freedmen. An example of this was Alcorn State University, which was established in 1871 and presided over by Hiram Revels, a U.S. Senator from Mississippi who was the first African-American to serve in the United States Congress.75

Unfortunately, the political success of African-Americans did not last. Reconstruction ended abruptly because of the Compromise of 1877, an unwritten deal that ended the disputes over the 1876 presidential election and gave Republican Rutherford B. Hayes the White House with the understanding that federal troops enforcing Reconstruction policies in Southern states would be

73 Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 97
removed. This had disastrous consequences for the progress that Blacks had made in Mississippi since the end of the Civil War. By the 1890’s, there was a new state Constitution in Mississippi that imposed multiple barriers to Black voters such as a two dollar poll tax and literacy tests. The repercussions of these new regulations were almost immediate. In 1892, the number of Black males registered to vote in the state of Mississippi dropped from 60,000 to 8,000.  

White Democrats still feared the potential of Black influence in politics from these few voters and thus, in 1902 the state legislature passed a law that permitted any party to excluding individuals from participating in their primaries. This allowed the Democratic Party in Mississippi to exclude Blacks from electoral politics all together because the party had such a strong presence in the state.  

*The End of the One Hundred Year Drought*

After almost one hundred years of being excluded from politics in the state, Blacks across began to protest these injustices during the Civil Rights Movement. These protests were met with strong resistance from many members of the White community. One infamous incident was the murder of three community organizers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Earl Chaney who were working in Philadelphia, MS to register Black voters. There was much violence across the rest of the South as well that inspired Congress to begin considering the Voting Rights of 1965. According to Jere Nash and Andrew

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77 Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 100.  
Taggart, two incidents forced Congress to pass the legislation. First, there was the highly publicized violence that occurred during the Selma to Montgomery marches that were led by Martin Luther King, Jr. During the first march, state and local police began to attack 600 protestors. Images of this incident flooded the front pages of newspapers the next day and horrified Americans across the country.79 A lesser-known incident that also pushed Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act was the establishment of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP ran candidates against incumbent members of Congress in the 1964 elections and challenged the right of the Mississippi congressional delegation to be seated. Volunteer lawyers from across the country also collected depositions from more than 400 witnesses to document the many ways in which officials prevented African-Americans from voting. These depositions were released while Congress was debating the Voting Rights Act and “offered overwhelming evidence that nothing short of drastic federal intervention would ensure that African-Americans had the right to vote.”80

The passage of the Voting Rights Act forced White legislators to reckon with the fact that Black voters would again be voting in Mississippi. They still had more tricks up their sleeves from preventing the large Black minority from receiving any meaningful representation. The legislature drew the new legislative districts for upcoming elections in a way that would disenfranchise Black voters and dull their voting power. Furthermore, they created multimember districts so that areas could be combined to create a White majority that would then vote

80 Nash and Taggart, Mississippi Politics, 102
multiple White legislators to office. For instance, Hinds County, which encompasses the capital city of Jackson and surrounding areas, was a multimember district that had a slight White majority. Therefore, although there was a sizeable Black population, only Whites were elected from Hinds County.\textsuperscript{81} Civil rights organizations around the country took this situation all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in the landmark decision Baker v. Carr that reapportionment cases were subject to judicial scrutiny. In the cases that followed, the Supreme Court would also rule that multi-member districts were unconstitutional with the famous “one man, one vote” ruling.\textsuperscript{82} These court rulings forced the Mississippi State Legislature to respond to Black demands for representation.

The lifting of the barriers to Black voter registration and the creation of fairer electoral districts facilitated the election of Robert G. Clark Jr., the first Black legislator since Reconstruction. Though Clark’s election seemed almost inevitable given the large demand for Black representation in the state, his challenger initially hotly contested the results of the election. Nevertheless, on January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1968, Clark took the oath of office and became Mississippi’s first Black legislator in almost a century. Clark would later chair the first Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus and the House Education committee and become an integral actor in education reform and the success of MERA.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} "Fred Banks.” Telephone interview by author. January 12, 2011.
\textsuperscript{82} Nash and Taggert, \textit{Mississippi Politics}, 103
\textsuperscript{83} Goodman, Julie. "After 35 Years of Fighting for Change House Leader Robert Clark Retiring." Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), February 28, 2003, sec. A.
The Formation of the Caucus

In the next decade three other Black legislators would join Robert Clark in the House. 84 Despite a large amount of media attention given to these new Black legislators, their political power as four representatives out of over one hundred was quite limited. Clark, who started his career as a schoolteacher, devoted his time and efforts to promoting education reform legislation. In his first term as a legislator Clark introduced three bills; two were provisions for a compulsory school attendance law, and the third was a proposal to equalize salaries between White and Black teachers. All three pieces of legislation died in committee. 85

The 1979 State Election

The 1979 state election that took place in Mississippi was a turning point in state politics. Although it is primarily remembered for the election of the William Winter, the change in composition of the state legislature is arguably a much stronger signal of the political changes occurring in Mississippi. For the first time in a very long time, the people serving in the state legislature actually more closely mirrored the people in Mississippi. Reapportionment allowed for the election of thirteen new Black legislators and younger legislators from urban areas well. 86 These new legislators stood in stark contrast to the old Delta planters that had previously held the power monopoly in the legislature. According to Andy Mullins, many of these new legislators came in with the desire

84 Kubissa, David. "17 Black Lawmakers Honored." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), January 9, 1980, sec. A.
86 Nash and Taggart, Mississippi Politics, 130
to challenge the power structures that the Delta Bourbons have built since Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{87}

\textit{The MLBC Sets Up Shop}

The elections of 1979 brought thirteen new Black legislators to the state legislature bringing the total number to seventeen. Although they made up less than ten percent of the new legislature, the seventeen Black legislators had a very strong and noticeable presence in the political scene before the start of the 1980 legislative session. Many African-Americans saw their election as a sign of hope for better lives and futures in Mississippi, while Whites saw their election as an indication of crumbling of their own power. The election of a sizeable number of Black legislators provided for the ability to establish the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus. By New Year’s Day 1980, the Black legislators announced that they would be forming a caucus that would help them to communicate with one another so that they could better facilitate the advocacy for Black interests in the state legislature\textsuperscript{88}.

Before the start of the 1980 legislative session, the members of caucus discussed the issues that were important to them including education and unemployment in the state. They also had meetings with both House Speaker Buddie Newman and Lt. Governor Brad Dye to discuss committee placements and potential chairmanships for Black legislators.\textsuperscript{89} The caucus would also plan fundraising events, including an inaugural dinner dance to celebrate the

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\textsuperscript{87} "Andy Mullins." Interview by author. August 11, 2010.
\textsuperscript{88} Klein, Jo Ann. "Legislative Black Caucus to Set up Office." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), January 3, 1980, sec. A
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
reapportionment fight that resulted in more legislative representation for Black Mississippians. All of these activities signaled that the Black caucus was ready to make a political impact and become a permanent political institution in the Mississippi state legislature.

A Survey of the MLBC’s members and its Leadership

The following table summarizes the Black legislators of the MLBC serving in the House in 1980:

Table 1: Members of the MLBC Serving in the Mississippi House in 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Chamber</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Committee assignments/Leadership positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fred Banks</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Vice Chair of MLBC, Chair of the Ethics Committee, Judiciary Committee, Oil and Gas Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horace Buckley</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Education Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credell Calhoun</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Highways, Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Clark</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Chair of House Education Committee, Chair of MLBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone Ellis</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Games and Fish Committee, Judiciary Committee, Local and Private legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillman Frazier</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Chairman of State Library Committee, Judiciary Committee, Ways and Means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Green</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>County Affairs; Military Affairs; Pensions, Social Welfare, and Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isiah Fredericks</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Contractor</td>
<td>Elections; Insurance; Pension Social Welfare, and Public Health; Public Building, Grounds, and Lands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Henderson</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Mortician</td>
<td>Appropriations; Education Committee; Pensions, Social Welfare, and Public Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kubissa, David. "17 Black Lawmakers Honored." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), January 9, 1980, sec. A.

As one can observe, the first class of legislators in the MLBC came from a variety of professional backgrounds. Additionally, three of the caucus’ members were given committee chairmanships, with Robert Clark retaining his position as chair of the House Education Committee.

The Caucus in Action

In order to assess the extent of the influence the MLBC had on the passage of MERA, we have to first examine how aware the Mississippi public was of the MLBC’s activities, how much political clout they had with their White colleagues in the state legislature, how much collaboration there was within the organization, and how they influenced legislative activity when the legislature was in session. The largest challenge to the MLBC during this time was its size. Seventeen legislators just simply did not have the strength to pass legislation on their own. As one member of the MLBC, Senator Henry Kirksey, stated in the Clarion-Ledger “We have a role to play but it’s not a role of conceivably getting legislation passed. We’re not naïve enough to think that as a 17-member group,
we can greatly affect legislation.” Moreover, the MLBC had difficulty establishing legitimacy among their White peers. However, the Black Caucus was able to capture public attention, remain united on important issues, and exercise procedural influence on legislation when the House was in session. Collectively these things were the MLBC’s contribution to the passage of education reform.

