

Babylon

“IF WE GIVE freedom to ourselves right here in Babylon,” Eldridge Cleaver told an audience in the late 1960s, “we will give freedom to the world.” For Cleaver, Babylon was America. But the Black Panther Party increasingly cast California, and Oakland itself, in this role. Oakland stood for the national condition of black America: a colonized nation living in an underdeveloped urban ghetto amidst an inaccessible regional and national prosperity. In the decade between 1968 and 1978 these meanings acquired even greater resonance. During these years African Americans in Oakland, led first by radicals and subsequently by liberals, looked to transform local politics and guide the city out of the mire of its unemployment and disinvestment crisis. Simultaneously, white homeowners, largely though not exclusively in suburban cities, again took up the cause of tax reform and helped to fuel one of the most far-reaching conservative political movements of the twentieth century: the so-called tax revolt that resulted in the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, the nation’s first property tax limitation measure and national harbinger of a new and mobilized politics on the right. Thus, in the late 1970s two of California’s most enduring and significant postwar political cultures met and clashed—in the real world of East Bay politics as well as the metaphorical world of Babylon, the corrupt and declining imperial city that symbolized both decadence and the possibility of rebirth. In the decade after 1968, both black power and white homeowner politics reached their historical crest in California.¹

These developments echoed the political battles of the 1940s but turned the pivotal question on its head. In those immediate postwar years, East Bay politics centered around how to divide the potential benefits of metropolitan growth. In the 1970s East Bay politics had come to focus on how to divide the *costs* of metropolitanization. Oakland’s predicament was hardly unique. By the 1970s, declining middling industrial cities like Oakland, as well as massive Fordist ones like Detroit and Chicago, confronted the economic and social legacies of segregation and uneven metropolitan development at the historical juncture when they could devote the fewest resources to those problems. Moreover, most cities devoted fewer resources than they could have. After two generations of shifts in postwar wealth, property value, and employment away from core cities, followed by the near wholesale abandonment of urban policy by the federal government in the 1970s, fiscal limits defined the new reality for urban America.

Oakland, like dozens of American cities, faced these limits as the long postwar economic expansion drew to an unmistakable close, its vast social costs standing in plain view.²

Urban voters across the country responded to the metropolitan predicament of the 1970s by electing new municipal regimes that fell broadly into two categories. In one, liberals, including many African American-led coalitions, came to power promising greater attention to neighborhoods, new approaches to poverty, and an expansion of social services. They hoped to satisfy their grassroots electoral base and to sustain traditions of urban liberalism that stretched back to the New Deal. In the second, business-dominated coalitions came to power—or fended off liberal challenges—promising retrenchment: social service and welfare cutbacks, attacks on union contracts, and fiscal conservatism. Both kinds of administrations came to power in cities that by the 1970s had the largest African American populations in history: cities like Detroit, Newark, and Atlanta had black majorities; cities like Oakland, Camden, New Orleans, and Baltimore had African American populations just under 50 percent; and in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, African Americans constituted a critical political mass of between one quarter and one third of the population.³

The political terrain of urban America in the 1970s, however, was not occupied solely by liberal and conservative variants of the nation's twentieth-century political archetypes. There were radical alternatives. In Detroit, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers asserted both on the shopfloor and in city politics a radical alternative to liberalism. In Newark, Amiri Baraka and the Modern Black Convention Movement pioneered a creative and open-ended experiment in urban politics that combined elements of cultural nationalism with radical political economy. At the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, delegates from around the nation put together a broad political agenda of black liberation and urban reform. And in Oakland, the Black Panther Party offered voters an elaborate and compelling version of the political agendas developed within the OEDCI and the Black Caucus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Combining their colonial analysis of black America, revolutionary Maoism, and the long-standing critique of Oakland's uneven postwar development into a political-economic analysis of the East Bay, the party provided an alternative to either liberal or conservative positions in major municipal elections in 1973 and 1975. The Panthers' radical alternative, however, was largely absorbed into, and demobilized by, the liberal Democratic Party in the second half of the 1970s, a process that raised profound questions about the ultimate influence and staying power of black radicalism.⁴

At the same moment, and in stark contrast, suburban East Bay homeowners increasingly cast *themselves* as the victims of metropolitanization.

Their communities had grown more expensive, their social burdens heavier. Spectacular property value inflation in the first half of the 1970s, combined with a sluggish economy, increasing welfare costs and the perception of educational waste, and the effects of 1960s tax reform convinced vast numbers of California homeowners that their lifestyle, and their homes, were under siege—even as their wealth, embedded in property values, increased to unprecedented levels. In their minds, the postwar metropolitan ideal had been compromised, and it required their efforts to reinvent it. In the tax revolt of 1978, voters in the East Bay and across the state registered with historical force what had long been an operating assumption in California: the single-family home was the preeminent site of political interest and commitment. Voters demonstrated that they were prepared to sacrifice vital public services and traditions of liberal social welfare and ultimately to institutionalize the fiscal advantages that suburban segregation afforded. Thus, in the late 1970s California's two most enduring postwar political cultures met in Babylon, each hoping that they held the secret to renewal. The spatial history of the East Bay metropolis had produced this moment: a black power political movement in Oakland and a tax reform political movement in the suburban surroundings. These were interest-group political projects in the traditional American sense, but they were products of and profoundly shaped through the spatial history of the postwar city.

Liberal Reawakening

The political and institutional mobilizations of the War on Poverty activists had done little to displace the *Tribune*-led downtown interests that still ran Oakland. With African Americans 40 percent of the city's population in the late 1960s, and still hamstrung by an at-large election system, black Oaklanders needed allies. Eldridge Cleaver said in 1968 that "black people can't do it by themselves. It's going to take white people who recognize the situation that exists in this world today to stand up." By the early 1970s the War on Poverty fights had indeed convinced a large number of whites that the city's future was inextricably linked to dismantling the ghetto and establishing a more democratic system of representation in city hall. These groups sought to open Oakland's corridors of power to black and white liberals and, under their control, black radicals. Standing in their way, as in the 1940s, was a conservative Republican city council whose strong ties to the downtown business community and to the city's major real estate interests had changed little in three decades. A few moderate Democrats had made their way to the council by the late 1960s, but four Oakland districts with overwhelming Democratic majorities were

represented by Republicans. Citywide elections, voter apathy, and the *Tribune's* influence in local political circles continued to undergird a municipal political system in which conservative Republicans governed a city with a growing majority of registered Democratic voters.⁵

More was at stake than a few city council seats in Oakland, however. For in Oakland, as in innumerable cities across the nation, municipal politics in the 1970s opened a larger debate about what post-Great Society liberalism would look like. The question was not only whether liberals and radicals, both black and white, could find common ground against formidable political foes. The question remained how the range of issues, political causes, and strategies of the previous decade would be incorporated into urban regimes actually coming to power. How would the critique of unequal metropolitan development translate into a local political agenda? How would affirmative action, racial nationalism, and anti-imperialism translate in municipal campaigns? Could the black-white, bi-racial paradigm of urban politics include the city's burgeoning ethnic Mexican population? Would the class-based issues of poverty and underdevelopment be lost in the ascension of a middle-class politics? These questions were more open in the early 1970s than they had been in Oakland politics since the 1940s.

Reformers in Oakland had long complained that the city's political structure rendered progressive change impossible. Incumbents dominated every election, backed by the *Tribune's* endorsement. After 1968, liberal activists in Oakland made reforming that system a priority. The liberal challenge did not come from labor, however, as it had in the 1940s, but from a vocal group of middle-class whites drawn into Oakland politics by the vicious battles over the War on Poverty and the arrests and murders of Black Panther Party members in the late 1960s. Replacing at-large voting with a district, or ward, system, they argued, would enable the working class and poor residents of the flatlands to elect councilmembers to pursue needed reforms of the police department and the school system. In the summer of 1968, during the tense negotiations between the Black Strike for Justice Committee and the city, the League of Women Voters packed the council chamber with supporters of a district election system. "Large numbers of Oakland residents with particular problems are inadequately represented by councilmen whose election depends on political and financial support of the city as a whole," a league representative explained. Dozens of others testified in favor of the league's proposal in a massive display of public disaffection with existing political arrangements.⁶

Pressure from the League of Women Voters placed Mayor Reading and the council in an awkward position. Already accused by African American activists of ruling like oligarchs, the council could not afford to dismiss the League's proposal out of hand. They compromised by placing Proposition

M, mandating district election of council members, on the city ballot in 1968, confident that they could orchestrate a campaign to defeat it. The League was nevertheless optimistic and assembled a coalition to campaign for the measure. They kept their message deliberately simple: district elections of council members would mean a more responsive, democratic city government. The coalition brought together the city's most visible liberal organizations: the Alameda County Labor Council, Mexican American Political Association, Oakland Council of Churches, NAACP, and Catholic Interracial Council, among others. Coming on the heels of the volatile summer of 1968, liberal activists endorsed Proposition M as a necessary first step in loosening the stranglehold conservatives had on city government. The opposition to Proposition M, led by the *Tribune*, included all of the city's major property-owning groups: the Alameda County Taxpayers Association, Oakland Real Estate Board, Alameda County Industries Committee, Alameda County Apartment House Association, and Oakland Property Owners Association.⁷

Proposition M divided the city by race and class and did little to dispel the image of a conservative, cliquish "establishment" controlling Oakland politics. Charles Kehrlein, chairman of the committee created to fight Proposition M, warned that the proposed system would return Oakland to "the dark ages of politics" and inaugurate a period of "special interest spending beyond the control of the taxpaying majority." Anti-M forces desperately feared that council members from poor neighborhoods would raise property taxes to help bolster the city's depleted social services budget. Knowland and the *Tribune* led a full counterattack to head off such a result. In the week before the November 1968 election, the *Tribune* openly blasted Proposition M, calling it "the desire for neighborhood boss control." In a series of hyperbolic campaign ads, the newspaper then turned the events of that summer against reformers: photographs of demonstrations overlaid with the words "No on Militants, No on Mob Rule, No on M" appeared in the pre-election editions of the *Tribune*. District election of council members, the *Tribune* suggested, would bring the city under the control of the same militants who had threatened Oakland the previous summer—antiwar protestors and black power advocates. Aided by the *Tribune*'s opposition, Proposition M went down to decisive defeat. In unsurprising returns, Proposition M passed overwhelmingly in West and East Oakland and failed in every other part of the city.⁸

