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An Instrument of Collective Redemption: The Moral Mondays Movement and Grassroots Community Organizing

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On a hot day in the summer of 2013, 92-year-old Rosanell Eaton addressed a crowd of protestors outside the North Carolina General Assembly in Raleigh. Having personally registered thousands of voters in her 75 years of civil rights activism, Eaton lamented the recent weakening of voting rights in North Carolina:

I have been up against a lot. I was only 18-years-old, finishing high school [when I faced] the voter ID bill that was designed to make it harder to vote. Here I am at 92-years-old doing the same battling. And adding again alongside Republicans' efforts to eliminate and cut early voting... alongside the effort to keep college students from voting by inflicting a heavy financial penalty on their parents if they attempt to vote away from home when they are away at college. And so, we need more, not less public access to the ballot... At age 92, I am fed up and fired up!"⁴⁹

In her speech, Eaton recalled being forced to recite the preamble to the Constitution as a prerequisite for registering to vote during the Jim Crow era.⁵⁰ More than seventy years later, Eaton described yet another restrictive voting law in North Carolina: House Bill 589. Eaton saw the bill as an attempt by North Carolina Republicans to disfranchise voters, linking it with her experiences as a young Black woman during the Jim Crow era; she saw both experiences as part of the same history of voter suppression in the state. Eaton was an active participant in the weekly protest movement, vowing to do whatever it took to defend the sacred right to vote. On

⁴⁹ NC Forward Together Moral Movement Channel. 2013. "92 Year-Old Moral Monday Arrestee Fired Up! | Rosa Nell Eaton," July 16, 2013, video, 6:15. <https://youtu.be/6yVdvABN3Hk>.

⁵⁰ Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 292.

that summer day in 2013, 92-year-old Eaton was arrested for the first time in her life. Her crime: civil disobedience.⁵¹

The story of Rosanell Eaton captures the essence of the Moral Mondays movement. Founded in 2013 under the leadership of Reverend Dr. William Barber II and the North Carolina NAACP, Moral Mondays was a grassroots response to the rightward shift of the newly elected Republican supermajority in the state. Although the movement sought to mobilize North Carolinians in opposition to extremist policies by the Republican legislature, it was much more than an oppositional effort. Moral Mondays built and sustained grassroots strength by articulating a vision that drew from religious ideals and a philosophy of ‘fusion politics’ to inspire a diverse group of citizens. Using North Carolina as a case study, this paper will examine the ways that grassroots movements can empower ordinary citizens to engage in the political process. I will use a bottom-up approach to historical analysis to explore the multi-faceted ways that Moral Mondays unified a diverse coalition of demonstrators to inspire faith in an inclusive society and a participatory democracy.

Understanding the formation and evolution of the Moral Mondays movement requires a basic historical overview of North Carolina’s political landscape in 2013. Funded by conservative billionaires such as the Koch brothers, Project REDMAP (Redistricting Majority Project) sought to increase Republican control of state legislatures to enable partisan gerrymandering during the 2010 redistricting process.⁵² One of the top targets of Project REDMAP was North Carolina, which saw Republicans gain control of both houses of the state legislature in 2010.⁵³ After taking office in 2011, the new Republican legislative majority gerrymandered the state to serve its partisan electoral interests. These gerrymandering efforts paid off in the 2012 election cycle, which saw Republicans win supermajorities in both houses of the state legislature.

The 2012 election also saw the victory of Republican gubernatorial candidate Pat McCrory; this was the first time Republicans won control of both North Carolina’s executive and legislative branches since Reconstruction. Despite campaigning as a pragmatic moderate who pledged to “bring this state together,” Pat McCrory took a sharp-right turn almost immediately after entering the governor’s mansion in early 2013. With the support of Republican supermajorities in the legislative branch, McCrory began proposing some of the most radical conservative policies in the nation. These policies affected a wide range of issues including voting rights, unemployment benefits, transgender rights, and cuts to education spending.⁵⁴

At the center of efforts to advance this ideological agenda were several influential right-wing think tanks such as the Civitas Institute, the John Locke Foundation, and Americans for Prosperity-North Carolina. After the 2012 election, Republican policymakers appointed