Public Awareness

The existence of the MLBC during this time period was quite novel and thus their activities became interesting to the public, both to those in support of their activities and those in opposition to having Black legislators. Consequently, any development in the caucus was taken seriously by the press and communicated to the public. Ever since the establishment of the Black caucus, newspapers treated the MLBC as a legitimate and influential institution within the legislature. The *Clarion-Ledger* and other newspapers around the state ran several articles that followed the establishment of the caucus, its members, and their activities. The papers would notify the public of specific policy priorities such as improving education or decreasing unemployment. Additionally, the paper would report any advances the MLBC would make. The establishment of the MLBC alone prompted multiple articles in all of Jackson’s major newspapers including the *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*. The strong public interest in the MLBC was beneficial because it meant their priorities and activities would be followed by the press. This gave them disproportionate amount of public

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92 Treyens, Cliff. "Black Legislative Caucus Still Trying to Get in Gear." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), December 22, 1981, sec. A.

attention for a seventeen-member body of a state legislature with over 120 members.

*Opinions in the Legislature*

Many legislators were wary of the MLBC, as they were unclear how the MLBC would try to assert its political power and how aggressive they would be in asserting their agenda items. In an interview with the *Clarion-Ledger*, Speaker of the House Buddie Newman stated the following:

“I don’t see the necessity for a Black caucus. In fact, it might do the Black people more harm than good. I think each bill ought to be considered on its own merits—there’s not a color issue involved.”

However, when many MLBC members were interviewed they were quick to comment on the support they had received from leadership in the legislature including House Speaker Newman.  

In interviews, I asked Robert Clark about how his White peers in the legislature responded to the presence of the MLBC. Clark asserted that in his decades of serving in the house they were very few instances of blatant racism against him or any of his colleagues. Clark also emphasized the friendship that he had with Buddie Newman, a relationship that no doubt helped him to receive the chairmanship of the House Education Committee. However, there are doubts from some about how sincere Newman’s intentions were in appointing Clark in the first place. Andy Mullins stated in an interview that he thought that Newman gave Clark the post because he thought the education committee was a weak

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95 Klein, Jo Ann. "Legislative Black Caucus to Set up Office." *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), January 3, 1980, sec. A.
committee and that Clark would have little with success with it. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, Clark would become quite influential in the education reform efforts and was vital in getting MERA out of committee and onto the House floor for voting. Another question that I asked Fred Banks, who served as both Vice Chair and Chair of the MLBC, was how often White legislators would come to ask to the MLBC for assistance. According to Banks, the MLBC was occasionally solicited for support, but the more common tactic was for legislators to reach out to individual members of the caucus. There was very little formal coalition building done by White legislators and the Black caucus in the few years leading up to MERA’s passage.

In general, the MLBC had very little sway over the actions of their peers in the legislature. Certain members like Robert Clark or Fred Banks, who both served as committee chairs and were more established by the 1982 legislative session, had influence over some of their colleagues who were not in the MLBC. However, the MLBC as a body did not exercise a significant amount of influence on the behavior of other legislators. In fact, in some cases White legislators doubted the legitimacy and purpose of the MLBC. Because of the lack of influence the MLBC seems to have had on the attitudes and actions of its peers, any political power it had needed to be obtained from its individual actions in influencing the passage of legislation such as block voting or procedural actions.

Caucus Unity

Another important dimension to examine when assessing the political power of the MLBC during the 1980’s is their group unity. The purpose behind the creation of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus was to facilitate the communication and collaboration between the seventeen Black legislators in order to advocate more effectively within the legislature for African Americans. The MLBC was also put into place so that older, more experienced legislators could train and mentor younger legislators who varied in political experience.100 During the legislative sessions, the caucus met on a weekly basis to discuss legislation and constituent grievances. According to Henry Kirksey, a new state senator from Jackson, the meetings were useful because the caucus members were able to alert each other about what each individual member was working on and what legislation in each chamber of the legislature may be of importance.101

Unity within the caucus was most important when it came time to vote for important legislation. According to Robert Clark, who was chair of the MLBC and its most senior member, it was difficult to count on a guaranteed block vote from members of the caucus except when it came to issues of education. In the interview, Clark also discussed dissension within the caucus between more senior and newer members of the MLBC. He believes there were some feelings of mistrust harbored by newer legislators towards veteran legislators. In general, Clark had a more moderate attitude about the MLBC. In the early stages of establishing the MLBC, Clark wanted to make sure that White legislators did not

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100 Hoffman, Don. "Legislators Differ on Black Caucus." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), March 23, 1980, sec. A
101 Ibid.
feel threatened by the MLBC. Clark was known for his philosophy of working “within the system” instead of disturbing the system, something that he and Buddie Newman both comment on in the press.\textsuperscript{102} Fred Banks had a more positive outlook on caucus unity during this time period. Banks asserted that Blacks were always united in supporting issues that mattered to African-Americans, especially issues like education. The MLBC was also quite adept at identifying what issues mattered to African-Americans.\textsuperscript{103}

Because the MLBC was a small organization, caucus unity was particularly important if they wanted to exercise any type of influence in voting on legislation. The fifteen Black members of the Mississippi House definitely had the potential to be important swing votes that could be the deciding factor in legislation, but as both Banks and Clark claimed in their interviews, the MLBC was not sought after by other legislators as allies in their legislative efforts. However, other Black legislators asserted a few years later that the MLBC did have an important role in the legislature as influential voters. In a 1986 article in the \textit{Clarion-Ledger} entitled “Black Caucus is force to be reckoned with”, MLBC members take credit for passing or killing major legislation. Representative Barney Schoby was quoted as saying, “Do you think would we have passed the Education Reform Act if it hadn’t been for the Black Caucus?”\textsuperscript{104} Indeed the MLBC’s votes had the potential to be pivotal when it comes to bills that are either very close or require a two-thirds majority such as suspension or revenue bills. It was in these cases that

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\textsuperscript{102} Ibid
\textsuperscript{103} “Fred Banks.” Telephone interview by author. January 12, 2011.
\textsuperscript{104} Anklam, Frank. ““Black Caucus Is Force to Be Reckoned with.” \textit{Clarion-Ledger} (Jackson, MS), February 12, 1986.
\end{flushright}
10 percent of the legislature was large enough percentage to matter. As Frank Parker explains in his book *Black Votes Count*, this power allowed the Black caucus to be a significant driving force throughout the 1980’s in passing education reform, blocking a statewide increase in sales taxes, and improving the provision of health care under Medicare. Therefore, we see that although a united Black caucus was not powerful enough to determine the success of a particular piece of legislation, it certainly had the power to sway the outcome of important and close votes.

*Procedural Power*

While their small numbers may have prevented them from single-handedly passing legislation that was important to them, the Legislative Black Caucus did have the votes to force certain procedural maneuvers and they were not shy to exercise their individual powers as legislators to influence the legislative docket in their respective chambers. One of the most powerful tools they had was the ability to demand for roll-call votes. In both past interviews with newspapers and a recent interview I conducted, Fred Banks noted the power that the MLBC had to demand for a roll-call in the House of Representatives. According to Banks, the members of the MLBC would frequently call for roll call votes on legislation that they disapproved of in order to increase accountability. Roll-call votes would ensure that every member’s vote was put on record while voice votes would only indicate whether a bill or its amendments received a

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majority yes or no vote. In their article “Party, Constituency, and Roll-Call Voting in the U.S. Senate”, Charles Bullock and David Brady conclude that roll-call voting in the Senate made its members more responsive to the needs of their constituents by providing more accountability. Roll-call voting also pressured senators to vote more in line with their party ideals.\textsuperscript{107} Since party was not salient in Mississippi’s legislature because of the dominance of Mississippi Democrats, constituency probably had an even larger influence in how legislators voted. This procedural maneuver became such a common tool for the MLBC to assert influence over legislation that they earned themselves the name “the roll call bunch.”\textsuperscript{108}

In addition to the group procedural power exercised by the MLBC, individual members were also aggressive in influencing the agenda and passage of legislation in the state legislature by being active procedural participants. To clarify, many Black legislators would individually try to influence the direction of the legislature through actions like suggesting amendments, motioning to change the order of the docket, or calling a piece of legislation to question. One example of this in the case of MERA was Black legislators trying to reduce the sales tax that was proposed in MERA because they thought it was adversely affect poor Blacks. In this case Black legislators proposed alternate funding methods through new amendments.\textsuperscript{109} Even though none of these amendments were adopted, the funding sources for MERA were given a larger amount of scrutiny and forced


\textsuperscript{108} "Fred Banks." Telephone interview by author. January 12, 2011.

\textsuperscript{109} Mullins 180
William Winter to address the concerns of members of MLBC before they agreed to proceed with MERA.\textsuperscript{110} Despite the fact that this episode actually slowed the passage of MERA, it illustrates an important power that the MLBC had despite its small membership and it should not be as seen as an action to stall education reform, but as a way the MLBC drew attention to potential harms to that their constituents could be facing.

Although the MLBC does not have nearly the political strength that it does in the present day, it was a relatively cohesive and influential body in the state legislature especially when its size and its age is taken into account. As a seventeen-member body, the MLBC did not have the power to single-handedly push through legislation, but it had certainly the power to affect the success of a piece of legislation.