A second campaign stirred Oakland's liberal political activists two years later: the candidacy of Ron Dellums for U.S. Congress. Dellums, nephew of C. L. and a protégé of D. G. Gibson's in the East Bay Democratic Club, had been a member of the Berkeley City Council since 1967. Dellums had been raised in West and North Oakland, had attended both McClymonds and Oakland Technical High Schools, and had joined Don Warden's

Afro-American Association while a student at Berkeley in the early 1960s. Under Gibson's wing in the second half of the decade, Dellums had successfully weathered the left-of-center political storms in Berkeley, where radicals, liberals, and nationalists fought one another within the Democratic Party, and sometimes, as with the Peace and Freedom Party, outside it. Berkeley's city council races in the late 1960s were heavily contested across the breadth of the city's progressive political spectrum. In this environment, Dellums had made a name for himself as an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam and as a spokesman for black nationalism who could effectively speak to, and work with, both radical and liberal whites. The rise of Ron Dellums demonstrated that East Bay politics was rapidly shifting to the left of the Great Society and that the East Bay Democratic Club remained adept at fashioning a capacious liberalism that could draw nationalists into its fold and engage with both old and new left radicals.⁹

By the late 1960s the Seventh Congressional District, which encompassed most of the East Bay flatlands from West Oakland to North Berkeley, was one of the most heavily antiwar districts in the nation. It was also home to the majority of East Bay African Americans. Democrat Jeffrey Cohelan represented the Seventh District in Washington, DC. Cohelan, a former teamster and member of the OVL coalition in the 1940s, had settled into a moderate Cold War liberalism. Supportive of civil rights laws and the War on Poverty, Cohelan successfully channeled federal poverty and redevelopment funds to the East Bay. But as a vigorous supporter of President Johnson's Vietnam policy, he increasingly found himself at odds with his district. In the eyes of many Oaklanders he had come to represent the establishment. Robert Scheer, editor of the new left magazine *Ramparts* and an antiwar stalwart, ran against Cohelan for the Democratic nomination in 1966, forcing the issue of Vietnam into East Bay politics. Two years later, Cohelan's opponent for the Democratic nomination was John D. George, an Oakland lawyer and former NAACP president. Scheer made a relatively small dent in Cohelan's support in 1966, but George, running on a platform that linked the antiwar struggle with efforts to eliminate unemployment and empower black residents, pushed Cohelan hard in 1968 before losing. Though unsuccessful, both Scheer and George had revealed the incumbent's weaknesses. In a newly politicized environment, where Vietnam and black power were the salient issues, Cohelan, a reliable and solid old-line liberal, had come to seem anachronistic.¹⁰

Following Scheer and George, Dellums declared his candidacy for Cohelan's congressional seat in 1970. Vowing to run against the incumbent's "expedient liberalism," Dellums undertook the challenge of grafting West and North Oakland's African American vote onto the largely white antiwar vote, concentrated in Berkeley. It was a task for which he proved especially capable. Dellums linked imperialism in Southeast Asia with

racism and poverty at home. Poor and working-class West Oakland African Americans were initially suspicious of a black candidate running primarily on the white student antiwar issue, but Dellums explained the connection—40 percent of the deaths in Vietnam, he told audiences, “come from two ethnic minorities in this district and in the country.” In black neighborhoods, Dellums called for greater community control of police, a program to address racism in American cities, and a withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, rhetorically linking the ghetto and Vietnam in his basic stump speech. Many of his positions on issues in the African American community were more generic than his antiwar views, but black voters responded enthusiastically. It certainly did not hurt Dellums that his family name was as familiar to East Bay African Americans as was Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, and equally a part of the civil rights pantheon. Moreover, Dellums’ appearances with Huey Newton after the latter’s release from prison gave the Democrat a radical and street credibility that he might not otherwise have enjoyed.¹¹

Dellums’ congressional campaign helped to redefine liberalism in the East Bay. In doing so, Dellums followed Scheer and George, but also the Black Panthers and a host of African American activists in West Oakland and Berkeley, whose politics stressed anti-imperialism abroad and political cooperation with radical and liberal whites at home. By 1970 the antiwar struggle had moved close enough to mainstream Democratic liberalism—with Richard Nixon in the White House—that Dellums could successfully run as a liberal while simultaneously attacking the Cold War liberal zeitgeist from the left. Radicals still eschewed the Democratic fold. Stinging from their 1968 setbacks, the Peace and Freedom Party ran a candidate against Dellums. But Dellums was able to win enough trade union and middle-class support to construct a traditional liberal coalition, albeit one put together in the left-of-center political hothouse of Berkeley and West and North Oakland. In Oakland, the largely white organizations leading the liberal revival in city politics, especially the League of Women Voters, the Citizens for Responsive Government, and the Community Organization United for Progress, enthusiastically endorsed Dellums. With Dellums’ victory in November, the Seventh Congressional District Caucus, a crucial local branch of the influential California Democratic Central Committee (CDC), was captured by a group who carefully blended black nationalism, anti-imperialism, and traditional liberal social and economic views.¹²

After 1968 the collection of liberal reformers, African American and white, who had pushed for Proposition M and worked on the Dellums campaign turned to Oakland city politics. They worked through a variety of private and semipublic organizations that included the Citizens for Responsive Government, COUP, the Committee for Change, the East Oakland Caucus, OCCUR, and the New Oakland Committee. But as liberals laid

the groundwork for future black-white cooperation in electoral politics, they simultaneously created dilemmas for black radicals and grassroots activists. Would such coalitions marginalize African Americans and silence radicals, as had the white-led liberal coalitions of the 1940s? Would alliances with the emerging black and white liberal mainstream in the East Bay force African American radicals and nationalists to submerge their critiques of class power and to compromise their political aims? The questions were not rhetorical, because so much of the political energy in Oakland between 1968 and 1972 had drawn on profound disillusionment with liberal remedies and pieties.¹³

The Political Turn of the Black Panther Party

By the 1970s, the Black Panther Party was both a worldwide media phenomenon and a local touchstone of black power. Huey Newton's release from prison in 1970 brought ten thousand well-wishers streaming into the streets of Oakland. Dozens of interviews with journalists, national and international, followed. But all of the media attention that year, as in the life of the Panthers more generally, obscured as much as it revealed about the actual life of the party and its leadership. Just prior to Newton's release, David Hilliard offered a more telling assessment in the party's paper, the *Black Panther*. "February Seventeenth is Huey's birthday," Hilliard wrote. "The passing of one year finds Huey still in jail, and much more. Bobby Seale is also incarcerated. Eldridge is exiled in Algeria. Dozens of Panthers have been murdered. Over 350 Panthers have been arrested on major charges, though hardly any of them have been convicted of anything." With the party leadership in jail, murdered, or in exile, the Panthers appeared to be held together through court appearances, press releases, and the *Black Panther*. Whether the party had an organizational life outside of that discursive existence was difficult to assess, because the media's exaggerated Panther narratives tended to focus on legal troubles and periodic declarations by Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale. Even in the East Bay, it was often difficult to distinguish Panther iconography from the actual organization.¹⁴

Away from the radical-obsessed late-1960s media glare, however, the party enjoyed a vibrant life at the grassroots. Having expanded to dozens of cities nationwide by the early 1970s, the party claimed more than a national following; it had a national infrastructure. Panther-run Survival Programs thrived in Los Angeles, New York, New Haven, and Chicago, among other cities, and party chapters around the country worked creatively within their local political contexts on police department reform, prisoners' rights, welfare rights, and a host of other issues relevant to urban

black communities. The *Black Panther* had emerged as one of the most important new left organs in the country with a wide national distribution. Emory Douglas, for instance, working in the *Black Panther* from his home in the Bay Area, influenced the Black Arts movement with his “protest aesthetics” in posters, cartoons, and sketches.

Despite this long reach, Oakland was still home. There, the Pantherite blend of revolutionary idealism, practical social programs, and street bravado enjoyed enormous popularity. By the early 1970s Oakland’s Survival Programs included day-care centers and the Panther Liberation Schools, free breakfasts for children, sickle cell anemia testing, shoe and clothing programs, health clinics, and massive grocery giveaways. The *Black Panther* itself was published and distributed by a dedicated local staff, who increasingly understood themselves as journalists as well as revolutionaries and polemicists—but not, as they wrote idealistically in 1970, like “the bourgeois press, to be read once and then discarded in the nearest trash can.” The party’s upper leadership echelon was, as Hilliard’s assessment revealed, disconnected from its base because of jailings, trials, and, even more consequentially and tragically, murders. But the Panthers remained organizationally viable through the labors of young men and women whose commitment was profound, even if they remained far outside a media spotlight that sought out only protests and radical chic.¹⁵

Following Newton’s release from prison, the party transformed itself. In that transformation, ideology and grassroots politics would play equally significant roles. Reading the ghetto as a colonized space and mobilizing the flatlands politically in the 1970s remain the Black Panthers’ most important local legacies. After his release, Newton and the party reorganized around three important new objectives focused on Oakland. First, they emphasized greater alliances with mainstream black institutions, especially the church and the East Bay Democratic Club. Second, they closed the party’s chapters in most other cities, moved many of the far-flung leaders to Oakland, and announced that Oakland would become the party’s practical demonstration of “revolutionary intercommunalism.” Oakland would be the sole “base of operation.” Third, the Panthers committed to formal electoral politics. All of this, largely directed by Newton in the tradition of Panther decision making, followed quickly on the heels of Newton’s split with and subsequent ouster of Eldridge Cleaver. The latter, exiled in Algeria, wanted the party to retain its internationalist orientation and anticolonial guerilla tactics. These moves closed one era of the party’s history and opened another. If the Panthers were to succeed at building a revolutionary movement in America, it would happen in Oakland. And at the heart of the movement would be an expanded analysis of Oakland as a colonized space—the platform behind their entrance into formal electoral politics.¹⁶