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Michael Kasino, *Rigged: The Voter Suppression Playbook* (American Issues Initiative, 2020), <https://www.riggedthefilm.com/watch-at-home>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Campbell Robertson, “North Carolinians Fear the End of a Middle Way,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2013, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/us/north-carolinians-fear-the-end-of-a-middle-way.html>.

members of these think tanks into high-level positions, allowing conservative ideologues to influence policymaking on myriad issues such as dissuading the state from expanding Medicaid.⁵⁵ According to a published document from July 2013, the Civitas Institute supported state legislation on “tax reform,” “election reform,” and a “major statewide school choice program,” all of which were euphemisms for controversial policies that directly impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians.⁵⁶ In yet another example of its legislative influence, the Civitas Institute worked to make the infamous North Carolina voter identification bill even more restrictive by urging state legislators to ban student IDs and tribal IDs from the list of valid state identifications.⁵⁷ It is hardly coincidental that the policies passed by the state legislature were consistent with the ideological goals of the Civitas Institute; it reflects the rightward shift in state politics after Republicans gained total control of the state in early 2013. At a Moral Mondays protest later that year, Reverend Barber criticized McCrory and Republican legislators for this sudden conservative shift. Barber said, “they’ve drunk all the Tea Party they could drink and sniffed all the Koch they could sniff,” referring to the influence of the Tea Party and the Koch Brothers on the governing party.⁵⁸ Outfitted with new electoral maps that strengthened their political advantage and influenced by the policy proposals of conservative think tanks, the North Carolina Republican Party shifted the state’s political landscape considerably to the right in the early months of 2013.

These dramatic policy changes had repercussions for North Carolinians: 900,000 people were affected by the elimination of the earned-income tax credit; 500,000 people were affected by the state’s refusal to expand Medicaid; 170,000 people were affected by the state’s decision to end federal unemployment benefits; 30,000 children were affected by spending cuts to pre-kindergarten programs; and hundreds of thousands of people were affected by proposed new voting restrictions and voter identification requirements.⁵⁹ Witnessing the deleterious impacts of these sweeping policy changes on the poor, the elderly, and young families, activists began to vocalize their discontent.

Tyler Swanson was one of the first activists to organize a response to these radical conservative policies. Swanson was a student at North Carolina A&T University, one of the largest historically Black universities (HBCUs) in the country and a site of youth activism during the Civil Rights Movement.⁶⁰ Swanson was particularly concerned about Senate Bill 666, which would have eliminated one week of early voting, reduced the number of early voting stations to

⁵⁵ Theda Skocpol and Caroline Tervo, eds., *Upending American Politics: Polarizing Parties, Ideological Elites, and Citizen Activists from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵⁶ Civitas Staff, “North Carolina’s 2013 Legislative Session Recap: Landmark Gains For Conservatism” (Civitas Institute, July 30, 2013), <https://www.nccivitas.org/2013/2013-legislative-session-recap/>.

⁵⁷ Theda Skocpol and Caroline Tervo, eds., *Upending American Politics*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵⁸ Ari Berman, “North Carolina’s Moral Monday Movement Kicks Off 2014 With a Massive Rally in Raleigh,” *The Nation*, February 8, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/north-carolinas-moral-monday-movement-kicks-2014-massive-rally-raleigh/>.

⁵⁹ Ari Berman, “North Carolina’s Moral Monday Movement Kicks Off 2014 With a Massive Rally in Raleigh,” *The Nation*, February 8, 2014.

⁶⁰ “Tyler Swanson – North Carolina NAACP Youth and College Field Secretary,” April 18, 2016, sec. Portrait of a Millennial Activist, https://sites.duke.edu/pjms364s_01_s2016_tylerswanson/.

one per county, and eliminated the \$2,500 child tax deduction for young adults who voted at an address different than their parents' home.⁶¹ Swanson and fellow activists at A&T and Bennett College worried these provisions would discourage college students from exercising their right to vote. After the university denied Swanson's proposal to host a protest on campus, he organized a demonstration with the nearby Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and invited Reverend William Barber II, president of the North Carolina NAACP. On April 12, 2013, Swanson gathered with dozens of students and community members for this grassroots demonstration. Derrick Smith, a political scientist at A&T and veteran activist, referred to Swanson and the three other student organizers from A&T and Bennett College as the "Greensboro Four of 2013".⁶² On that day in April 2013, in the city where the Greensboro Four launched the sit-in movement more than fifty years earlier, a new protest movement was born.