\textbf{The MLBC and its Involvement in Education}

Education has always been an important issue to the African-American community. It was the integration of public schools that caused the most protest among the White community and elicited the most passionate rebellion among the Black community. Most African-Americans in Mississippi understood the connection that Governor Winter would continually make about better public schools and better economic prospects and they were in favor of education reform in the state. A House representative Hillman Frazier told the \textit{Clarion-Ledger}:

\begin{quote}
“We feel that education is directly tied to the economics of this state. In order to attract industry, we’re going to have to improve the education system. By encouraging children to attend school, we can make them
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid 181
producers instead of just consumers. We want to be in a position to get these jobs.  

Additionally, comparatively, a much larger percentage of the Black community attended Mississippi’s public schools, and therefore, on average, would gain more benefit than Mississippi’s White population. Indeed, districts that elected Black state legislators in Mississippi during this time tended to be “Blacker, poorer, and less educated than those of the state as a whole.”

Understanding that public education reform was probably the most important issue to their constituents, the MLBC announced before their first legislative session began in 1980 that they would make education reform their first priority. They would also prioritize other issues including unemployment and the low rates of voter registration among Blacks. According to Robert Clark, education reform was the issue that united Black caucus members the most in the MLBC’s first few years after being established. Education was the most important issue to Black voters. Fred Banks agreed with this assessment, but emphasized that public education reform was not something that just benefited African-Americans in Mississippi, but everyone in Mississippi.

Robert G. Clark Jr. and his contribution to MERA

While there are different assessments about the effectiveness and the involvement of the MLBC, there is no doubt that Robert Clark was a vitally

111 Treyens, Cliff. "Black Legislative Caucus Small in Number, Powerful in Backing." Clarion-Ledger (Cliff Treyens), December 28, 1980, sec. A.
112 Ibid
114 Ibid
important actor in the fight for MERA’s passage. In interviews with Dick Molpus, Andy Mullins, and Governor Winter I asked them who they thought were the essential players in the passage of MERA in the state legislature and all three of them listed Robert Clark as an indispensable person to the entire process. Even before MERA, Clark had devoted much of his time to working towards education reform and drafting education legislation. Clark described his beginnings in the legislature as the following:

“I knew that we needed a system of education that was affordable for all Mississippians in order for Mississippi to move forward, particularly African-Americans. So I came into the legislature with the desire to work on education… For a fifteen-year period I battled for education reform with no success. Then lo and behold, Governor Winter was elected in 1980 and it was a great thing we had a governor interested in education reform.”

Though all of his efforts to significantly change the state’s public schools were unsuccessful before the passage of MERA, his efforts prior to the 1982 special session gave Clark the experience he needed to become a key ally to the Winter administration.

Robert Clark entered the legislature in the late 1960’s determined to create improvements in Mississippi’s education system. One of Clark’s first bills was one to reinstate compulsory education in Mississippi, a policy that would be a central provision of MERA. He was met with much opposition. One of his peers even denounced his proposal as communism. However, Clark remained persistent and undeterred from reaching his goals. Clark also was also very cognizant of the fact that White legislators might feel threatened by his presence and therefore

made an effort to become friends with House leadership and other important legislators. As Bill Minor pointed out in an 1980 editorial entitled “Robert Clark: changing things from the inside”, over time Clark was able to work his way into the “Inner Circle of the House” after being given a seat in the Rules Committee and the chairmanship of the House Education Committee. The latter position was especially useful in the fight for passing MERA as Clark had significant power to overcome the committee structure of the House that had prevented so many previous bills from passing. Traditionally, Speaker Newman had been successful at preempting potential legislation by appointing committee chairs that would work to kill undesirable legislation in committee. However, having Robert Clark as chair of the HEC meant that there someone that would actually promote the development of legislation and staunchly advocate for its passage. Additionally, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, committee meetings were traditionally not monitored by the press, which created a very loose system of accountability. Robert Clark, as chair the committee, prevented any type of wrong-doing in the education committee and his leadership helped to transform it from a weak and ineffectual committee to one of substance and productivity.

In my interview with Robert Clark he said the following of his contribution to the passage to MERA: “Without Governor William Winter, I would not have gotten this education reform passed. Without me, William Winter would not have gotten education reform passed.”

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progression of education reform legislation and the evolution of MERA in the Mississippi State Legislature, this assessment is quite accurate. Without the support of Governor Winter, Clark was unable to achieve any measurable legislative success in reforming the public schools that he cared so much about. In the same vein, without Robert Clark, William Winter would have been without an ally in the House of Representatives that had the power to advance MERA both in committee and on the floor of the legislature.

The MLBC and the Winter Administration

When I asked William Winter and three of his staff members how they viewed the power of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus during Winter’s term of office they all seem a bit puzzled by the question. Winter stated that the MLBC in the early 1980’s did not have nearly the political strength that it does now.121 None of the staff members could recall a meeting that they or Governor Winter had with the Black caucus to solicit support or to strategize for the achievement of their shared goal of better public schools in Mississippi.

Though the lack of formal coalition building between Governor Winter and the MLBC would suggest that they were not formally allied, Fred Banks explained this by saying that Winter was always confident that he had the support of the MLBC. According to Banks, Winter did not have to convince the MLBC to join him in his fight for education reform. They were going to support education reform because better public schools were important to the Black community.122 Therefore, we should not take the lack of formal collaboration between the Winter

administration and the MLBC to signify that the MLBC was not a useful ally or significant political force in the passage of MERA.

**Conclusion: How did the MLBC affect MERA’s Passage?**

In an article entitled “Many hands helped build the education package miracle”, The Clarion-Ledger’s John Emmerich lists the parties that he feels should be given credit for the passage of MERA. Not a single Black legislator, including Robert Clark was mentioned by name. Instead Emmerich praised Governor Winter, the state’s news media, the new facilities in the State Capitol building, and Speaker Buddie Newman.\(^{123}\) It might be an overstatement to suggest that the presence of the MLBC made it possible for MERA to be passed in 1982, but it has certainly been an oversight in the historical record to not include the growth of Black political power as a contributing factor of MERA’s success. The MLBC was not at the peak of its strength when William Winter took office, but it provided a useful voting block and procedural power. In a legislature that was previously so hostile to any type of education reform, seventeen staunch allies change the political atmosphere quite dramatically. The fifteen legislators in the house were particularly useful in this way and could also provide procedural support when education legislation was on the floor.

Furthermore, the rise of MLBC after the 1979 elections represents a fundamental shift that was occurring in Mississippi politics. The election of a contingent of Black legislators represents the opening of Mississippi politics that ultimately made the state legislature more hospitable to progressive causes like

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reforming public schools. Although the Black population was not represented to
the extent they should have been in 1982, for the first time in a very long time
they could say that there was a group of people in the state government looking
out for their specific needs. This is a vast difference from anything they had
experienced in the period of time following Reconstruction and preceding the
Voting Rights Act of 1965. The formation of the MLBC ultimately helped their
concerns and demands for better public schools be heard by everyone sitting in
the State Capitol in Jackson.
Chapter 5: The Agenda Setting Press: The News Media and MERA

Introduction: The Press and the Double Image of Mississippi

Despite the bleak statistics that often define Mississippi in the eyes of outsiders, Mississippians, especially White Mississippians, have a romantic and wistful love affair with the Magnolia state. Mississippians pass down stories of past glory to their children and they sing *Forward Rebels* at every Ole Miss football game. It is difficult for many of them to reconcile with the harsh realities and challenges that faced Mississippi in 1982, as the nation’s poorest, least educated state, and arguably most racist state. Mississippi’s social backwardness and its racial violence were brought to the attention of the entire nation in the 1960’s Civil Rights struggle. America became acquainted with Mississippi by reading about burning churches, senseless murders, and violent struggles for freedom by the state’s African Americans.

These two different images of Mississippi, the internally circulated myth and the externally propagated tragedies were reinforced by local and national news sources respectively. The local newspapers of Mississippi, including *The Clarion-Ledger*, were committed to perpetuating the romantic myth of the Old South. In *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, John Caughey and James Silver describes the Mississippi press as a “vigilant guard” of the closed society. The newspapers would try to dull the seriousness of the racial tension and violence by often neglecting or glossing over crucial pieces of information that might display

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Mississippi in a negative light. However, national media often sensationalized what was happening in Mississippi to draw in viewers. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall claims the following about the national media and their coverage of the civil rights movement

“The mass media, in turn, made the protests ‘one of the great news stories of the modern era,’ but they did so very selectively. Journalists' interest waxed and waned along with activists' ability to generate charismatic personalities (who were usually men) and telegenic confrontations, preferably those in which White villains rained down terror on nonviolent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best”

The difference in the goals of local and national media in terms of how they covered what was occurring in the 1960’s demonstrates a fundamental difference in how each body viewed Mississippi and its problems. On one hand, we can see a local power structure that is devoted in maintaining the false image of the Southern fantasyland of Spanish moss and hospitality, even though everything around them is telling them that change is almost inevitable. On the other hand, we see an almost exploitative group that reduces the problems in Mississippi to something that they can use to draw more viewers.

