

FOR BLACKS IN BOSTON, A POWER OUTAGE

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The series was reported by Adrian Walker, Andrew Ryan, Todd Wallack, Nicole Dungca, Akilah Johnson, Liz Kowalczyk and editor Patricia Wen. Today's story was written by Ryan, Walker, and Wallack.

Boston's power brokers met in secret for months, drafting an ambitious bid to host the 2024 Olympics. They imagined the city on the world stage, showcasing a modernized transit system, a grand boulevard, and gleaming new neighborhoods that would define Boston for the next millennium.

Legal documents made it clear who was in charge: five prominent executives from the region's dominant spheres of influence, representing business, higher education, sports, and construction. All five were white, and their initial Olympic plan envisioned new buildings and venues sprinkled across Greater Boston. But other than Franklin Park, the Games would not include another venue in the city's predominantly black neighborhoods.

It was a stark example of how in Boston — from politics to boardrooms, law firms to the State House, and labor halls to hospitals — blacks still find themselves shut out of the insular world of Massachusetts' powerbrokers.

“If you're not in the room, you have to get invited into the room,” said William “Mo” Cowan, who served briefly as interim US senator in 2013, and later as one of the most prominent blacks involved in the Olympic bid. “If we're going to be serious about making everyone feel like they're part of the prosperity, then people have to invite [black] people into the room.”

The Globe's Spotlight Team examined whether Boston still deserves its longstanding reputation as an inhospitable place for blacks. It found that in the corridors of power, blacks have failed to gain commensurate economic and political clout in a city where they make up nearly one-quarter of the population.

In many other major American cities, from Philadelphia to Atlanta and Los Angeles, the black community has made good on the promise of the civil rights movement by amassing economic and political power — the ability to wield influence and exert control.

Seattle and Minneapolis have elected black mayors. Denver has had two. All three cities have smaller black populations than Boston, which has never elected a black mayor.

Despite Boston's reputation as a liberal bastion, the region's power base remains largely white men. Blacks' political achievements are more occasional than institutional. There are no black faces in Massachusetts' congressional delegation, nor among statewide officeholders, and the only black to win election to statewide office since 1972 is former governor Deval Patrick. Such infrequent electoral victories are different from an ongoing voice in all the affairs of a city.

***Scant diversity among top elected officials**

Massachusetts has an 11-member **congressional delegation**.

All 11 are all white.

Massachusetts has six statewide **constitutional officers** such as governor and attorney general.

All six are white.

Massachusetts has 200 representatives and senators in the **state Legislature**.

Eight are **Hispanic**, six are **black**, five are **Asian**, and one seat is currently vacant.

All the others are white.

Among Massachusetts' publicly traded companies, just 1 percent of board members are black. Only two of the roughly 200 companies have black chief executives. Most major law firms have few, if any, black partners. Greater Boston has only one black leader of a major union. And the powerful group of chief executives known as the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership has no black members.

"Honestly, Boston is considered an old boy's town, [and] one barrier is the old guard being protectionist and not wanting to relieve their duty or help groom the next generation," said Jason Burrell, a 28-year-old law student and former

congressional staff member. “Even though we’re a majority-minority city, we’re still white dominated.”

The anatomy of power

Boston has concentrated more authority in its mayor than any other big city, Chicago and New York included. Former Boston mayor Kevin H. White once described a “democratic dictatorship” that made the mayor of Boston “the single-most powerful municipal office-holder in America.”

That concentration of power makes it especially significant that Boston has never had a black mayor, given that City Hall has historically been a springboard for civic and philanthropic leaders across the city.

How unusual is Boston?

Among the most populous 25 American cities, Boston is one of nine that has never elected a black mayor. In fact, it joins Indianapolis as the only metropolises to exclusively elect white men. Boston has had 48 in a row.

Boston mayors are so entrenched that the city has had only four in the past 50 years. Opportunities to seize power occur here once in a generation.

Another obstacle to sharing that power, some say, has been a lack of cohesion. Boston’s black community has more immigrants — 36 percent — than any other of the top 10 metro areas nationally, even Miami. That diversity has infused the city with cultural richness, but many believe it has also divided Boston’s black power structure. Immigrants from Jamaica to Somalia have a bond as newcomers, but they do not always share the African-American history of struggle in the streets and sit-ins at lunch counters.