If the student-led protest on April 12 planted the seeds of the movement, April 29 marked its metamorphosis into a full-fledged organization with a distinct identity and theory of change. On April 29, 2013, a group of approximately fifty protestors marched into the North Carolina General Assembly in Raleigh singing freedom songs. Two of the group's leaders were Reverend Barber and Bob Zellner, a veteran community organizer from the Civil Rights Movement and the first white field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Just as the Greensboro Four and the 1960 sit-in movement lay the groundwork for the student-led protest on April 12, 2013, so too did the legacy and tactics of the Civil Rights Movement inspire the April 29 protest. The protest was a response to the voter identification bill being debated in the state legislature. The bill sought to transform North Carolina from a state with relatively progressive election laws into a state with some of the most stringent voting restrictions in the country. On the first day of protest, seventeen people were arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience, most of whom were clergy members. Barber and fellow demonstrators referred to the event as a "peaceful pray-in," an intentional description that sought to use a religious allusion to justify the movement's values-based approach to social change. After the demonstration on April 29, the group of clergy members and community organizers began hosting weekly protests event. They called these events "Moral Mondays".⁶³

The spring of 2013 saw the rapid growth of the new Moral Mondays movement. Song and prayer filled weekly demonstrations in Raleigh as protestors joined the movement to represent diverse issues of concern to North Carolinians. A *National Public Radio* broadcast from May 22, 2013, interviewed several demonstrators including Larsene Taylor, the vice president of UE Local 150, North Carolina's public service workers union. In the interview, Taylor identified herself as a first-time community organizer who joined Moral Mondays to advocate for labor rights in a state that did not provide strong protections for workers. After being arrested for civil disobedience in a May 2013 protest, Taylor expressed a desire to return to future demonstrations, telling the interviewer, "I'm ready to go back and do it again if it will

⁶¹ General Assembly of North Carolina, *Election Law Changes*, Senate Bill 666, 2013, <https://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2013/Bills/Senate/PDF/S666v1.pdf>.

⁶² Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*, chap. 10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

make a difference.”⁶⁴ Taylor’s enthusiasm reflects the movement’s broadening appeal as it moved beyond voting rights to galvanize support among various citizen groups with different policy priorities. Like Taylor, many demonstrators joined Moral Mondays in May and June 2013 as the movement grew rapidly and diversified its policy goals.

By the sixth week of protests on June 3, an estimated 1,500 people attended an event branded as the “Mega Moral Monday”. Demonstrators gathered on Halifax Mall in Raleigh to represent a diverse range of issues; among the attendees were public school teachers, environmentalists, feminist activists, clergy members, and union members. Later that day, 150 people were arrested for civil disobedience as they sang freedom songs and delivered speeches in the General Assembly building to highlight the government’s neglect of its most vulnerable citizens.⁶⁵ Later in June, researchers studied a Moral Mondays event to better understand the demographic composition of the crowd. Of the 316 people interviewed, 50% were attending their first Moral Mondays protest, indicating the growing popularity of the movement. Additionally, around 90% of those interviewed were white alongside a significant number of African Americans, and the average age of the respondents was fifty.⁶⁶ The movement grew more diverse with each week as increasing numbers of young people, immigrants, and Latinos joined the growing demonstrations to represent a broader range of issues.⁶⁷

As the Moral Mondays movement burgeoned in June 2013, so did the backlash against it. High-ranking Republican state senator Thom Goolsby published an infamous op-ed in the *Chatham Journal* titled “Moron Monday shows radical Left just doesn’t get it,” in which he attempted to delegitimize the concerns of protestors and justify the state’s cuts to public services as efforts to eliminate “government waste,” and reduce state budget shortfalls.⁶⁸ Goolsby’s claim about this good-faith Republican effort to remain fiscally responsible does not hold up to scrutiny; alongside sweeping cuts to public services, the state legislature passed a major tax overhaul that disproportionately benefitted the highest income earners by eliminating the estate tax and reducing the number of tax brackets.⁶⁹ Moral Mondays demonstrators had been protesting against this tax bill, arguing that the bill was regressive because it reduced the tax rate

⁶⁴ Nicole Campbell and Frank Stasio, “Moral Mondays: Modern Day Civil Disobedience In The State Capitol,” *North Carolina Public Radio - WUNC*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.wunc.org/post/moral-mondays-modern-day-civil-disobedience-state-capitol>.