Despite these disparate paradigms, in the 1980’s, we see a convergence of the interests of the local, state, and national press when it comes to the reporting of Mississippi’s education system and the need for reform. All parties become extremely active in exposing the backwardness of the Mississippi education system and the need for education reform. Local and state newspapers begin to engage in high-quality reporting that not only presented education as a critical

125 Ibid.
political issue, but an issue that citizens would hold their government officials accountable to.

Moreover, there was a shift in the rhetoric, led by the *Clarion-Ledger*, used when talking about Mississippi and its social problems. News sources were no longer interested in glossing over the gory details for the sake of saving the state embarrassment. Instead, they led the charge in assessing the education system’s weaknesses, understanding the political processes that stood in the way of MERA’s passage, and interrogating the motives of the opposition to MERA. National news sources watched the state very closely and acknowledged the novelty of what the Winter administration and its allies were trying to do. Although the majority of national press attention was given to MERA after its passage, the national press played a key role in establishing the need for education reform in the state by creating an atmosphere of shame around Mississippi’s public education system. This put external pressure on Mississippi’s citizens and state government to change. After MERA’s passage, the national press was also essential in telling the story of education reform in Mississippi and inspiring other state’s to take action. This turned Mississippi from being known as last place on almost every list to being a leader in the nationwide education reform movement that occurred in the 1980’s. With the convergence of the goals of the local, state, and national press in covering Mississippi’s public schools in the 1980’s, the press became strong force in the passage of MERA. The press acted as a public agenda setter by providing information on Mississippi’s public schools, increasing
the accountability placed on local government officials, and creating public
discussion forums for citizens to express their beliefs about education.

In this chapter I will discuss how the local, state, and national press
facilitated the passage of MERA. First, I will summarize what has already been
said about the involvement of the *Clarion-Ledger*, a state newspaper that won the
Pulitzer Prize for public service for its coverage of education reform efforts in
1982. However, though the *Clarion-Ledger* took the most active role in pushing
to get education reform passed in the state, local newspapers and national news
sources were also active in reporting what was going on in Mississippi. Therefore,
I will be connecting what is already known about the activities of the *Clarion-
Ledger* to what local and national media sources were doing at the time in order to
prove that these three bodies acted in unison to promote education reform efforts
in Mississippi.

**The *Clarion-Ledger* and Mississippi’s Pulitzer**

The *Clarion-Ledger* is a statewide-circulated newspaper with headquarters
in Jackson, Mississippi. The newspaper traces its history back to 1837 and is
Mississippi’s most read newspaper. Although the *Clarion-Ledger* took a very
progressive stance on education reform in the 1980’s, it previously held a very
terrible record with civil rights issues. One of the most infamous incidences of its
blatant racist tendencies in the 1960’s was its coverage of the famous March on
Washington in 1963 in which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I

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Have a Dream” speech. Instead of devoting its energy to covering the actual march, the newspaper instead wrote an article about the clean up required in the National Mall, which ran under the headline, “Washington is Clean Again with Negro Trash Removed.” The staff of the newspaper would also support segregation by attacking leaders of the Civil Rights movement calling them “communists”, “chimpanzees”, and other degrading names. Many members of the African-American community nicknamed the paper “The Klan Ledger.”

Despite its racist past, The Clarion-Ledger became one of the Winter’s administrations greatest proponents in the struggle for education reform. It was recognized for its efforts in covering the education system by receiving one of the largest honors in journalism, the Pulitzer Prize in public service. Charles Overby, the executive editor of the paper at the time called this award “Mississippi’s Pulitzer.” According to Overby the goal of covering education reform in the state was not to win the Pulitzer, but to simply to make education reform happen. Over the course of 1982, the paper published a stunning number of pieces about Mississippi’s education system and legislative politics, including fifty-one news stories, twenty-seven staff editorials, and an eight-part investigation on Mississippi’s public schools. In an interview, Andy Mullins stated that very little attention was given to the education system by the press prior to this time.

By doing these things, the Clarion-Ledger was able to increase accountability that

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130 Wickham, The Role of the Clarion-Ledger, 43
131 Ibid 44
legislators had to their constituents, outline the problems and potential solutions to Mississippi’s education woes to concerned citizens, and emphasize education reform as an issue of importance to Mississippi’s future well being.

*Change in Leadership causes Paradigm Shift*

The primary cause for the departure in the *Clarion-Ledger’s* racist, pro-segregation stance to one that was pro-education and progressive reforms was a change in the *Clarion-Ledger’s* leadership. The Hederman family owned the *Clarion-Ledger* until 1982. The Hedermans were staunch segregationists who supported the efforts of the Sovereignty Commission, a quasi-secret government agency given the authority to “protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi” from federal interference, or more explicitly to preserve segregation. Hodding Carter III, a newspaperman from Greenville, MS, said of the Hedermans: “The Hedermans were to segregation what Joseph Goebbels was to Hitler. They were cheerleaders and chief segregationists, racist and dishonest.”

In the early 70’s however, Rea Hederman took over the family business and began to take it into a different direction. Hederman encouraged his reporters to take up projects of “muckraking” journalism, or reporting that leads to the indictment of individuals or institutions for unjust or illegal practices. The reporters of the *Clarion-Ledger* began to take on projects that highlighted the racial problems present in Mississippi such as incidences of police brutality in Jackson or poor Black

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farmers in the Delta. The paper even began to win awards because of the high quality of reporting. 134

Charles Overby was chosen as Rea Hederman’s successor by the Gannett Co., which had bought the paper from the Hederman family in 1982. Though the staff was initially concerned about Overby’s heavy involvement with the Republican Party in Tennessee, they quickly became impressed with his immediate resolve to cover education reform at such a high level. It was quite risky for someone in his newly appointed position to take such a strong stance on a controversial issue. However, Overby, who had gotten his start in the newsrooms of Jackson, felt that it was part of his job to help to bring change to the state. Overby prescribed to the same belief that Winter held, convinced that “education was the root of every problem affecting Mississippi.” 135

Making Education an Important Issue

Given the state of Mississippi’s public schools, one would have assume that education was an extremely important issue to both the people of Mississippi and the state government. However, as described before, there was an incredible amount of apathy among the state legislature. According to Dick Molpus, when he would talk to state legislators, especially those from the Delta region, about the need for improving public schools they would simply state “No one in my district attends public schools.” 136 One of the most important functions that the Clarion-Ledger served was helping the Winter administration to establish the need for education reform in the state through their investigative reporting and editorials.

134 Ibid
135 Wickham, The Role of the Clarion-Ledger, 18
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The unprecedented attention given to education by the *Clarion-Ledger* was integral in convincing the Mississippi people that education reform was crucial for their children’s future well-beings.

One of the best examples of how the *Clarion-Ledger* brought attention to the state of Mississippi’s public schools was an eight-part feature written by two young reporters Nancy Weaver and Fred Anklam Jr. The pair traveled across the state to dozens of school districts, often arriving announced. The first line of the first article of this series simply states: “Mississippi public schools aren’t making the grade.” The article then goes on to describe some of the largest challenges facing the Mississippi school system: high drop-out rates, low spending, poorly enforced standards, low teacher salaries, etc. These problems were also framed with a more national vantage point. Weaver and Anklam would cite the performance of Mississippi’s Southern peers, national averages, and historical facts in order to emphasize the backwardness of Mississippi’s education system. This is a stark contrast from how the paper used to approach issues of education and civil rights, because before it was more advantageous to alienate Mississippi from the rest of the country in order to suppress the need for change. However, in effort to emphasize a need for change, Mississippians had to be made aware of the large discrepancies between their public schools and those in the rest of the country.

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Increasing Accountability for Legislators

In a democratic system increased information for citizens about the activities of their elected officials translates into an increased ability for citizens to hold their elected officials accountable. The press serves a crucial function in this accountability mechanism by being the deliverer of the information. The Clarion-Ledger was the primary source of information for Mississippians about the problems the state faced in its public school classrooms, and it was also the primary source for citizens to find out what their government was doing to solve these problems.

During this period, the Clarion-Ledger made a larger effort to provide information about the activities of the state legislators. One change that was particularly effective in creating additional accountability was the coverage of committee meetings in the State legislature. According to Andy Mullins, this was a very important change because legislators would often be publicly supportive of a particular issue like education, but would often be against the issue in committee. They were allowed to do this, because there were few formal records kept during committee meetings, and even fewer people who took the time to see what was going on in committees. The coverage of committee meetings by the Clarion-Ledger forced legislators to have consistent positions on issues, especially education reform. This also helped citizens to understand the many complex steps in getting education reform legislation passed in the state legislature and which legislators were central in the process.

139 Ibid
In addition to increasing coverage within the state legislature and its processes, the Clarion-Ledger also published pieces in the tradition of muckraking journalism that specifically indicted those who were preventing education reform from occurring. Most notably, after the passage of MERA, the paper published a list of legislators that voted against the legislation under the distinction of “Hall of Shame.”\textsuperscript{140} The paper also put tremendous pressure on Speaker of the House Buddie Newman, especially after a controversial procedural maneuver by the Speaker that killed a piece of legislation which had to votes to provide public kindergartens in Mississippi. When this occurred the leading story of the Clarion-Ledger the next day was an article entitled “Kindergarten bill dies without vote in House.”\textsuperscript{141} A few days later, a political cartoon also ran in the paper which depicted a tombstone labeled “Kindergarten Bill 1982” and a legislator coming to pay his respects with a smoking gun still in is hand.