But that lack of cohesion is just a small piece of a bigger problem for the black community: the hurdles it has faced in developing the kind of organizational muscle seen in other parts of the country.

Politicians in other cities say a successful candidate must be able to solidify a political base before broadening it to build a coalition that can carry an election. Both of those tasks have been difficult for candidates in Boston — in large part because of entrenched political and neighborhood alliances that have undermined efforts to build broader coalitions.

“If you’re a minority candidate, you have to come out of the blocks with your base constituency locked down,” said Wellington Webb, who served three terms as Denver’s first black mayor, starting in 1991. “You have to have a coalition.”

And, he said, there also has to be a sense “of buying into the history.”

Norman Rice, elected the first black mayor of Seattle in 1989, said that when he entered the race, he, too, had what he calls an “Afrocentric base” he could build on. But that was not enough. He also campaigned on such universal issues as education and basic city services. That helped him convince white voters that he would be a leader for the entire city, because, he said, “You can’t run as a black man in a white city.”

City Councilor Tito Jackson’s resounding loss in the mayor’s race this year came after he could not expand his political base and failed to win the support of many black officials.

It’s not as if Boston’s black community hasn’t tried to build a launching pad for black candidates. The most ambitious effort of the kind was the Black Political Task Force, an organization founded in the late 1970s by Melvin H. King — a state representative who would later run, and lose, a bid for mayor in 1983 — and the late John D. O’Bryant, a member of the elected Boston School Committee. For well over a decade, the organization endorsed and promoted black candidates. But its influence waned in the 1990s amid internal discord and it has never been fully revived.

Still, Boston has undoubtedly made progress. Neighborhoods that once seethed with racial animus are now safe, although still largely segregated. Suffolk County has elected a black district attorney and two black sheriffs. The 13-member Boston City Council in January will have four black councilors and Andrea Campbell is poised to take the gavel as the first black City Council president since 2001.

In their successful runs for the City Council, Ayanna Pressley and Lydia Edwards both found traction fund-raising and door-knocking in neighborhoods where blacks once feared for their safety.

But that does not mean black Bostonians now wield commensurate influence.

“If the power was equitable,” said Pressley, “then our boards, then our commissions, our contracting, our wealth-building opportunities would all look very different.”

Getting business done

Boston’s power dynamic was unmistakable in the sea of white faces at the Boston College Chief Executives Club’s lunch. At arguably the city’s most high-profile networking group for business leaders, a reporter in September could see only four or five black people out of roughly 200.

A robust black business community could offer a path to civic power, but Boston’s business hierarchy is as white as its politicians.

Among senior managers at companies, fewer than 1 in 50 are black, a figure significantly lower than in many other major metro areas, according to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Census data indicate that relatively few local companies are owned by black residents.

Boston’s largest media companies, such as The Boston Globe and the Boston Herald, have never been led by black editors in chief or black publishers. Boston’s largest law firms have hundreds of partners, but few are black, according to the firms and data collected by the National Association for Law Placement, a legal career group.

The data showed fewer than 1 percent of law partners at Boston law firms last year were black, up only slightly from 1997. Nationally, the percentage of black law partners has increased to 1.8 percent from 1.1 percent over the same period.

Black partners at Boston's largest law firms

Goodwin 0 black partners out of 156

0%

Goulston & Storrs 0 out of 111

0%

Nutter 0 out of 75

0%

Nixon Peabody 0 out of 64

0%

Ropes & Gray 1 out of 131

0.8%

Foley Hoag 1 out of 95

1.1%

WilmerHale 1 out of 84

1.2%

Morgan, Lewis & Bockius 1 out of 83

1.2%

Mintz Levin 2 out of 135

1.5%

Choate Hall & Stewart 2 out of 76

2.6%

Source: the law firms. Note that numbers are for Boston office locations only.