The Panthers announced their new revolutionary approach in the summer of 1972 with a headline in the *Black Panther* that read “Oakland—A Base of Operation!” “In this interest,” the newspaper explained, “each week the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service will publish a supplement examining one aspect of the city of Oakland in the hope that this information can be used to turn a reactionary base into a revolutionary base.” “Intercommunalism,” as the new efforts were called, represented an elaborate positioning of Oakland within an international revolutionary narrative in which Oakland’s contribution was to be something like socialism in one city. But the base of operation was not a city on a hill. Oakland was the starting line in a revolutionary distance race. Once Oakland had become a “people’s base” through the electoral victories of the party, the revolution would move to other cities. Anticolonial political struggle in Oakland would yield rearranged political, social, and economic priorities as an example to the remaining “colonized world.” It was simultaneously practical, because specific to Oakland, and ambitiously utopian. It represented the Panthers’ complicated fusion of liberation politics and geography, in which historical racial oppression was linked to the specific injustices of a capitalist metropolitan order that developed certain places and underdeveloped others.¹⁷

The Panthers’ critique began with the physical destruction of West Oakland and moved, in an ever widening arc, to encompass the principal contradictions of the East Bay economy as a whole. “Oakland is unique in its particulars,” Newton wrote, “a city with a small-town face doing big-time business.” Using the publications of the Oakland Project, the University of California’s multiyear study of Oakland, the results of the federal government’s 701 housing survey, and various reports and research papers produced by the University of California’s Survey Research Center, the *Black Panther* documented the demolition and redevelopment of West Oakland. Here were the familiar culprits: BART, the new interstate highways and federal post office, the closing of public housing projects, massive delays on West Oakland’s biggest housing project, Acorn, and residential displacement. “BART has spent over 20 million dollars,” the newspaper cited as an example, “has literally dislocated thousands of people in West Oakland, offered few of the promised jobs to Blacks, and has the nerve to make one stop in West Oakland.” The *Black Panther* published special editions on the cost of living, public housing, imbalances in urban and suburban public school budgets, urban renewal, and unemployment. In each, attention focused on the spatial contradictions of late-twentieth-century capitalism and urbanity: poverty amid wealth, the prevalence of violence in the urban landscape, a declining urban tax base inside a ring of comparatively affluent suburbs, and a colonized black nation living within an imperial state. It was a remarkably coherent body

of critical journalistic work, concluded after its first year, 1972, with a special issue entitled "Our Challenge for 1973." The latter became the political platform on which Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown ran for political office.¹⁸

The base of operation campaign provocatively reconceived the spatial logic of the Metropolitan Oakland Area Program. In the MOAP, Oakland was the "center" of a new metropolitan order in which progress came with ever expanding industrial and residential markets, enriching suburban areas but redounding to Oakland as well. The party constructed a vision of social advancement with Oakland "at its center" as well, but what was naturalized in the MOAP was political in the base of operation. Oakland *should* be located spatially, according to Panther logic, but on a global grid of power in which centers and peripheries had different meanings: centers were developed colonial powers and peripheries undeveloped subject people. In the example of the Port of Oakland, for instance, the city's most visible industry, the Panthers politicized the way capital and people moved through the city. The disembarking of troops heading for Vietnam from the Oakland Army Base, the siphoning of tax dollars into port redevelopment while West Oakland's unemployed stood literally two blocks away, and the port's enormous cranes that lifted commodity-filled containers onto the city's streets—all were powerful spatial metaphors for the dramatic coincidence of wealth and poverty in Oakland. There was nothing natural about the way property and goods changed hands through the port, the Panthers suggested. The exchanges benefited some and exploited others. In this analysis, Oakland was both center and periphery, home to both colonizers and colonized.¹⁹

The base of operation series reflected two important branches of ideological evolution within the Black Panther Party. The first, intercommunalism, represented subtle but important changes in party ideology. Intercommunalism defined the world as a collection of communities dominated by the United States and its global allies. Ongoing struggles against oppression worldwide need not be tightly coordinated, because most faced a common set of constraints and enemies. Liberation at any point would serve the larger cause. African Americans, in this view, were particularly well placed to lead global opposition to imperialism and neo-imperialism, because they had more than three hundred years of experience in dealing with European racial oppression and two hundred years of experience with the state apparatus of the United States. "We black people have always lived under this threat in our communities inside the United States," Newton wrote in 1971. "United States control of our communities is not difficult to understand." The analysis led to an optimistic conclusion. "We can transform these circumstances to our benefit: Revolutionary Intercommunalism." After his release from prison, Newton had taken Panther

delegations to Africa and Asia, meeting with Mozambique President Samora Moises Machel and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. These sessions with international leaders influenced the development of intercommunalism. Back home, the party's grassroots strength in Oakland and its evolving commitment to global counterimperialism made their home city a natural choice for the party's revolutionary demonstration.²⁰

Second, the base of operation embodied Newton's notion of advocating practical revolutionary activity to which people could relate. In a long dispute with the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), Newton and the Panthers insisted that revolutionary action take place "above ground," in visible public space—hence, "patrolling the pigs" and all of the other Panther public activity. The leaders of RAM, on the other hand, argued that revolutionary organization should remain underground, beyond the long reach of the state police and surveillance apparatus. But Newton and other party insiders had long believed that the principal problem with late-twentieth-century radicalism was its abstractness and distance from the material experience of ordinary people. Fomenting violence from "underground," as other groups like the Weathermen had done in the late 1960s, only served to alienate any potential revolutionary constituency, according to Newton, because people feared the violence and did not understand its political relevance. The base of operation, coming on the heels of the successful local survival programs, embodied the party's effort to educate the public in a revolutionary language by developing a practical political agenda people could find relevant to their daily lives. It was not simply about giving out free bags of groceries and then asking people to listen to a few revolutionary speeches. It was more fundamentally about making capital, power, and injustice visible and real—to politicize what most people, ordinary black folks and white folks, took for granted as natural.²¹

Like Paul Cobb and the West Oakland Planning Committee before them, the party seized upon the Port of Oakland as a symbol of the city's failed priorities and the deep contradictions within local economic development. "While the Port thrives, Oakland stagnates," read the headline in a special edition of the *Black Panther* in 1972. "Its spiraling growth, which began a few years ago, has not brought about the same kind of increase in employment for Black and poor people in Oakland." While the Port of Oakland had become the West Coast's busiest and largest, doubling its annual income between 1968 and 1972, according to the Panthers "the city gets little in return: no jobs and no access to Port income at a time when Oakland city government flirts with bankruptcy." In fact, the party contended, "tenants get special tax privileges to lower their property tax bills, and in some instances the Port actually pays their property taxes." The Panthers highlighted the odd independence of the port.

Its Board of Commissioners was appointed by the mayor, but city hall had little other official control over port activities and revenue. It remained a public entity, technically owned by the city, but its operations and revenue were virtually untouchable. As the *Black Panther* observed, this arrangement meant that when public tax dollars were invested in the port—as had happened during its phenomenal growth—the proceeds benefited private shipping companies, not the residents of Oakland. In all, the party argued, the port's operation was another example of the city's "behind the scenes deals for millions of dollars, money that is never used to benefit us [Oakland citizens]." ²²

The party's two-year base of operation campaign mixed its older anti-colonial discourse with this new attention to local political and economic arrangements in Oakland. The party emphasized the enormous percentage of the city's white workforce that lived outside of Oakland (more than 50 percent by some estimations), particularly members of the municipal police force and fire department. Party journalists wrote countless articles on the failure of federal redevelopment and urban renewal projects to provide opportunity for local residents while nearby industrial suburbs boomed with new factory and construction jobs. In 1973 the Panthers urged a full reassessment of the city's tax structure and advocated raising taxes on the long-sheltered downtown properties and reducing the property tax burden on small businesses and residents in the neighborhoods. In preparation for the 1973 municipal elections, the party prepared a detailed analysis of past Oakland voting patterns, exploring divisions between white and black neighborhoods on such issues as public housing and Proposition M. West Oakland "ranks among the lowest in registered voters, and is consistently the lowest in votes and voter turnout," according to the party. This was true despite the fact that it "shows the greatest united support for Black and poor people's candidates and issues." Such analysis confirmed what the party suspected: apathy and lack of political consciousness among the poor, as much as the *Tribune's* political monopoly, prevented progressive change in Oakland. ²³

Panther writers envisioned the base of operation as a means of educating the city's African American and Latino residents in preparation for political action. The party's central leadership, especially Newton, Seale, and Elaine Brown, understood that large-scale reform in Oakland was impossible without electoral power and public office. In Oakland, even the highly publicized struggles over community control of the various poverty programs had not produced much change in voter turnout. "In the last elections, 25,000 Black people were removed from the register rolls because they did not vote in the general election," the party's writers claimed. "Our community cannot afford to repeat this mistake." The Panthers took on this considerable challenge in 1972 and 1973, determined through the



Figure 8.1. Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown on the campaign trail in 1973. Though neither Seale nor Brown was ever elected to city office, both proved to be effective grassroots campaigners who brought the Black Panther Party's message of new economic priorities to tens of thousands of Oaklanders. They helped to make the city elections of 1973 and 1975 among the most interesting in Oakland's history. Courtesy of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation and the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

education drive of the *Black Panther* and the sheer strength of their reputation to mobilize the city's poor voters. Electoral action lay behind the base of operation program from the beginning; the *Black Panther* would expose the city's failed priorities, while simultaneously promoting Seale and Brown for public office. Newton had declared Bobby Seale a candidate for Oakland mayor and Elaine Brown a candidate for city council nearly a full year in advance of the spring 1973 elections. They were to run on the base of operation platform, campaigning against the "establishment" on such issues as the port, the City Center, unemployment, and what they called a new "Revenue Raising Plan." As a warm-up, the party ran a slate of candidates for the West Oakland Planning Committee's governing board in the late summer of 1972. At the polling places, party members passed out free bags of groceries and new women's shoes to voters, winning six seats. It was a small victory, but core party regulars, of whom

there were approximately 150 by this time, interpreted the success as proof that the combination of Panther popularity and their new platform was a potent electoral mix. After the WOPC elections, the party devoted all of its resources to the candidacies of Seale and Brown.²⁴

Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown cast the 1973 municipal election as a contest between the community and the “establishment.” According to the Panthers, the “conservative majority which has dominated the Oakland city council for more than thirty years” was beholden to the publishers of the *Tribune*, the attitudes of which “ranged from outright neglect to direct racist provocation.” “The struggle of Black and poor people in Oakland to seize control of their own lives and realize political power in the city,” the party continued, “will inevitably lead to a confrontation with the *Tribune*.” Such a characterization reflected the civic polarization and rhetorical excesses of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but beneath Panther diatribes lay important truths about the kind of closed civic political culture that had persisted in Oakland for decades. Knowland was widely known to have handpicked the city’s previous three mayors—Clifford Rishell, Houlihan, and Reading—and Houlihan had been a *Tribune* attorney for many years. In addition, the *Tribune* had been responsible for escalating conflict during the spring and summer of 1968, when the paper ran the series of provocative ads portraying the boycott of downtown retail stores as radicals holding the city hostage at gunpoint. And finally, *Tribune* editorials praising Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, and the Vietnam War, as late as 1973, seemed to mark the city’s “establishment,” even in the eyes of moderates, as reactionary, entrenched, and determined to maintain a cliquish control over civic affairs.²⁵

Seale and Brown did not rely solely on protest banner logic in their contest with “the establishment,” however. In addition to the Base of Operation series, which carefully documented how decisions about economic development in the city had been made, who had benefited, and who had borne the costs, the party undertook a massive voter registration and grassroots organizing drive. “We must first organize the block, then the neighborhood,” the party announced, “gradually expanding to the city.” By some estimates, they had registered more than twenty thousand new voters by early 1973. Between 1972 and 1973 the party divided Oakland into a dozen sections and assigned teams of workers to each section. Each team, in turn, broke its section into manageable neighborhood units, where party workers sold the *Black Panther*, registered voters, met with community leaders, and stumped informally for the Base of Operation campaign. A typical day in the life of a section worker went something like the following, from a 1973 report to Newton: “We opened the office at 9:00 a.m. Patti did registration at the Welfare Dept. until 2:00 and then did door to door registration in Section 1. Steve registered two people on

call. . . . went to see Charlie Fair about the use of his van. . . . 53 people were registered.” In effect, the party created through its own initiative something resembling a ward system, with section leaders held responsible for the party’s presence, strength, and effectiveness within their bounded area. It was a creative response to the city’s lack of a true political apparatus in the neighborhoods, and by all accounts it worked extremely well.²⁶

Seale and Brown hiked, stumped, and handshook their way across the city in the first truly grassroots municipal campaign Oakland had seen since the late 1940s. Community control of the port and City Center, affirmative action, residency requirements for employees of the city police and fire departments, and a new “revenue-raising, revenue-sharing” plan designed to redistribute the tax burden from the neighborhoods to downtown topped their list of proposals. Not unlike the OVL platform of three decades earlier, the Panther candidates called for a more equitable distribution of the city’s tax burden. Seale proposed a 1 percent tax on private stocks and bonds and a 5–10 percent tax on capital gains. Small businesses, Seale emphasized, would be excluded. The Panther leader also proposed a residency requirement for members of the Oakland police and fire departments, 70 percent of whom, Seale claimed, lived outside the city and had no contact with its residents except during patrol hours. Both “Bobby” and “Elaine,” as they were affectionately known to party faithful, carried the message of the “People’s Plan” to Oakland voters. Brown, a tireless campaigner with an extraordinary speaking voice, explained the party’s “revenue raising, revenue sharing” plan to countless audiences. Refusing to run simply on name and reputation alone, both Brown and Seale worked Oakland’s streets like true grassroots candidates. As the April 1973 election neared, their message became simple and focused: the city’s existing priorities “reflect the needs of the city’s business community,” while Seale and Brown would take the first steps toward “the construction of a people’s economy.”²⁷

To gain the support of the city’s liberal mainstream, Seale and Brown had to prove that their campaign was more than an extension of the fiery Panther rhetoric of the past. Everyone connected to the party’s campaign conceded that its fortunes hinged on middle-class African American and white voters, liberal Democrats who favored fundamental changes in the way Oakland was governed but were reluctant to endorse the Panthers. Many liberals believed that the Panthers were as responsible for the rhetorical escalations and street confrontations of the late 1960s as Reading, Knowland, and the *Tribune*. Seale had for many years been the party’s principal speaker. His vigorous strides to the podium and electrifying Maoist speeches were well known in Oakland, and they gave him a reputation for excess that proved to be a political liability. But Panther notoriety also gave Seale an advantage. Local media treated the mayoral election as if it was solely a contest between Reading and Seale, marginalizing a number of

other candidates, including Otho Green, an African American businessman, liberal Democrat, and former assistant to the city manager in Berkeley. Seale and Brown attracted considerable attention everywhere they went during the campaign months of early 1973. The attention was good for the campaign, but constant questions from the local and national press dogged them. How could the Panthers expect to govern a city in which they had created so much tension? How effective could a self-proclaimed radical group be in building a workable coalition in city government? Would the fiery rhetoric of the past give way to organization and action?²⁸

The Panthers led a broad field of radical and liberal challengers to Mayor Reading in 1973. Seale and Brown expectedly garnered the “radical” label, but all of the candidates on the left included in their platforms issues and themes that dated back to the Black Caucus, the WOPC, and the OEDCI of the late 1960s. Otho Green, for instance, stressed unemployment and taxes as the critical campaign issues (he also included crime), noting that “half the people who work in Oakland live outside; 22 percent of Oakland residents are unemployed.” John Sutter, a mainstream white liberal, ran on the promise to “reorder our priorities in favor of the neighborhoods as compared to downtown interests. . . . Reading’s policy has been to ignore the neighborhoods.” Though neither Green nor Sutter proposed as radical a set of new taxes as Seale did, both men stressed the need to distribute the tax burden more evenly between downtown and the rest of the city. Green’s and Sutter’s candidacies made clear that the neighborhood-first politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the community-driven reorientation of civic priorities around ghetto rehabilitation and the health of Oakland’s living spaces, had moved to the center of politics in the city. No candidate hoping to occupy a position anywhere from moderate to radical on the political spectrum could hope to run successfully in Oakland without championing the neighborhoods.²⁹

Voting returns in 1973 revealed a startlingly good showing for the Panther political novices. Brown received nearly 35,000 votes in her council race against the moderate African American Republican incumbent, Josh Rose (Rose won 55,000 votes). Brown’s showing convinced her to make a second run in 1975. Seale fared well, though in a complicated three-way split of the liberal-Democratic vote, he garnered only 21,000 votes in the primary. Still, it was just enough to force Reading into a runoff election in May. In the subsequent race, Seale’s Panther past haunted him. Though he gained important endorsements from the city’s liberal community, none was enthusiastic. The memory of his recent jail sentence, the violence of 1968–1971, including his arrest and trial stemming from demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and continued rumors of Panther involvement in local illegal activities hamstrung Seale’s efforts to bill himself as a candidate acceptable to black and white moderate

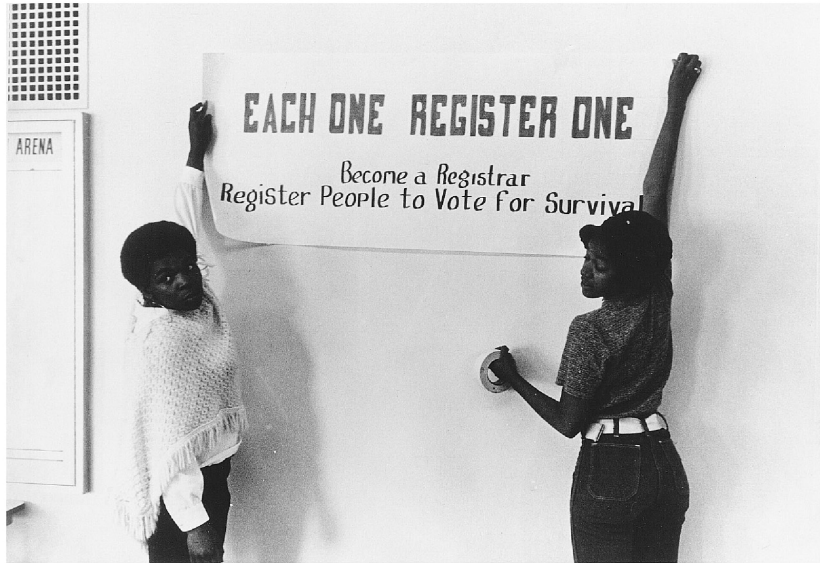


Figure 8.2. The Black Panther Party registered thousands of new voters in the early 1970s. These volunteers, and hundreds like them, gave Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown broad grassroots support. Courtesy of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation and the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

liberals among the city's crucial swing voters. Reading demolished him in May, winning with 77,000 votes to Seale's 43,000. However, his candidacy generated unparalleled political involvement and enthusiasm in the city's poor and working-class African American communities. A stunning 70 percent of registered voters turned out for the May 1973 runoff between Reading and Seale, a nearly unprecedented total in Oakland. And though Reading defeated the Panther handily, Seale showed impressively for a political novice running a grassroots campaign dogged by a complicated past. Seale demonstrated, particularly in the month-long campaign between the primary and the runoff, that he could quickly and deftly transform himself into a political figure capable of running with what the *Oakland Post* called "composure and dignity," even against long-time foe Reading. But it was not enough to overcome the suspicion and distrust of the city's moderate middle third. Seale declared a symbolic victory and promised that the party would fare better in 1977.³⁰

Oakland's political culture had begun to turn on a new axis. The Black Panther Party's foray into electoral politics and political education was an important component of this turn, joining the OEDCI, the WOPC, and the Black Caucus in creating new poles of politics in the city's African

American community. The political culture called forth by these institutions and the various leaders who passed through them and used them included three central elements. First, metropolitan space, and the relationship between Oakland and its nearby suburbs, had become the definitive political issue in the city. A politicized metropolitan space was not new in Oakland politics, of course. But unlike the Metropolitan Oakland Area Plan, 1970s' politics questioned rather than celebrated suburban progress. Second, race and the "community" had emerged as poles around which the political culture organized authenticity. This, too, had spatial elements, since to live in the community was also to be of the community, something a good many African American liberals could not say by the 1970s. Third, politics had come to be associated with the provision of concrete jobs. This was true, not in the older sense of political patronage, but in terms of how jobs in the private and semipublic sectors were distributed. Here, the port and City Center were the most important symbols, and here too there were the familiar spatial elements. This new political alchemy reworked both class and race in important ways, revealed in the years following the Panthers' initial foray into electoral politics. The party may have been naïve about the realpolitik behind urban policy, but the position that they had staked out, in the larger conversation with integrationist African Americans and liberal and conservative whites, marked them as a potent political voice with a concrete vision of Oakland's future.