By framing certain legislators as “supporters” and others as “opponents”, the Clarion-Ledger put enormous amounts of pressure on individual legislators who opposed education reform. Moreover, any legislators who were neutral or on the fence about education issues were then pushed to became supporters of education reform after seeing how the opponents were treated and how important the issue of education was becoming in the state. The paper was integral in providing citizens with the information needed to put political pressure on the people they had elected and creating an overall atmosphere of accountability to one’s actions in regards to education reform.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid
\textsuperscript{141} Putnam, Judy. "Kindergarten Bill Dies without Vote in House." The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS), February 12, 1982.
The Dreaded Editorials

Some of the most persuasive and influential journalistic pieces from the Clarion-Ledger were editorials written by the staff, especially those written by a man named Bill Minor. If the investigative reporting and frequency of education pieces being published wasn’t enough to indicate the paper’s support, the editorials cemented its position. These editorials were strongly worded, aggressive, and biting critiques of Mississippi’s education system and state politicians. They did two important things. First, they reinforced and summarized what the investigative reports and news articles were saying. Citizens did not have to closely follow every move of the legislature in order to have a clear idea of what was going on. They simply had to flip to the editorial section where a member of the Clarion-Ledger’s staff would assess the week’s events for them and draw a logical conclusion. Second, editorials were also important because they allowed journalists to voice their opinions candidly. The editorials allowed journalists to express things that they would not be able to do under the constraints of reporting on specific events or investigative reports. For instance, in a December 1982 editorial entitled “Simple racism fuels some of the kindergarten opposition”, Paul Pittman postulates that the debate over state-funded kindergartens is hinged on racist attitudes that the kindergartens would become “babysitting institutions” for young Black children.142 This is not something that a regular article could argue because no legislator would say outright that they were against kindergartens because they were racist. Bill Minor, one of the Clarion-

Ledger’s regular columnists would also use his weekly column to muse about the developments in education reform efforts.

The staff of the Clarion-Ledger wrote forty-one editorials during this period of time. These editorials proved to be the most damaging to legislators who were fighting against education reform. In an interview with Kathleen Wickham, a Clarion-Ledger project editor said the following: “Do not underestimate the editorials. They were strong. The legislature hated the editorials…It was a graveyard for some people. They lost their jobs.”\textsuperscript{143} In a later interview I conducted, Andy Mullins confirmed that legislators were held accountable for their actions during this time by stating that many of the legislators who did not vote for education reform were defeated in the next legislative elections.\textsuperscript{144}

\textit{An Alliance with the Winter Administration}

When asked whom their most supportive and influential ally was in their efforts to pass MERA, Winter and his staff members immediately cited the Clarion-Ledger. Although the press and government do not always have a harmonious or collaborative relationship, the Winter administration and the Clarion-Ledger were both highly dependent on each other during the most active months of pushing for education reform. When the governor and his staff took to the road to rally support for education reform among the general public, the Clarion-Ledger covered almost every town hall meeting. The paper viewed every one of these instances to be a significant news story in its own right because it

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{143} Wickham, \textit{The Role of the Clarion-Ledger}, 23
\textsuperscript{144} "Andy Mullins." Interview by author. August 11, 2010.}
every town hall showed the widespread support for education reform in a different part of Mississippi.  

The close following of the Winter administration’s activities in education reform was facilitated by an extremely close working relationship between the staff of the paper and the staff in the Governor’s office. The staffs of the paper and the Governor’s office were in constant collaboration. The paper would call David Crew, Winter’s press secretary and John Heneghan, Winter’s Chief of Staff, for information because they did not want to wait for new stories to be written to take an editorial stand. The relationship between these two parties was one of mutual benefit in the fact that the effectiveness of their efforts to achieve education reform was enhanced by the collaboration with the other. Although many have noted the benefit that the Clarion-Ledger’s work gave to the Winter administration, it should be noted that the Clarion-Ledger also received a great amount of benefit from its work with the Winter administration. Not only was it able to earn a prestigious prize and be a part of a historic moment in Mississippi, but also it was able to make up for the previous harms that it caused to the progress of Mississippi.

Local Newspapers Become Discussion Forums

Although the Clarion-Ledger indisputably had the largest involvement of any single media source in the passage of MERA, local newspapers were also covering education stories at a higher volume than in the past. This was especially true during the public support campaign when William Winter and his staff

\[145\] Ibid
\[146\] Ibid
members would travel all over Mississippi to talk about education reform. For the most part, the *Clarion-Ledger* only covered large-scale events attended by the events. However, local papers such as the *Tylertown Times* and the *Pontotoc Progress* published their own pieces in response to speeches that Winter and his staff made these areas. In addition to providing more localized coverage of education reform efforts, these smaller news sources were important because they offered an open venue for local discussion about education issues and therefore were important sources of information for the Winter administration and others working to pass education reform.

*The Creation of Discussion Forums*

By and large, local newspapers were strongly in favor of the education reforms proposed by Governor Winter and his staff. However, they were not supportive in the same level as the *Clarion-Ledger*. In 1982, the *Clarion-Ledger* published sixty-three letters to the editor related to education reform, of which only twenty-three were in opposition to education reform. Moreover, almost every single editorial piece published by the paper’s staff members was strongly in favor of education reform.

It should be noted that there although there was a strong need for education reform in the state, there were also provisions for the largest tax increase in the history of the state of Mississippi. The tax increase would raise $110 million dollars for the state from a corporate and individual income tax increase, and a half percent sales tax on alcohol, tobacco, and soft drinks. The

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147 Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 192
148 Wickham, *The Role of the Clarion-Ledger*, 31
proposed tax increase that was most contested in newspapers across the state, a potential oil and gas severance tax was not included in the bill. This tax was severely opposed in certain parts of the state because of the fear that it would harm the oil and gas industry that fueled the economies of certain regions of Mississippi. An article, published by Biloxi’s *Sun Herald* entitled “Spokesmen for oil, gas industry claim tax publicity is one-sided”, reported that the tax had potential to scare away future investment from these industries in Mississippi, a sentiment that was reiterated in the paper by concerned constituents on the coast where the companies operate. *The Leader Call* of Laurel, Mississippi in the article “Funding Means Opposed” discussed negative local reactions to the oil/gas severance tax in a town hall, including opinions from local industry representatives. In an editorial published in the *Daily Corinthian* entitled “Winter’s Tax Increase ‘Sheer Folly’”, Robert Moon stated that Governor Winter had “a total lack of regard and understanding of an industry so vital to Mississippi’s economy.” Though these negative portrayals of Winter’s plan for education reform seem like they would actually hinder education reform, they were actually essential pieces of information for the Winter administration to use to their advantage. The large amount of localized opposition expressed through these articles was not something that they could have fully acknowledged if they

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149 Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 182
150 The articles discussed in this section were all found in the education reform files of William Winter’s staff that are housed in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Therefore, it can be assumed the Winter’s staff collected and read these articles while they were developing their strategy for education reform efforts across the state.
152 Williams, Steven. “Funding Means Opposed.” *Leader Call* (Laurel, MS), September 24, 1982
only relied on the *Clarion-Ledger* for information. It is no coincidence that the funding of MERA relied not on the oil/gas severance tax, but a statewide sales and income tax increase.

Therefore, although public support was generally quite strong, there was a significant portion of Mississippi that was rightfully wary of what education reform would look like for them. The *Clarion-Ledger* was selective in the letters to the editors they could publish both because they had a quite a large readership and limited space as a statewide newspaper and because they had a very clear agenda. In fact in their Pulitzer Prize submission file, the *Clarion-Ledger* only included one letter to the editor that voiced a negative opinion of education reform efforts in the state. Consequently, local newspapers became a much more convenient place for people to air their grievances or voice their support. The Winter administration kept track of what was being published in local newspapers and used them as a way to gauge public opinion and form their messaging during their public support campaign.  

**The View of MERA from Outside Mississippi**

Mississippi was not the only state concerned about its public education system in the 1980’s. The United States as a whole began to realize that its education system needed an update thanks to the publication of the groundbreaking report *A Nation at Risk*. The report warned against slipping standards, falling behind in international rankings, and poor teacher quality, overlapping with many of the concerns that were voiced about Mississippi’s

education system.\textsuperscript{155} With the both the concerns raised by \textit{A Nation at Risk} and the example of Mississippi’s success to work from, many Southern states including Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Texas went through their own processes of education. The national press helped to create this phenomenon. Before the passage of MERA, the press focused on Mississippi’s problems and its backwardness. This helped to inspire change within Mississippi. After the passage of MERA, the press focused on the incredible achievements of Mississippi to pass such comprehensive education reform. This then helped to inspire other states to tackle their own education reform efforts, making Mississippi a national leader in education for the first time in its history.