Former US attorney Wayne Budd, who is black and serves as senior counsel for the law firm Goodwin, said he believes the city's racial climate has generally improved over the years, though it has historically been difficult to recruit talented people of color from elsewhere to come here.

"Boston, as everybody knows, has enjoyed a reputation of not being particularly friendly to people of color," he said. "Fortunately today, at least in my view, that reputation is not all together well deserved."

Even today, many blacks here also find it difficult to break into the social circles that perpetuate power.

"If you don't have a relationship with the powerbrokers, it's not likely you are going to come in contact with them," said Darnell L. Williams, chief executive of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts. "You don't worship at the same place,

you don't play squash, you're not a member of the country club, so your relationships are somewhat limited.”

What leverage, then, does Boston's black population have? “I'm very hesitant to use [the] word ‘power,’ ” Williams said. “There are blacks in Boston who have influence, but in order to have power, you should be able to make things happen, stop things from happening, or be at the table when things are starting to happen.”

The pattern continues even on Beacon Hill, among the state's 100 highest-paid lobbyists in 2016. The top black influence-peddler ranked 63rd and was one of only two blacks on a list dominated by white men, many of whom are former elected officials, according to a Globe analysis.

That clubby nature of white Boston was evident a few days before September's preliminary election when Mayor Martin J. Walsh addressed a Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce breakfast.

On stage, Walsh bandied with the chamber chief executive, James E. Rooney, whom the mayor called “Jimmy.”

“As you know, the Chamber of Commerce does not endorse candidates for elective office,” Rooney told the audience after the speech, without specifically mentioning the election in less than a week. “But thank you for doing such a great job. Thank you for your partnership with the business community, and we look forward to seeing you here again next year.”

Diversity numbers remain secret

Boston's leading corporations and government institutions often boast of commitments to diversity, but few are willing to prove it.

In all, the Globe contacted more than 50 prominent companies, seeking statistics about the racial makeup of their employees. Only three provided data.

By contrast, financial services giant Fidelity Investments said on its website that the firm's “culture of diversity and inclusion makes us more effective.” But Fidelity told the Globe it did not have data showing the race or ethnicity of its board, staff, or top managers.

The parent company of Dunkin' Donuts, Dunkin' Brands, highlights the need to reflect its diverse customers on its website, but in an e-mail the company said it was "unable to share" the demographics of its workforce.

The administration of Governor Charlie Baker, who does not have a black member of his Cabinet, cited the risk to public safety and terrorism, and other exemptions, to withhold records detailing the race and ethnicity data for of the state's workforce. The city of Boston provided data only after a judge ruled last year that demographic information for city employees was public record.

The Massachusetts Trial Court, which is not subject to the state's open record law, also declined to provide comprehensive data for its employees.

The Massachusetts AFL-CIO and the Greater Boston Labor Council said they do not collect demographic data on their members.

Organized labor remains a cornerstone of the local Democratic power structure, a fundamental support that provides money, grass-roots expertise, and willing bodies to knock on doors. But in Greater Boston, the Globe found only one black leader of a major union, Tyrék D. Lee Sr., who represents health care workers in Service Employees International Union Local 1199.

Following the money

Boston's best shot at electing a black mayor came in 2013. It was the first truly open race for mayor in 30 years, and an increasingly diverse electorate, including an influx of Latinos and Asians, had the opportunity to elect a mayor of color after nearly two centuries of white men.

A dozen candidates made the ballot: six white, five black, one Latino. Among the black candidates were two strong contenders, both with Ivy League credentials: Charlotte Golar Richie, a former state representative, and John Barros, an executive from a Roxbury nonprofit.

From the outset, white candidates enjoyed a large advantage as labor unions, lawyers, and business executives lined up behind their men.

The top six recipients of campaign spending were white, and the bottom six were candidates of color. It meant combined spending on white candidates leading up to the September preliminary nearly topped \$7 million, compared to a paltry \$845,000 on behalf of candidates of color.

With limited funds for campaign costs, black candidates were even more in need of unity if they were to have a shot at City Hall.

A community meeting was held that September in an effort to coalesce behind a single black candidate. Golar Richie was the favorite of Boston's African-American establishment. Though Barros was born in Boston, he was the son of Cape Verdean immigrants and thus resonated with newer arrivals.