Return of the East Bay Democratic Club

The Black Panther Party had become a major political force in the city, but Seale's loss in 1973 demonstrated that Panther candidates discouraged as many votes as they mobilized. Elaine Brown, however, almost single-handedly kept the Panthers' 1973 agenda before the public and the city's leaders. More than any other individual, she constructed a bridge between the Panthers and the liberal community, black and white. Between 1973 and 1977 Brown moved out from under the long shadow of Seale, her former Panther boss, and Newton, her famous companion. She claimed a public space and voice for both radical and feminist politics unlike anything the city had ever seen. Originally from Philadelphia, Brown had come to Oakland in the early 1970s from Los Angeles, where she was a veteran of the party's renowned clashes with the cultural nationalist Ron Karenga and his organization, US. In Oakland, she edited the Panther newspaper and served on the party's central committee. In 1974 Newton, in exile in Cuba, appointed Brown chairperson of the Black Panther Party. Brown became one of Oakland's most important leaders and a spokesperson for the left wing of the city's progressive forces. Her capacity

to discuss local issues and her never-ending networking among black leaders, including representatives of the church and Democratic Party establishments, earned her a reputation unique among Panthers. At a national Urban League conference in San Francisco in 1974, Brown spoke forcefully about guaranteed full employment, a guaranteed minimum income, and how effective community organizing can deter crime. Adding "I think it would be better if we saw a lot more women here [at the conference] speaking on a lot of things," Brown signaled her efforts to reform the party's gender codes and to place a new public face on the party's politics.³¹

In 1975 Brown made another run for the Oakland City Council. It was a second test both of the Panther vision for Oakland and, perhaps more consequentially for political calculations, the Panthers' ability to work with other African American leaders and to attract liberal whites. Brown put together a campaign that reflected her considerable coalition-building skills and established a working partnership between the party, the emerging political apparatus under Ron Dellums, and the community leadership of West Oakland. Brown's campaign manager was Beth Meador, a prominent organizer for Dellums; her executive chairperson was Dorothy Payne, former head of the West Oakland Planning Committee; and her co-chair was Otho Green, who had run against Seale in 1973. It was a potent combination, because Brown had tapped the two most important liberal-progressive political networks in Oakland—Dellums' Democratic Party organization and the West Oakland planning community—while reaching out to mainstream black businesses and the middle class through Green. Brown was determined to run as much behind this kind of political savvy as on the Panther name and radical platform.³²

Brown ultimately lost in a close election, but her campaign coalition anticipated the combination that would elect Lionel Wilson mayor two years later. And Brown herself exemplified what many people felt was the best of the decades-long grassroots and black power movements in Oakland. She ran as the candidate of "multi-ethnic Oakland," promising the city's African American, Latino, Asian, and white voters "a new day in Oakland." She also drew large numbers of women into the campaign, breaking the Panther gender division of labor by selecting women for the top strategy positions on her team. For the first time in Oakland politics, a candidate for major local office spoke of the feminization of poverty, a process that had been eroding the city's neighborhoods for nearly two decades. "The women of the city of Oakland, over half the population," Brown declared at the event officially announcing her candidacy, "suffer job discrimination in city agencies, unequal pay plans, and lack of child care plans." In addition, she echoed her and Seale's platform from 1973, em-

phasizing the lack of accountability of the port, the unequal distribution of taxes, and the lack of neighborhood priorities in the city budget. Moderating the radical language of Oakland as a revolutionary base rewarded Brown with key liberal endorsements from the Alameda County Democratic Party Central Committee, the Alameda County Labor Council, the Teamsters, the United Autoworkers, and virtually all of the city's neighborhood Democratic clubs. Brown had, like Dellums in his congressional district, forged a coalition with roots anchored in black radicalism and anti-imperialism that simultaneously attracted the traditional liberal base of the Democratic Party.³³

The Panthers' "revolutionary intercommunalism" had been an attempt to forge a left politics outside of Cold War liberal philosophies and institutions. Indeed, "revolutionary intercommunalism" charged that American imperialism abroad had a domestic cognate—segregation and the underdevelopment of black America—that compromised every national institution, including both major political parties. As Brown moved the Panthers into closer alliance with the East Bay Democratic political establishment after 1973, the fate of the party's radicalism remained an open question. Would that radicalism encounter an inevitable demobilization as Panther activists sought a place in the mainstream political process? Would self-determination as a political credo—along with the radical critique of political economy advanced by Seale and Brown—be either sacrificed to or rendered empty and hollow by the necessary alliance with liberals? The possibility after 1975 of African Americans achieving real power in Oakland—and the promise that African American leftists would be part of that coming to power—made these questions far more than hypothetical.³⁴

Both Brown and her ardent supporter, Ron Dellums, understood the possibility that a left African American politics could gradually erode under strong pressure from middle-class black liberals. "Simply changing white faces for black faces," Dellums explained at a rally for Brown in 1975, reinforces "the same materialistic, empty, plastic values that we've come to know as middle-class America." He further warned of covering over "reactionary politics with black rhetoric." Instead, Dellums and Brown argued that year, East Bay African Americans should pursue a class politics in which black leaders would reform, rather than simply take the reigns of, the local political economy. Radical African American activists and political leaders around the country faced a similar dilemma, as they watched black power rhetoric increasingly serve the interests of liberal and moderate blacks—who, once elected to municipal or legislative posts, isolated or marginalized radicals and other leftists. Amiri Baraka's complaints about "bourgeois black nationalism" had begun to resonate among East Bay activists who believed that the black revolution stood for

something greater and more transformative than simply electing black faces to public office.³⁵

Nevertheless, the powerful gravity of the political middle exerted a steady pull on these activists. Following Elaine Brown's run for city council in 1975, the city's left-liberal coalition was led by Brown, Paul Cobb, Elijah Turner, Don McCullum, white veterans of OCCUR, and African American veterans of OCCUR and the WOPC. This group drafted Lionel Wilson to run for mayor in 1977. The former chairman of the OEDCI and one of the most popular leaders in the city, Wilson was a fiscal conservative and social moderate who had steered relatively clear of the black power disputes of the late 1960s. The first African American Superior Court Judge in Alameda County, Wilson had managed a successful career in law while making clear his political differences with Mayor Reading and the city council. He seemed an ideal candidate to chart a liberal middle course between the city's radical left and its professional and business establishment. In 1972 Reading had appointed Wilson, along with McCullum, Cobb, and Turner, to serve as black representatives on the New Oakland Committee. Formed to appease Black Panther radicals like Seale (and, then, Brown), the New Oakland Committee was charged with designing long-term plans for retaining existing employers and attracting new ones to the city. Wilson's rapid ascension in the years after the Seale and Brown campaigns marked the triumphant return to Oakland politics of the East Bay Democratic Club, D. G. Gibson's thirty-year-old stronghold of African American liberalism. And it marked the incorporation of both Black Panther radicalism and West Oakland's blend of nationalism and grassroots populism into the EBDC's political orbit.³⁶

The mayoral election of 1977 thus represented a test of two major political strategies that had emerged within African American Oakland since World War II. First, 1977 was a test of the EBDC's decades-old coalition-building strategy: of working with white-dominated groups from positions of strength in the black community. It stretched back to Byron Rumford's first campaign for the California assembly in 1948. The EBDC had lost its working-class base in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and among other railroad and dock workers in West Oakland, but its strength was now solidly rooted in the city's sizable black middle class and among civil servants and African American blue-collar workers in labor unions like the ILWU and the Service Employees International Union Local 250. The EBDC would need to join these constituencies to the liberal and moderate white vote in order to elect Wilson. The second test would determine if Brown, Cobb, and Turner could successfully push the emerging coalition from the left, forcing the cautious and deliberate Wilson into more radical positions on key issues. For Brown and her Panther cohorts, the latter included at least progressive reform of the city's

tax system, including a payroll tax to offset the suburban exodus of income, as well as an aggressive affirmative action program in city hiring. Brown especially imagined that having Wilson's ear—he had supported her in 1975 and actively sought her assistance in 1977—would allow her to influence the direction of the potential new administration. Historically, these were crucial tests. The *California Voice* put it this way: "Four years have passed since Bobby Seale, former Chairman of the Black Panther Party, forced John Reading into a runoff for the office of mayor of Oakland, Calif. During these four years, Oakland has been marking time on a treadmill leading nowhere."³⁷

Despite the presence of many radical and community activists on his campaign staff, Wilson ran as a moderate liberal who wanted to increase social welfare without alienating business, emphasizing both fiscal conservatism and the expansion of social services. Unemployment, public safety (crime), and the "eroding tax base" were his principal stump issues. With virtually the city's entire liberal base behind him, a campaign manager from Ron Dellums' office, and Reading having decided not to run again, Wilson ran a cautious, but confident, campaign. He proposed an "urban bank," funded through the federal government, to be used to attract new businesses to Oakland. He promised an expansion of virtually all city services, from police protection to care for the elderly and public housing. He pledged to improve and promote the port as the city's most vital industry, while simultaneously harnessing its resources more directly to the city budget. In an optimistic campaign moment prior to the 1977 election, Wilson told a crowd of well-wishers that Oakland had "the human, economic, and environmental potential to develop into a Renaissance city" and that his bid for mayor was "a catalyst, a conduit, through which we can express the needs that we have as a people in this city." He was celebrated in the African American press as "the first black mayor of Oakland" well before the election, but Wilson publicly downplayed the "first black" dimensions. He lamented and pledged to end minority unemployment, but his messages of "Oakland first" and "we have to learn to live together" stressed the liberal unity Wilson's team believed necessary to win against a weakened, but determined, conservative establishment. Appalled that so many Oakland workers lived outside the city, he nonetheless opposed a payroll tax (that would tax those workers' incomes before they could leave the city) because he found it "regressive" and because it would create a disincentive for businesses to locate in the city. Most importantly, he refused to make that issue an explicitly racial one, preferring to stress Oakland's relationship to surrounding suburbs in the abstract.³⁸