\textit{Mississippi’s National Image}

When many states assessed their own education performance they would exclaim “Thank God for Mississippi!” This was because Mississippi was not only last in almost every measurable education standard, but it was also significantly behind any state ahead of them in national rankings. In August 1982, the very popular primetime news program \textit{20/20} decided to run a broadcast with the lead story being the failed kindergarten bill that Speaker of the House Buddie Newman had killed with a controversial procedural maneuver in the last day of the regular session.\textsuperscript{156} The piece was quite controversial and very unflattering to Buddie Newman and the rest of the legislature. It also portrayed Mississippi as a whole in a generally negative light, playing off the classic images of Southern

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\textsuperscript{156} Mullins, \textit{Building Consensus}, 102
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backwardness and racism. Mississippians and the local press were both outraged and embarrassed by how the news piece portrayed the state. According to William Winter, Mississippians have always had a strong sense of state pride, but this pride to some extent has been built off of an inferiority complex.\(^{157}\) Therefore, the 20/20 piece was highly effective in getting Mississippians and legislators thinking and talking about the education situation in the state.

In addition to highlighting the deplorable state of Mississippi public schools, the 20/20 piece also exposed the strength of “old guard” in the state legislature, namely Speaker Buddie Newman. Newman thought the piece portrayed unfairly, and perhaps in an effort to repair his image became much more amenable to education reform legislation in the special session MERA was passed in.\(^{158}\) In an interview conducted by Andy Mullins, Mississippi’s First Lady Elise Winter said that she felt the program gave the “first real crack in Newman’s armor.”\(^{159}\) The Jackson Daily News ran an editorial that stated the piece was too harsh on Newman and not hard enough Mississippians who were not “sending the right signals to the legislators.”\(^{160}\) Writing retrospectively in a December 1982 editorial in the Mississippi Press, Bill Minor viewed the 20/20 piece as the “catalyst” that drove the House to develop a piece of legislation that “would redeem the house and its leader.”\(^{161}\) Although there is not a consensus in how large of an effect the broadcast of the piece had on the actual passage, there is no

\(^{158}\) Ibid
\(^{159}\) Ibid 103
doubt that it put larger amounts of pressure on certain legislators and helped to create a discussion in Mississippi about public education in the state.

*Mississippi as a Leader in Education Reform: Inspiring a Nation*

After MERA was passed by the state legislature in the special session of December 1982, it was not only a historic victory celebrated by Mississippian, but the rest of the nation as well. Newspapers in other states began to take notice of the tremendous success of MERA and then assess their own state’s needs for education reform. For example, the *Herald-Leader*, the newspaper of Lexington, Kentucky, published a special report on MERA and what implications it had for the education system in Kentucky. Many Southern states that also suffered from low education rankings felt an immediate need to improve their own public schools because of Mississippi’s example. As State Senator David Karem put it: “It used to be people always said ‘Thank God for Mississippi!’ Now they’re not going to be able to say that anymore.” Indeed, many states that had always counted on Mississippi to cushion their own education rankings began to send inquiries to Winter and his staff about how they achieved the passage of MERA. Governor Dick Riley of South Carolina sent an envoy of his staff to Jackson to meet with the Winter administration. As one of Riley’s staff members Hayes Mizell aptly observed, “If one Southern governor does something, the governor in the next state says, ‘Hey we can’t sit by idly and do nothing.’ We’re always in a competitive situation.”

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162 Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 186
163 Ibid
legislatures of Arkansas, South Carolina, Texas, Florida and Tennessee to pass their own education reform legislation by 1985.

**Conclusion**

Although the *Clarion-Ledger* undoubtedly played the largest and most active role in setting the agenda for education reform in the Mississippi legislature, the local and national press also had very important functions in effort. The press at the local, state, and national levels had differing functions in pressuring the Mississippian and their state government in recognizing the need for education reform. The local press served as a localized discussion forum for citizens to air their concerns about public schools and the reasons they either supported or opposed the current proposals for education reform legislation. Because these were more candid discussions than what would be seen in the *Clarion-Ledger*, these papers became important in their own right by establishing a way for citizens to express their opinions, both positive and negative. This made these newspapers valuable gauges of public opinion for the Winter administration and other parties working for education reform.

The *Clarion-Ledger* was perhaps the Winter’s administration greatest weapon against its opponents. The *Clarion-Ledger* was integral and highly effective in creating a feeling of urgency for change. It helped to give every citizen a way to hold their citizens accountable and made education reform opponents aware that their actions were being watched and documented. The high involvement of the *Clarion-Ledger* in pushing for the passage of MERA is especially noteworthy considering its infamous racist past.
Finally, the national press served a dual role in both asserting Mississippi’s relative backwardness before the passage of MERA and its role as an education reform leader after the passage of MERA. This not only created pressure for Mississippi to reform, but its Southern peers as well. The three levels of the press had an integral part in the passage of MERA, providing crucial information to citizens and government officials as well as putting pressure on legislators to pass education reform. The convergence in the goals of all three levels of the media was particularly remarkable considering their differences during the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, their unity in message created an even stronger force to push for education reform.
Chapter 6: Future Research and Concluding Thoughts

“The governor who cares about the future of his state, who is dedicated to serving his people, who worries about their opportunities in life, and who sees his job as the leader of the state to point out the paths to the best human fulfillment, does indeed come back to education as the means to making lives more worthwhile… The governor who is a champion of education has always, invariably, state by state and time after time, been judged to be a great governor.”

-Terry Sanford, Governor of North Carolina (1961-65)

“[The South’s] underdeveloped human capital remains our greatest barrier to economic growth and prosperity. The plain fact is that as long as we have so many undereducated people, our state and region are going to be poorer than the rest of the country. Poorly educated people translate into poor people. Education is the only thing that will break the cycle of poverty. It is the only thing that will unlock the door to economic prosperity.”

Governor William Winter

Looking Across the South

As mentioned previously, Mississippi was not the only state to undergo large-scale state-led education reform during the 1980’s. The passage of MERA in December of 1982 coincided with the publication of a nationwide assessment report on the United State’s public education system, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. The 1983 report claimed that American students were struggling academically, schools lacked even standards, and teachers were not equipped with classroom skills. *A Nation at Risk* marks a turning point in the attitudes concerning the public education system in America.


As a result of its findings and the highly publicized success of Mississippi in implementing recommended reforms, other Southern states began to feel the pressure to critically assess their public education systems. Mississippi, though the lowest performing state in U.S., was certainly not unique in some of the problems it faced in the classroom and education reform was just as unpopular in many other state governments in the United States. In the 1980’s, we also see the election of many “progressive” Southern governors who according to Dick Molpus seemed like they would “risk their political standing” like William Winter did for education reform in Mississippi. These governors included Bill Clinton in Arkansas, a future president, Richard Riley of South Carolina, and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, both future U.S. secretaries of education. The Southern governors of the 1980’s are given much of the credit for the success of education reform and other progressive reforms that took place in the South, but again, one must ask: what else was occurring in these places that made these governors successful?

This chapter serves both as a conclusion to my findings about MERA’s success and as an introduction to how we can apply these findings to similar cases during this time period. It is not my goal to make any conclusions about how applicable the model of MERA that I have created is in explaining related phenomena across the South. That would require a much more comprehensive examination of the particular political forces and debates that fuelled the education reform movement in every state. However, I do believe that the broad similarities in the changes of the political and social landscape across the South

undoubtedly contributed to the strong improvements in public schools across the region during the 1980’s.

The 1980’s were an eventful period for the American South. The beginning of the decade brought a recession that had a large economic effect on the entire region. According to Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, the South, which was already behind the rest of the country, began to make the connection between better public education and more economic opportunities for the region.\textsuperscript{167} This idea was propagated by governors across the South including William Winter, Richard Riley in South Carolina, Jim Hunt in North Carolina, Bill Clinton in Arkansas, and Ross Perot in Texas.\textsuperscript{168} After the leadership of Mississippi, many Southern states began to pass their own education reform packages based on the same principles as MERA and the recommendations of A Nation at Risk. Southern governors were the most active and vigilant proponents for education reform in their states and thus, they are given the credit for the eventual success of education reforms across the region. However, as was discussed in previous chapters, the case of MERA shows that there were other significant social and political developments that facilitated large-scale social change in Mississippi. These changes were also present in the rest of the South, and potentially had an impact on other states’ abilities to pass education reform packages.

\textsuperscript{167} Thomas, Jennie. ""How Three Governors Involved the Public in Passing Their Education Reform Programs"" Diss., Peabody College for Teachers, Vanderbilt University, 1992.

Legislative Black Caucuses in the South

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Baker v. Carr empowered Black voters across the entire Southern United States. These Black voters then had the ability to vote in Black elected officials to represent their needs in their state government. In the 1980’s we see these newly elected Black state legislators forming caucuses in their state legislatures in order to advocate for their constituents in more effective manner. By this time, Black legislative caucuses were established in states like North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. As to be expected, the political power and the policy priorities of every Black caucus varies from state to state, and therefore it is difficult to make a strong generalization about their influence in the South without a thorough investigation and comparison of all the Southern LBC’s. Nevertheless, the example of the Tennessee Legislative Black Caucus gives shows how the presence of LBC’s across the South could have helped to bring about public education reform in this region.