"People wanted to divide and build a wedge," Barros recalled in a recent interview. "People would say, 'John's not black. John's Cape Verdean.'"

The meeting ended in failure, only highlighting the divisions it sought to bridge.

Neither Golar Richie nor Barros made it to the final election, and Walsh came out on top in November. In victory, Walsh pledged to bring more diversity to the upper reaches of City Hall. He has increased the diversity of the mayor's Cabinet.

Shortly before Walsh's reelection in November, the Boston branch of the NAACP issued a scathing assessment of Walsh's record on race, charging that he had made little or no progress in many key areas affecting the black community. Walsh strongly took issue with the NAACP's findings and criticism.

Walsh — buoyed by the traditionally high approval ratings of an incumbent mayor — easily won reelection last month over Jackson, the first black mayoral finalist since 1983.

Walsh said his first term as mayor had given him a deeper appreciation of how the issue of race plays out for black residents.

"When you talk about economic development, when I go to a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce and see 97 percent of the room (is) white, my perception has changed," Walsh said. "I'm still learning as time moves on."

Jackson's resounding rejection underscored a brutal reality: A black mayor is nearly as remote a possibility now as it was when King ran more than three decades ago.

Horace Small, the 64-year-old executive director of the Union of Minority Neighborhoods, said, "I'm going to be dead before we have a black mayor."

Becoming a better city

While the biggest prizes in the quest for power — the executive suites, the lucrative law firm partnerships, and most of all, the mayor's office — remain largely beyond reach, some prominent members of the establishment sense dynamics shifting.

"I'm no expert on black power," said Boston's only living former mayor, Raymond L. Flynn, who led the city in the tumultuous years after school desegregation. "But there is a great deal of talent in the black community, and it will change. There will be a black mayor."

The exercise of power in Boston has always intrigued Travis McCready, a black, Brooklyn native who moved here 17 years ago.

Power manifests itself much differently here than in his native New York, said McCready, who now serves as chief executive of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, a quasi state agency that supports economic development in biotech. Boston's insular power structure, he believes, shuts too many people out.

"Part of what becoming a great international city will mean for Boston," McCready said, "is deconstructing some of these rooms, making them more diverse, and allowing these rooms to reflect the incredible diversity we now enjoy in this city."

That, in part, turned out to be one of the lessons of Boston's failed Olympic bid. Civic and political leaders launched a late push to gain support of the black community, expanding the initial plan beyond just hosting equestrian events in Franklin Park.

Walsh enlisted the Rev. Jeffrey Brown to work as a \$5,000-a-month liaison to the black community. But by that point, Brown said, the bid's "diversity problem" had taken a back seat to the realization that organizers "had underestimated the opposition" and fears that the Olympics would saddle the city with a huge debt.

The collapse of the effort to bring the Olympics to Boston in 2024 left black leaders with a familiar sense of being an afterthought. That feeling was captured in a year-end photo shoot featuring chief proponent of Boston's Olympic bid, John Fish, and a prominent leader of the opposition, Chris Dempsey. The two civic leaders, both of whom are white, appeared smiling together with a white dove on the cover of The Boston Globe Magazine.

Brown recalled his reaction: "White people have all made up. And as usual, we got nothing."

**Post-script* Please note the following updated information regarding the identities of elected officials in Massachusetts, updated December 2018:

Scant diversity among top elected officials

Massachusetts has an 11-member **congressional delegation**.

10 members are white – in 2018 Ayanna Pressley was elected to represent Boston in Massachusetts' 7th congressional district, the first black woman in the state to be elected to Congress.

Massachusetts has six statewide **constitutional officers** such as governor and attorney general.

All six are white.

Commissioner William Gross currently serves as the first black police commissioner in Boston, appointed by Mayor Walsh in 2018.

Massachusetts has 200 representatives and senators in the **state Legislature**.

Seven are **Hispanic**, six are **black**, and four are **Asian**.

All the others are white.

The city of Boston has 13 **city councilors**.

One is **half-Tunisian**, four are **black**, and one is **Asian**.