In a close election, Wilson won. Elaine Brown remembered that she and her cohorts "fielded every Panther and every other campaign worker,

on foot, in cars, and on buses, to drag those black registrants to the polls. The streets of Oakland were being harvested.” Nonetheless, voter turnout in the flatlands was disappointing, below 50 percent in most precincts. The election had not produced the enormous participation rates that Seale’s candidacy had generated in 1973. It would later appear that white swing voters, Democrats who had voted for someone other than Wilson in the primary, had made the difference. They were as crucial to his victory as were the Panther streets. Black Oakland celebrated. “We can look forward now,” the *Voice* editorialized, “to Black people beginning to be represented adequately at decision-making levels in all areas of city government there, and we note with approval that, even in the few public statements he has made since the victory, Judge Wilson has shown his commitment to the Number One social priority, not only in Oakland, but throughout the rest of the nation as well—jobs.”³⁹

Wilson’s victory was part of a nationwide pattern. In the 1970s, in urban centers across the United States, African Americans achieved civic power in unprecedented numbers. In 1973, black mayors were elected in 48 U.S. cities. Another 268 came in the next decade and a half. All told, it represented one of the postwar half-century’s most remarkable and sweeping political changes. White suburbanization, the War on Poverty, three decades of black political coalition-building, and the civil rights/black power movement all contributed to the enormous shift. In addition, the ascendancy of African American-led coalitions to civic power reflected a reenergized urban liberal agenda. Even as liberalism was in decline in national politics and its virtual death was declared in much of the nation’s suburban areas, urban voters overwhelmingly supported a wide range of liberal candidates and programs. Inheriting cities in decline—the “hollow prize” described by one contemporary commentator on the surge of black mayors—however, was nothing if not an ambivalent victory, and there was no better instance of this stark ambivalence than Oakland.⁴⁰

Wilson advanced to the city’s mayoralty confronting profound predicaments that were the product of three decades of metropolitan history in the East Bay and California. Oakland’s experiences with capital investment since the mid-1960s had convincingly demonstrated that competition with the nearby suburbs was a zero-sum game. Almost in direct proportion as San Leandro, Fremont, Hayward, and Milpitas gained jobs and investment, Oakland’s tax base declined, its major industries fewer and fewer. Left with an enormous population of relatively poor people to support with city services, Oakland increasingly lacked the tax base to support those services. The kinds of proposals designed to guarantee new jobs to Oakland residents—as in affirmative action at the City Center and the port—had the potential to generate new sources of employment for historically oppressed communities. But without economic growth, the city



Figure 8.3. Lionel Wilson at a press conference in the late 1970s. With him are representatives of the two strategic forces behind his campaign for mayor in 1977: the East Bay Democratic Club and community activists from West Oakland. To Wilson's right is John George, a member of the state legislature. To his left are, in order, Doug Jones, Paul Cobb, and Elijah Turner. Cobb and Turner had been leading activists in West Oakland grassroots politics since the early 1960s. Courtesy of the *Oakland Tribune*.

would ultimately lose more jobs than it created. The more radical proposals for dealing with the urban-suburban competition and the shrinking city budget—such as the Panthers' system of redistributing the tax burden—threatened to make Oakland an even more unfriendly place for businesses to invest than it already appeared to be to outsiders. Thus, whatever group of leaders Oakland's residents and neighborhoods selected to run the city, those leaders were trapped in a spatial class system in which competition for economic investment placed the city's future as much in the hands of outside capitalists and investors as in politicians, neighborhoods, and anything resembling "the people."

Wilson and Oakland simultaneously had to contend with tax reform. The California tax revolt, driven by conservative activists in Southern California but eagerly embraced by homeowners in the Bay Area, represented the most far-reaching spatial predicament of the postwar generation.

In an earlier era, control of city politics in Oakland would have meant a great deal, but in the thirty years since the close of World War II, power and civic authority in the East Bay had dramatically decentralized. A populist political movement in suburban Alameda County, as in suburban counties statewide, could limit and constrain the power of Oakland, a contradiction of both capitalist development and metropolitan governance with enormous consequences for Oakland's residents. This was confounded by the massive retreat of the federal government from urban policy in the 1970s and the consequent contraction of federal money. The demobilization of federal urban policy had begun under President Richard Nixon, whose distaste for the OEO and War on Poverty were well known, but it continued apace throughout the decade. The federally funded job training, support for public schools, and public housing that Wilson knew the city so desperately needed were increasingly unavailable. The combination of Proposition 13 and the federal retreat from urban policy in the late 1970s dealt a heavy blow to Oakland and places like it, a blow that would ripple across the subsequent decade.⁴¹

The Tax Revolt and the New California

At a conference on California's Proposition 13, the nation's most far-reaching property tax limitation measure, Bay Area Urban League representative Percy Steele explained that "although the initiative does not appear to have an overt racial implication, any cuts in service delivery or any employment layoffs will have an adverse impact on the minority community." Later, at the same lectern, Paul Cobb put the situation more bluntly. "Proposition 13 was white folks' message to us that we are going to have to do it ourselves." These pessimistic assessments came so quickly on the heels of Lionel Wilson's election in 1977 that a sense of tragedy descended on Oakland's African American leadership. California voters, including a large majority in Alameda County, approved Proposition 13 in June 1978, one year after Wilson's victory and only a handful more removed from Elaine Brown's campaign for a "people's economy" in Oakland. Few Californians explicitly racialized Proposition 13—Steele was correct—and the campaign was spared the backlash rhetoric of Proposition 14, the 1964 measure that repealed the state's fair housing law. But Cobb was not wrong. For in 1978 it appeared that urban African American California was once again peering across a spatial-political divide at suburban white California. Clayborne Carson, a professor of history at Stanford University and former SNCC activist, accused white suburbanites, the widely recognized grassroots base behind Proposition 13, of being "less interested in tax and government reform than in declaring

their unwillingness to pay for public facilities and services that are needed for central cities.”⁴²

Proposition 13 grew out of an existing, quite real crisis in the state’s system of taxation. The political resolution that it imposed, however, deepened a more profound crisis in the political economy of California’s metropolitan areas: a spatial political economy in which vast differences in the levels of development within a single metropolitan region were not merely tolerated, but encouraged and subsidized. Proposition 13’s principal support came from postwar suburbs like San Leandro and Fremont, places where a low tax populism was nurtured in postwar city building. The measure’s principal opposition came from the statewide liberal coalition that, too, was a product of the postwar decades. African Americans, especially, opposed the measure in larger numbers and with greater voice than any other single group. In this sense, Proposition 13 represented the kind of standoff that Carson described: between revenue-starved older cities, where the majority of African Americans and other communities of color lived, and revenue-rich suburban communities dominated by white-Anglo homeowners. It was a political confrontation produced by the state’s uneven postwar metropolitan development and the racial and class segregation built into postwar federal housing policy and private housing markets. As such, the 1978 tax revolt cannot be reduced to a transparent rejection of liberalism by ideologically driven and reflexively antistatist conservative voters. Its causes and sources were more complex, and ultimately enframed within the spatial and political history of California’s property markets, postwar suburbanization, and urban underdevelopment, the longer story told in this book.⁴³

The 1978 tax revolt was the product of three intersecting developments. Each played a crucial role in shaping both the election’s outcome and how that outcome would be interpreted and mobilized on both the left and right—in the East Bay, in California as a whole, and subsequently across the nation. First, tax reform in the 1970s was a response to the real increase in taxes paid by individuals in California compared with those paid by corporations and other businesses. In Oakland the Panthers had made this an issue for the progressive left, arguing for higher corporate and business taxes. Statewide, however, the issue was captured and advanced politically by the right. This linked to the second development. Tax reform in the late 1970s emerged as one component of a larger attack on liberalism. This attack’s reliance on a rhetoric of unfairness and a broad-brush denigration of government (“bureaucrats”) only thinly veiled its complete incorporation into a long-standing conservative political opposition to the welfare state and the social wage. But that same rhetorical framework allowed tax revolt proponents to appear as populists defending the “little guy” against a flawed government bureaucracy. Third,

the tax revolt voting returns strongly suggest that California's legacy of residential segregation—and the segregation of wealth and political interest within spatially distinct urban and suburban enclaves—profoundly affected how individual Californians had come to understand the mutual obligations between state and citizen. In this regard, it is clear that even among people who did not oppose government programs and who were not ideologically opposed to the welfare state in the abstract nonetheless voted for Proposition 13 because their immediate concerns remained local and property-centered. The tax revolt likely would not have been successful absent any one of the preceding three components. It is thus best to understand the tax politics in late 1970s California as both an indication of growing opposition to liberalism and a structural product of segregation, including suburban overdevelopment and urban underdevelopment.

Tax reform politics in California in 1978 were an extension of efforts that had been underway since 1966. In that year the California legislature passed A.B. 80, requiring assessors to evaluate all property in the state at 25 percent of market value. As we saw in chapter 7, this had the effect of shifting the overall property tax burden from business and industrial property to individual homeowners. The bill had the desired result of reducing assessor fraud, but the legislation had imposed a much more regressive tax structure on California. Under the 25 percent rule, local governments had little freedom to adjust property valuations to reflect the mix of industry and residence in their locale and no ability to provide homeowners with relief—the sort of tax relief that municipal regimes in cities like San Leandro had used so effectively in the 1950s. The only option available in most counties and municipalities was to increase tax *rates* and to impose new special assessments or to raise sales taxes. The result was an even greater burden on individual homeowners—or on other residential property owners, who passed their higher costs on to renters. In a metropolitan region like Alameda County, all homeowners and renters experienced this financial pinch. But it hamstrung older, economically depressed cities like Oakland—with higher social service burdens and greater demands on public services—more than suburban cities like San Leandro and Fremont.⁴⁴

The contradictions within the postwar development strategies of places like San Leandro were laid bare in the 1970s. In the 1950s and 1960s cheap land, federal mortgage subsidies, a booming industrial economy, and racial segregation combined to permit San Leandro's leaders the luxury of manipulating property taxes both to attract industrial investment and to maintain a political consensus among homeowners. Though successful for a time, this strategy always contained within it two regressive tendencies. The first we have encountered numerous times—suburbanization of this kind had the effect of segregating wealth and development by race

and class. The second, however, was less obvious. Keeping property taxes low as a development tool, especially taxes imposed on business property, placed a constant pressure on local municipalities to redistribute the tax burden away from businesses. In a competitive capitalist marketplace in which cities across the state were competing for business investment, this pressure on individual cities had the cumulative effect of increasing the regressive nature of the tax structure.