The Tennessee Legislative Black Caucus (TLBC) was founded in 1975 with eleven members in order to better advocate for the Black Tennesseans.169 The structure of the TLBC was similar to that of the MLBC. Additionally, the TLBC published their policy priorities prior to every legislative session. These priorities included better healthcare, improving higher education, strengthening the economy, increasing employment opportunities, and of course improving

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The TLBC had an astonishing amount of legislative success compared to the MLBC. In 1987, bills proposed by Black legislators had a passage rate of 57.2 percent in the Tennessee state legislature, compared to a 12 percent passage rate by members of the MLBC in the same year. Examples of bills that were passed by the TLBC during the 1980’s included “loans for low-income homeowners, the erection of low-income housing throughout the state, a food stamp mailing system, a civilian police review board, quality health care for the elderly and poor, and improved conditions in state prisons.”

The effect that the TLBC had on Governor Lamar Alexander’s education reform package has not been formally noted in any previous research. However, given what we know about the TLBC, it stands to reason that they had the potential for a substantial influence on education reform in Tennessee, especially given the influence the smaller and weaker MLBC had on MERA. It seems strange that such strong cohort of Black legislators would be relatively uninvolved in the improvement of public schools in the state.

Though most Southern states did not have legislative Black caucuses with the same level of efficacy as Tennessee’s, the establishment of legislative Black caucuses across the South demonstrates a general increase in Black political power and the attention paid to Black issues in the region. For instance in North Carolina, the NCLBC had thirty-one members serve in the general assembly from 1970 to 1988. The body also had a 62 percent passage rate of legislation they

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170 Ibid 11
171 Ibid 15
173 Wright, "The Tennessee Black Caucus of State Legislators." 16
introduced in the 1987-88 legislative sessions and had improving public and higher education as one of its primary policy priorities. Therefore, it would be only logical to assume that the establishment of these bodies contributed in some way to the broader appeal and success of public education reform in the South in the 1980’s.

**Changes in Mass Media in the South**

The eyes of the entire nation were on Little Rock, Arkansas, in the summer of 1957 when Governor Orval Faubus called the Arkansas National guard to prevent nine African-American students from enrolling at Central High, a school previously only open to Whites. In the reporting of the events to follow, the *Arkansas Gazette* under the leadership of one its journalists Harry Ashmore took a strong editorial stance and supported the efforts of the federal government to integrate the schools in Arkansas. Consequently, Whites from local Citizen Councils and elsewhere began to call in death threats to Ashmore and organized a boycott of the paper. The *Arkansas Gazette* lost ten percent of its circulation and consequently almost went out of business. It won two Pulitzer Prizes, but the national recognition was not enough for it to reestablish itself in its community.

The events of the Civil Rights movement were heavily covered in the national media, but Southern news sources took to glossing over the gory details of the racial tumult that was occurring in the region. At the very best, newspapers

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were neutral towards what was going on around them. In his book *The Southern Press*, Doug Cummings describes the situation as the following:

“*Time* magazine in 1956 called desegregation the South’s biggest running story since the end of slavery and said that most Southern newspapers were doing a ‘patch, pussyfooting job’ covering it. This was true, Southern papers typically downplayed the civil rights story when it was close to home, and played up wire copy on racial turmoil outside the South. In opinion columns, segregation editors in Jackson, Mississippi and Charleston, South Carolina blew hot steam over what they called engineering of the Supreme Court and the ‘mongrelization’ they foresaw with race-mixing.”

The example of the *Arkansas Gazette*’s struggles after its strong stance against forced segregation in Arkansas public schools gives the impression that this type of reporting was necessary for Southern newspapers to maintain their readership.

However, as we saw from the example of the *Clarion-Ledger* and other local Mississippi newspapers that pushed for MERA’s passage, even the most racist Southern newspapers could change their racist attitudes with the right leadership and cause. As Cummings describes, the quality of the reporting in newspapers increased across the region as Southern newspapers started to retain the talent of the region by offering competitive salaries. This increased the quality of Southern newspapers such as the *Charlotte Observer*, *The Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, and the *Miami Herald*.

Better reporters yielded better reporting, which in terms of education reform induces more social pressures to improve suffering public schools in the South. We can see this from the examples given in the previous chapter. The press in other states reporting on the success of MERA helped to increase the pressure for education reform in their own states. In

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177 Ibid 217
order to assess how these news sources were influential in the processes of passing comprehensive education reform packages in the South, there would be have to be a more detailed case studies of how actively the press reported on each specific case.

*Ideas for Future Research*

Like in Mississippi, the success of education reform is traditionally explained by the leadership of a strong, progressive, and persistent governor. In the case of MERA, I have found that there two other crucial sociopolitical developments that were integral in creating an atmosphere that would finally make the Mississippi State Legislature receptive to changing the status quo by improving public schools. Therefore, one of the objectives of this chapter was to see if these two things were also potentially important in the success of the other Southern states that passed education reform legislation during this period. It appears that the social and political developments that facilitated the passage of MERA were also present in the rest of the South. In many ways these states followed the model of Mississippi when they began to reform their own public education systems, and hence, it is reasonable to hypothesize that they were successful for the same reasons.

This section serves as a short glimpse into what type of further research could be done on this era. Looking back, the success of these states in passing education reform is a remarkable triumph for a region that resisted the integration of schools so vehemently just a few decades earlier. Something was sparked in these states for them to start caring and working so hard to improve the schools
for their future generations. However, the momentum of this movement has slowed, and the South still lags behind of the country in terms of educational achievement and economic wealth, with Mississippi again cushioning the bottom of every ranking. I believe that a critical assessment of the success seen in improving Southern public schools in the 1980’s will give insight in how to reignite the passion for education reform in Southern states today.

**Conclusion**

When I met William Winter in his office in Jackson, he showed me a painting hanging on the wall that has followed him throughout the years. The painting is of a one-room schoolhouse where he attended primary school. It serves as a reminder to him of both how far he has come from his rural roots in Grenada, MS, and how far the state to go in terms of public schooling and economic development. Before I arrived in Jackson, MS in the summer of 2010 to complete this research, I knew that I wanted to tell a different story of how education reform took root in the state. After meeting with Governor Winter and hearing his story in person, it is impossible to ignore his love for Mississippi and the love the state has for him in return. This man has undoubtedly left an incredible legacy and helped to forever change the way in which the state government relates to Mississippitians. However, his election to governor is not the only reason why comprehensive education reform was able to occur in Mississippi in 1982. My approach to this thesis was never to undermine this remarkable man’s importance in bringing progress to the state, but merely to highlight the changes in
Mississippi that made it possible for the progressive ideas of Winter and others to take hold in a society that was previously so averse to change.

Summary of Findings

The first objective of thesis was to find a way to quantify the effect that the Winter administration’s public support campaign had on how legislators related to their constituents. This had to be done in order to show the need for a more comprehensive investigation of MERA’s passage. The public support campaign is viewed by most people as the most important and novel aspect of the fight for education reform in Mississippi. It organized constituents and drew attention to the significant need for improving public schools. Traditionally, it was believed that the public support campaign was the reason why legislators suddenly became receptive to MERA when it was presented during the special session. However, through my archival research, I realized that in addition to the election of William Winter, there were two essential sociopolitical developments which were also significant influences on legislators and legislative politics: increased Black representation which yielded the MLBC and an agenda-setting press that supported the cause for education reform. By running regressions that correlated how legislators voted based on constituent demographics, I found that there was very little change over the course of 1982 in how legislators voted on education legislation in relation to the demography of their constituents. This does not mean that the public support campaign was not effective or that it was
unimportant, but it does open the possibility for other factors of success in MERA’s passage.

One of the most dramatic changes in the state legislature during this time was the presence of significant number of African-Americans serving in the state legislature. The election of these legislators brought much needed representation for Mississippi large African-American population. The formation of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus organized these legislators into a united body that had the potential to successfully advocate for the needs of African-American across the states. However, as a relatively new body, the MLBC faced a number of challenges. It was never sought out by the Winter administration as an ally in the education reform process, even though the MLBC had announced that its two primary policy priorities were improving public education and improving the economic climate. The White legislators also did not seem to reach out to the MLBC as an institution, but would instead talk to individual Black legislators to solicit support.

Nevertheless, the MLBC had significant political influence in the form of procedural power in the state legislature and positions of power in House committees. Procedural power was used by the MLBC to influence legislation and to increase accountability in the House. The ability to call for a roll-call vote was a particularly useful tool for the MLBC to enhance accountability in the House. In addition to their procedural power as a group, individual members of the MLBC, particularly Robert Clark, had a substantial influence on education legislation. Finally, the power that the MLBC had in the state legislature when
they voted in unity should not be underestimated. In times where voting was very close or where had a two-thirds majority had to be reached, fifteen votes in the House could be a deciding factor in whether legislation passes or not.