California's spectacular property market inflation during the 1970s amplified this already regressive system. Until the early 1970s, property values in California consistently rose between 4 and 5 percent annually. By the late 1970s, however, inflation was as high as 14 percent. This translated into as much as a tripling of an individual homeowner's tax bill. To make matters worse, between 1967 and the late 1970s, California had gradually increased its reliance on income taxes as a source of state revenue. By the later years of the decade, the per capita state collection of income taxes was rising at a rate of about 20 percent annually. Inflation combined with a state tax structure that burdened homeowners more than business and industry meant that individual Californians experienced dramatic increases in virtually every form of taxation across the decade of the 1970s. The fabulous land price increases that boosters and developers had so praised in the 1950s and 1960s as the key to California's prosperity had now boomeranged to strike back at homeowners.⁴⁵

In this political economic context, antistatist conservatives, rather than liberal or left leaders and activists, emerged to set the tax reform agenda. Proposition 13 was conceived by two conservative political activists from Southern California, Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann. In his post tax revolt memoir, entitled *I'm Mad as Hell*, Jarvis cast himself in the mold of the American populist. "The brains and capacity of the citizens of the United States are invariably greater than the brains and capacity of the bureaucracy," he rhapsodized. Jarvis, an apartment house owner and longtime anti-New Deal Republican, loudly and passionately proclaimed Proposition 13 to be the "people's" revolt against incompetent spendthrift politicians and their profligate welfare state. Gann was a former realtor and also a longtime political entrepreneur on tax reform initiatives. Though he did not share Jarvis's crusader-like voluntarism nor his quest for the spotlight, he was nonetheless a staunch political opponent of liberal social policy. Jarvis's and Gann's political orientation and the alliances on which they drew were important, because they framed tax reform as an oblique attack on the liberal state. Rather than arguing for tax reform as an effort to correct the regressive nature of the state's tax system—as the Panthers had done in Oakland—Jarvis and Gann approached the tax question from the right. They thus combined two political positions that did not necessarily converge: tax reform and antiliberalism. It was, however,

a powerful combination that gained appeal month after month in the first half of 1978. Jarvis and Gann shaped the state's political discourse around a broad rejection of the political establishment and government "bureaucracy."⁴⁶

Jarvis and Gann were figureheads, but tax reform remained a mass grassroots social movement organized and led by hundreds of local groups across the state, coordinated in the late 1970s by the United Organizations of Taxpayers. The social basis for what became known as the "Jarvis-Gann," or simply "Jarvis," initiative lay in the postwar logic of California suburbanization and in a political culture that elevated homeownership and property itself above all other social goods. Two generations of Californians had come of age politically in a suburban world in which low taxes, moderately increasing property values, and minimal fiscal and civic connections to core cities and their social problems could be taken for granted. Moreover, the various institutions that required public revenues—especially the state's immense college and university system, local public schools, and diverse social services and social wage programs—were more burdened than ever by the dramatic expansions of the state's population in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since 1966, when tax reform politics first emerged as a compelling statewide issue, the California legislature had done little to ease the burden on the "average homeowner," by then the most important political interest and ideological identity in the state. What relief legislators had offered, as in A.B. 80, deepened the crisis.⁴⁷

One of the major problems with Proposition 13, in 1978 and since, was its misrepresentation of how taxes in the state were divided. Local governments and agencies received nearly all of their funding through property taxes. Fifty percent of all local public school budgets, for instance, were funded with property tax revenues, 40 percent of county budgets, 27 percent of city budgets, and 90 percent of fire department budgets. State government, however, was funded overwhelmingly by other kinds of taxes: especially those on personal income, retail sales, transportation, banks, and corporations. Spectacular property-value inflation, especially in the three years between 1976 and 1978, had pushed property taxes into public consciousness. However, the equation between property taxation and wasteful state bureaucracy was entirely ideological, because property taxes had (and have) little to do with state government financing. Only county government contributions to certain federal- and state-mandated social insurance programs linked property taxes with state government. Proposition 13, then, stood to do far more damage to local services than state government and promised, because the state would presumably have to find other revenue sources, to shift further the state tax burden onto individuals—through income and sales taxes, for instance.⁴⁸

In suburban Alameda County, the tax revolt of 1978 was an extension of the tax reform efforts that had begun in 1966, fueled by the same mixture of populist resentments and property politics. At the top of the list of complaints lay California's welfare state. In a series of letters to the editor leading up to the June 1978 election, the *San Leandro Daily Review* gave voice to these concerns. The "frills and exorbitant wastes" of state government, according to one letter writer, had forced homeowners to go on "strike" against the state bureaucracy. After all, he noted, "our civil workers have made demands beyond the negotiable amounts offered by their supervisors," which constituted a "strike against the taxpayer." Another cited the "overpaid political hacks" ensconced in state government who constituted an assortment of "gluttons at the public trough." A third declared that "the initiative is the last barricade the taxpayer has to rock some sense into these reckless officials." In Fremont, where the debate over Proposition 13 was as fierce as anywhere in the state, one letter to the editor summed up this position: "The taxpayers' enemies are the free-spending politicians who approve the mounting budgets at every government level." No observer of Alameda County in the decade before 1978 could deny that the tax burden on small homeowners had increased—indeed, opponents of the Jarvis initiative often rushed to make this admission in order not to seem insensitive—but the ferocity and scale of attacks on state government shifted debate from how best to correct an uneven tax structure to the broader social legitimacy of liberalism and state social policy.⁴⁹

Proposition 13 proposed an enticing, superficially simple resolution: limit the taxes levied on any piece of real property and require a two-thirds vote of the state legislature to increase any other tax. Coming on the heels of failed property tax limitation measures in 1968 and 1973, the Jarvis initiative purposefully streamlined its formula—property taxes could never exceed 1 percent of the "real cash value" of the property, and reassessments for taxing purposes could occur only when property changed hands. Furthermore, Proposition 13's rules were placed outside the control of the state legislature: they could be altered only by another referendum. The measure mandated a two-thirds vote for all future state tax increases and a two-thirds vote for local increases as well. Finally, the measure did not include a provision prescribing how the state and local governments were to replace lost revenue: the hope was that they would simply cut.⁵⁰

Pre-election studies and warnings began to appear in the winter of 1978 and mushroomed in the spring months leading up to the June election. Most came from local and state agencies, county governments, and nonprofit organizations opposed to Proposition 13. A typical example was the May 1978 report issued by the Committee on Local Government

and Taxation of the State Assembly. It projected a loss of \$7 billion in property tax revenue across the state and predicted massive reductions in all government services, including “property-related” services. The latter issue stood out, because Proposition 13’s supporters contended that the measure would leave local governments with sufficient revenues to fund essential property-related services—fire and police, sewers, parks, street maintenance, and the like. The state legislature disagreed, arguing that some of the sharpest cuts would come from just these areas, in addition to education. The Oakland City Council declared its opposition to Proposition 13 in a resolution asserting that the measure “will severely limit the services available to the citizens of Oakland, it will create substantial unemployment, and it will cause confusion in local government.” As the battle of studies and projections played out through the months of the early spring, and as the public culture became glutted with statistics and percentages, both sides boiled their rhetoric down to familiar colloquial platitudes. Opponents argued that tax reform was necessary, but that Proposition 13 went too far, too fast, and would have too many unintended consequences. Proponents of the measure responded that their adversaries used “scare tactics” to frighten the public and that, in the words of the *Milpitas Post*, “after waiting so long and being promised tax reform so often, nothing seems too fast.”⁵¹

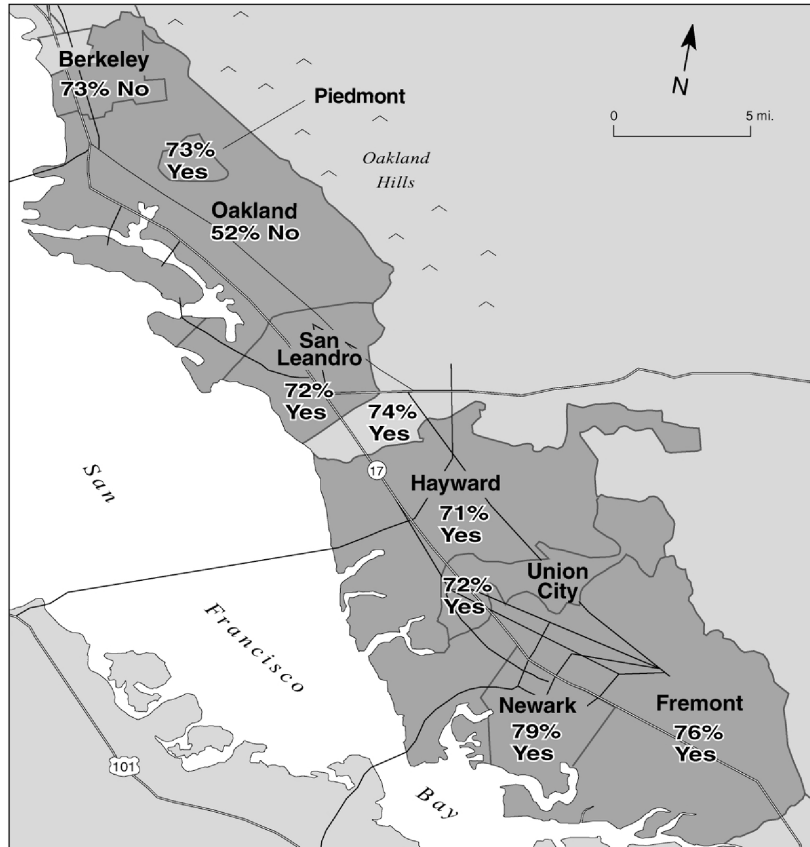
The reactions to Proposition 13 in Alameda County’s official circles ran parallel to the statewide response. In a letter to the County Board of Supervisors, county administrators predicted that the Jarvis initiative would cut \$115.5 million from annual property tax revenues: total revenues would fall from \$162.5 million to \$47 million. “So many imponderables,” the letter admitted, made it difficult to estimate losses accurately, but officials believed that placing the worst-case scenario before the voters—county layoffs in excess of five thousand employees, for instance—was both a political necessity and their responsibility as public servants. Union City’s city manager estimated that their municipal operating budget would be cut by as much as 65 percent, and every other city in the East Bay prepared “Jarvis initiative budgets” in the pre-election months that predicted unprecedented cutbacks in education and basic governmental services. Ironically, given how much of the pro-Proposition 13 support evolved from resentments of the state’s growing social insurance burden, county AFDC budgets would remain the least affected, because state and federal rules mandated minimum payments.⁵²

The Proposition 13 debate in Fremont offers a window on the political currents contending over tax reform. The Fremont chapter of the Alameda YES on Proposition 13 Committee was led by a local apartment building owner and a developer. They cast themselves and Proposition 13 as victims of a relentless campaign waged by government employees, cities,

and school districts. "People who don't have time [for such a campaign] pay the taxes," Bob Reeder, vice chairman of the YES on 13 Committee told the *Fremont Argus*. The Fremont city manager, projecting budget cuts of up to \$4 million, proposed to raise taxes on local businesses to compensate partially for such losses. Before the city council, and an audience of hundreds of the city's business representatives, the city manager explained that while homeowner property valuation had increased by 129 percent, business property valuation had done so by only 8 percent. Increasing business taxes was simply a way to correct these dramatic imbalances. The council was not swayed, nor were those business interests who testified, many of whom attacked the city for "wasteful spending." When the council turned back the tax increase, the city manager lamented that "there doesn't seem to be any distinction in the public mind between this government and any other."⁵³

The 1978 campaign was contested principally in two arenas: local ones like Fremont and statewide, primarily through vast media coverage. Many opponents of Proposition 13 insisted that Californians were not prepared to reject the welfare state or liberalism outright but were encouraged into a voting frenzy by the extraordinary media coverage of Proposition 13 and its most vocal supporters. "The meanness and ugliness presently emerging throughout the State of California has largely been encouraged by television and radio," wrote one commentator on "the morning after" Proposition 13. Indeed, Jarvis and Gann proved to be adept, if duplicitous, strategists who forced political opponents onto their terrain. Jarvis frequently made outlandish accusations, as when he claimed that property taxes paid for politicians to travel to Paris and London. Gann would then counter with homilies that softened Jarvis's sharp edge. Proposition 13 will "let us dream the American dream of being safe and secure in our homes," Gann told a television audience during a debate in June. Jarvis's and Gann's greatest success came in placing legislators on the defensive. The California Legislature had done little to reform the state's tax structure. Democratic Governor Jerry Brown had allowed the state to run unprecedented surpluses, largely a product of inflation. And Jarvis and Gann camouflaged Proposition 13 with broad populist, antiwaste political strokes. In this context, legislators often came across exactly as Jarvis and Gann hoped they would, as speaking in bureaucratic language about budget numbers and feasibility studies, while Proposition 13 proponents spoke in easy populist tones.⁵⁴

California voters passed Proposition 13 by a margin of two to one, despite the opposition of nearly the entire state political establishment, both Democrat and Republican. In Alameda County, only the vote in Oakland and Berkeley kept the tallies close. In San Leandro, Fremont, and the Castro Valley, voters approved Proposition 13 by more than 70 percent



Map 8.1. Proposition 13 voting results in Alameda County, 1978. Suburbanites in South County voted overwhelmingly in favor of property tax limitation. Only Berkeley, by 1978 one of the most liberal cities in the nation, and Oakland, in a close return, rejected the so-called tax revolt. Cartography Lab, University of Wisconsin.

(map 8.1). South County as a whole represented a Proposition 13 stronghold. The tax revolt was engineered and led by political forces primarily from Southern California—Los Angeles and Orange County in particular. But voters in southern Alameda County responded aggressively and with near unanimity. Alameda County residents made much less rhetorical noise in the months leading up to the election, but their votes spoke volumes in June. In Oakland proper, the vote reflected the broad class divisions that had persisted in the city for decades. The hill regions voted with the rest of the state, approving Proposition 13 by nearly two to one.

In flatlands neighborhoods, overwhelmingly working-class African American and ethnic Mexican, voters rejected the measure by two to one.⁵⁵

One of the most important contexts in which to understand Proposition 13 and the tax revolt, however, is not the *little* capital of homeownership but the *big* capital of California's corporate business sector. Over the decade preceding the June 1978 election, the share of California's total tax burden borne by individuals in the state had increased, while the share borne by business and industry had declined. This was not solely a product of the property tax legislation (A.B. 80) of the late 1960s, which reduced most business property taxes. It was equally a product of the evolution of other tax structures. The personal income tax, for instance, increased dramatically in California between 1950 and 1975, at a pace far ahead of increases in any comparable corporate taxes. Indeed, the per capita tax in the state increased ahead of income growth, placing individuals on a cycle of adjustment their corporate counterparts largely escaped. Proposition 13 accelerated this overall shift in the state's tax burden, despite the populist rhetoric employed by Jarvis and others. Nearly two-thirds of the property tax relief mandated by Proposition 13 went to businesses and landlords. In Fremont, for instance, Proposition 13 resulted in the reduction of the annual property tax load paid by General Motors from \$3.8 million to 1.1 million, an astonishing loss of revenue for the city and a massive corporate subsidy. Between 1967 and 1979 the share of all state taxes borne by individuals increased from 54% to 72%; the share borne by businesses decreased from 46% to 28%. Thus, not only did Proposition 13 help to accelerate a shift in the distribution of public resources away from older, poorer cities like Oakland, it subsidized and masked a larger social redistribution of the tax burden, from corporate and business capital to people.⁵⁶

This moment in late 1970s California revealed a crucial turn in the evolution of postwar political economy and popular politics in the nation. In the 1940s homeowners in California had entered into an epochal bargain with the federal state, industrial capital, and local officials, in which low taxes were promised in exchange for support of industrial growth. Industry "pays your taxes," as San Leandro boosters bragged in the 1950s. In cases like San Leandro, Fremont, and Milpitas, there was in the 1940s a populist sense that industry could be held responsible for paying a "fair share" of local taxes. When that bargain broke down, however, in part because of capitalist restructuring, homeowners rarely sought to hold corporate capital responsible. Instead, they responded to the shift in the state's tax burden onto their shoulders by staging a counterrevolution against the liberal state, its perceived "waste," and one segment of its beneficiaries, mostly poor and low-income people with historically minimal access to public social resources like education and health care.

Rather than turn their attention toward the immense private corporate and business economic sector, they participated in a revanchist politics defined by a withdrawal from civic and financial connections to older, troubled communities like Oakland.

A generation of homeowners who were among the most privileged in the history of the nation—and who, despite increases in property taxes in the 1970s, continued to benefit enormously from additions to their real wealth, embodied in their homes—engineered the political counterrevolution. Proposition 13 was a major turning point in the political narrative of California and the nation and a bookend to the story of this book—the other being the politics of the late 1940s. The tax revolt anticipated and laid the groundwork for the Reagan era in the national political culture and signaled a fundamental shift in the public's relationship to liberalism and the long legacy of the New Deal. In 1979, the year after Proposition 13, more than twenty other states passed property tax reform legislation or measures, as the tax revolt swept east. More than twenty states also passed income tax reductions. Ronald Reagan would make tax reductions at the federal level part of his broad indictment of government spending and the welfare state. The outcome of tax reform politics in 1978 underscores the centrality of class and racial segregation in the shaping of political interest and ideology in postwar California. Proposition 13 was made possible by more than an ideological turn in the state's electorate. It was made possible because postwar metropolitan development had subsidized segregation.

In Babylon, there was always the possibility of deliverance and rebirth. Yet African American radical and nationalist politics in the 1960s and 1970s were strongest at the level of the U.S. state system, municipal government, where mechanisms for political realization remained the weakest. Despite the Black Panther Party's enthusiasm for intercommunalism and its ambitious plans for socialism in one city, municipalities like Oakland are poor instruments for either revolutionary or social-democratic projects. The property tax can never act as the primary leverage for redistribution because the very survival of the city's institutions depends on it—overtaxed employers and industries simply flee to cities that will not burden them with high taxes. Moreover, the post-Proposition 13 environment in California rendered the property tax an even more unwieldy mechanism for progressive redistribution. Furthermore, the large-scale withdrawal of federal support for urban programs specifically and the welfare state generally in the 1970s and 1980s weakened cities' leverage in the national political economy even more. Black power had no real chance of instantiation at the city level other than in the limited nationalist actions—black capitalism, boycotts, and electing African American

mayors and city councilmembers—that emerged as dominant strategies in the 1970s. These were not inconsequential—indeed, for many they were epochal in importance—but neither were they capable of forcing the sorts of transformations that people like Paul Cobb and Elaine Brown believed places like Oakland needed. The colonial analogy of urban black America, no matter its analytic utility, could thus only take its adherents so far in practical political economic terms.

The year between Lionel Wilson's election in 1977 and the Proposition 13 election in 1978 embodied the muted enthusiasms, complex ironies, and unanswered questions that mark historical transitions. The city's political regime had been overturned, and for the first time in two generations black Oaklanders and their allies had access to real municipal power. But Wilson did not look like the kind of leader who would emerge as the champion of a dramatically new politics—certainly not the sort of new politics that neighborhood activists had been articulating for a decade. Was his Panther support merely symbolic—a reflection of the capacity of middle-class black political leaders to capitalize on the rhetoric of black power radicalism without pursuing its substance—or the signal of progressivism? Other questions pressed with even greater intensity on veterans of black Oakland's political struggles. What did it mean for an African American-led municipal administration to be coming to power at exactly the historical moment when urban resources were approaching a postwar nadir—and when hostility to spending on cities in California was not merely a vague tendency but part of a major political movement, quite soon a national one? These questions lay not very far below the surface as Wilson completed his first year in office. Both the possibilities and the limitations seemed so real, so palpable to observers across the political spectrum that the entire situation seemed suspended, held in sort of liminal rest. Oaklanders who wanted to make a new city—indeed, a new history—struck out into this world with tentative apprehension, heirs to the social and political legacy of three decades of struggle over the fate of the East Bay metropolis.