The second sociopolitical development in Mississippi that contributed to the passage of MERA, was the evolution of an agenda-setting press that was willing to explore Mississippi’s educational shortcomings and increase accountability for Mississippi’s elected officials. The most well known example of this was the Clarion-Ledger, whose influence has been noted and studied by others. The Clarion-Ledger was an integral ally for the Winter administration. Without the incredible amount of attention and support that the paper gave the education reform efforts, Winter’s work would not have taken hold. Furthermore, the paper created a large amount of pressure on legislators, particularly house leadership who were initially very resistant to the idea of large-scale education reform.

In addition to the Clarion-Ledger we also see a greater involvement of local newspapers in reporting about education reform. These papers were also able to provide a more localized discussion about the pros and cons of MERA. This was especially true in areas that could have experienced adverse economic effects from the proposed tax increases that would fund education improvements. The Winter administration and other allies were then able to use these critiques constructively to restructure the legislation so that it would become more appealing to all Mississippians.
Finally, there was the role of the national press, which had a dual function of portraying Mississippi as a leader and a trailer in education. The national news media forced Mississippians to recognize the shortcomings of their state’s education system and the reluctance of their leaders to change this. When MERA did pass, the national press acknowledged the magnitude of this achievement for Mississippi and through its praise helped to pressure other states to pass their own reforms.

Concluding thoughts

The goal of this thesis was to have a deeper understanding of how and why education reform was able to finally pass in Mississippi in 1982. Although the story of a selfless and charismatic leader overcoming all odds is a compelling historical trope, it is often a misleading and inaccurate way to view important historical events. William Winter is certainly an important figure in Mississippi’s history and a critical component of what made education reform successful in 1982. He may even be the most important reason why MERA passed. However, I believe that without the social and political developments that Mississippi experienced in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, there would be no way that even a man as great as William Winter would have been successful in reforming the education system of a place like Mississippi. The story of MERA is more applicable to present day problems in education and race politics if we carefully examine all the potential factors that made the Mississippi “Christmas Miracle” possible. Given the fact that Mississippi and many other parts of the South are still falling behind the rest of the nation in almost any economic and social
measure, there cannot just be the hope that another William Winter, Bill Clinton, Dick Riley, or Lamar Alexander will be able to lead the South to glory again. Instead, there must be recognition of the type of social climate that needs to be developed in order for the necessary great changes to occur.
Appendix A: List of Important Actors

**William Winter**- Governor of Mississippi (1980-1984)

**Ray Mabus**- Winter’s Legislative Liaison, Governor of Mississippi (1984-1992), Current Secretary of the Navy

**John Heneghan**- Winter’s Chief of Staff

**Dick Molpus**- Winter’s director of Federal-State Programs, Secretary of State of Mississippi (1984-1986)

**Robert Clark**- Chairman of the House Education Committee and the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus during the time of MERA’s passage, the first African-American to serve in the Mississippi State Legislature since Reconstruction

**Brad Dye**- Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi (1980-1992)

**Buddie Newman**- Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives

**Tommy Waldron**- Vice Chair of the House Education Committee

**Fred Banks**- Vice Chair of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus, Chair of the Mississippi Black Caucus, Mississippi Supreme Court Justice

**Charles Overby**- Editor in Chief of the Clarion-Ledger

**Bill Minor**- Columnist for the Clarion-Ledger who frequently wrote about education reform issues during this time frame
Appendix B: Timeline of Events Leading up to the Passage of MERA

May 17, 1954: The Supreme Court delivers their decision on Brown v. Board stating that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

October 1, 1962: James Meredith becomes the first African-American to enroll at the University of Mississippi, prompting riots at the campus

May 26, 1965: Congress passes the Voting Rights Act, which forces Mississippi and other states to remove voting practices the disenfranchised African-Americans

1967: Robert G. Clark Jr. is the first African-American elected to the Mississippi State Legislature since Reconstruction.

1979: William Winter is elected Governor of Mississippi, The Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus is formed, and Ray Hederman takes control of the Clarion-Ledger

June 23, 1980: At the request of William Winter, the legislature created the Special Committee on Public School Finance and Administration

Early 1981: Governor Winter and his wife Elise Winter begin visiting schools across the state

January 1982: The legislative session opens. The issue of public kindergartens is given much attention in the press and is poised to be the most contentious issue of the session. The legislative session does not any laws concerning public kindergartens or compulsory attendance.

February 10, 1982: Buddie Newman refuses to recognize Robert Clark’s motion to vote on HB 936 and adjourns the House, and consequently killing the bill. This maneuver was severely criticized in the press, most notably in a piece conducted by 20/20

Spring and summer 1982: William Winter and his staff members travel around the state in build support for education reform, Clarion-Ledger publishes investigative series on Mississippi public schools

December 6, 1982: Legislative special session opens

December 11 1982: MERA passes in the house and moves to the Senate

December 21, 1982: MERA passes in the house and senate chambers and becomes law.
Appendix C: Details of MERA

Full Name: The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982

Provisions:
- **Kindergartens:** All Mississippi public school districts are required to adopt a nine-month full-school day kindergarten program that operates during the school year by the 1986-87 school year
- **Basic Skills Assistant Instructor Program:** Assistant teachers will be placed in all grade 1-3 classrooms by the 1985-86 school year
- Mississippi Compulsory Attendance Law: Beginning with the 1983-84 school year every child that is between the years of 6 and 14 must attend school
- **Statewide Test Program:** The State Department of Education is directed to implement a statewide testing program in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 in addition to testing that occurred prior in grades 4, 6, and 8.
- **Revised graduation requirements:** more rigorous requirements to graduate high school
- **Study of Subject Matter Mastery:** The State Department of Education will conduct a story of the extent to which children in Mississippi public school master one level of course work before advancing to another
- **The Commission on Teacher and Administrator, Education, Certification, and Development:** The fifteen member commission will review all existing requirements for teacher and administrator certification and develop a new process and criteria for issuing certification to those persons who for the first time will hold a teaching or administrative position in Mississippi public schools.
- **Performance-Based School Accreditation System:** on-site school accreditation reviews, give school accreditation greater meaning, credibility, prestige and respect

Funding:
- **1984 Fiscal Year:** $107,000,000
  - State Sales Tax: $59,000,000
  - Corporate Income Tax: $29,000,000
  - Individual Income Tax: $19,000,000
- **1985 Fiscal Year:** $112,000,000
  - State Sales Tax: $62,500,000
  - Corporate Income Tax: $29,500,000
  - Individual Income Tax: $20,000,000

Goals:
- Joint responsibility among all stakeholders in public education
- A functionally literate school population
- Education stands established, raised, and maintained
- Improved instructional and administrative quality
- Accountability for local school districts
- Teacher salaries that are least average among those in the south
Appendix D: Mississippi Legislative District Map
Appendix E: ArcGIS Map
Appendix F: Summary of Education Reforms Across the South in the 1980’s


**Alabama:** Teacher pay increased by 30 percent, forgivable loan programs for potential math and science teachers, exit exam for high school seniors, voluntary but fully funded kindergartens, 15.9 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Arkansas:** Passed penny sales tax hike for school improvement in 1983, two-thirds of state’s school districts raised property taxes, first state to test veteran teachers, new testing schemes, districts with low test scores force to submit improvement plans, 10 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Florida:** Forgivable debt for prospective teachers, 7.8 percent teacher pay raises, literacy test for graduation, lengthened school days, tougher teacher certification laws, 8.2 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Georgia:** Quality Basic Education Act passed in 1984, more money going to poorer districts, mandatory kindergartens, new statewide mandatory curriculum, average 8 percent teacher pay increase, teacher testing, 17.7 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Kentucky:** $300 million reform plan, new teacher internships, districts failing to meet standards risk state control, smaller class sizes, raised graduation requirements, lengthened instruction time, required test in all grades, 6.2 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Louisiana:** 7 percent teacher pay raises, minimum competency exam to enter teacher training, advanced placement programs, high school exit exams, half day kindergartens required, 1.4 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**Mississippi:** Passed 1 percent corporate and personal income tax increase, 0.5 percent sales tax increase, $4,400 sales tax increase, raised requirements for schools of education, periodic teacher licensing, compulsory education age raised to 14, functional literacy test for graduation, state wide testing in grades 3, 5, 8, 11, 18.3 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

**North Carolina:** 1985 Basic Education Program, half percent sales tax increase, raised standards on teacher exams, boosted scholarship programs for prospective
teachers, reduced class sizes, free summer school for students who fail, 9.6 percent increase in teacher pay, 10 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

South Carolina: Education Improvement Act of 1984, increased sales tax by a penny increased teacher’s pay to Southern average, cash incentives for schools who show outstanding progress, mandatory kindergartens, high school exit exams, longer school days, tightened attendance policies, 6.9 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

Tennessee: $1 billion, three-year school improvement plan passed in 1984, teacher career leader, 20 percent percent pay hikes, minimum competency test for graduation, increased math and science requirements. Summer programs for gifted students, 7.5 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

Texas: $2.8 billion Educational Opportunity Act of 1984, multi-tiered teacher certification system, mandatory achievement tests, graduation exit exam, 3.2 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86

Virginia: Readiness test for students entering kindergarten before age 5, magnet school programs continued, scholarship loan program to attract math and science teachers, computer literacy programs, 15 percent increase in school budget for 1985-86.
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