⁶⁵ Adam Owens, “More than 150 Arrested at ‘Mega Moral Monday’ Protest,” *WRAL*, June 3, 2013, <https://www.wral.com/-mega-moral-monday-protests-heat-up-outside-legislature/12511141/>.

⁶⁶ *Outside Agitators? The Homegrown Roots of the Moral Monday Protests* (EPS Research, June 17, 2013), <http://80pct.com.s3.amazonaws.com/eps-research/MoralMonday.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Scott Keyes, “The Biggest Liberal Protest Of 2013 In 35 Photos & Video,” *Think Progress*, June 28, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140731214800/https://thinkprogress.org/justice/2013/06/28/2207851/moral-monday-protest/>.

⁶⁸ Thom, Goolsby, “Moron Monday Shows Radical Left Just Doesn’t Get It,” *Chatham Journal*, June 7, 2013, <https://www.chathamjournal.com/weekly/opinion/myopinion/moron-monday-shows-radical-left-just-does-not-get-it-130607.shtml>.

⁶⁹ Mark Binker, “Breaking down the 2013 tax package,” *WRAL*, July 18, 2013, <https://www.wral.com/breaking-down-the-2013-tax-package/12678653/>

for wealthy individuals while eliminating tax breaks for childcare, permanent disability and education expenses.⁷⁰

Despite protestors' legitimate concerns about these changes to state policies, Harry Brown, another Republican state senator, echoed Thom Goolsby's contempt for Moral Mondays. Brown explained, "it's my understanding that a lot of these people are from out of state," advancing a common Republican claim that the movement consisted largely of 'outside agitators.'⁷¹ In his first public comment about Moral Mondays in June 2013, Governor Pat McCrory concurred with Brown's assessment, saying that "outsiders are coming in, and they're going to try to do to us what they did to Scott Walker in Wisconsin." McCrory was referencing the mass protests in Madison after Governor Walker and state Republicans passed a 2011 law revoking collective bargaining rights for public sector workers.⁷² Notwithstanding Brown and Walker's claims of 'outside agitators', the aforementioned study of a Moral Mondays protest found that only 5 of 316 interviewed protestors (2%) at a June 17 event reported an out-of-state zip code as their primary address.⁷³ The strong local enthusiasm for Moral Mondays was not surprising; the movement provided an opportunity for ordinary North Carolinians to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the state legislature's unpopular conservative policies. Republican lawmakers felt threatened by the appeal of Moral Mondays as a popular, nonviolent protest movement that allowed constituents to hold the governing party accountable. Consequently, the backlash from prominent state Republicans often contained falsehoods intended to delegitimize the growing movement such as the myth of 'outside agitators.'

As spring turned to summer, the movement saw record-breaking enthusiasm and turnout, and weekly protests drew more than 3,000 attendees. On a Monday in late June, a multi-racial crowd gathered to pray at Pullen Baptist Church before joining the weekly protest. Reverend Barber preached about the immorality of state Republicans' refusal to expand Medicaid. He asked the crowd: "How do you say cutting 500,000 people's health care is the moral thing to do?... [Republican lawmakers] liberally ignore most of the Bible... When you hurt the poor, you are not faithfully executing the constitution."⁷⁴ In this speech, Barber evoked faith to advocate ethical policies and justify Moral Mondays protests. This was part of a longer tradition of civil rights organizing that drew on religious values in order to promote a moral policy agenda. As Annie Li argues, Black Christian voting rights activists such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and C.T. Vivian "intertwined and synergized [civil rights activism]

⁷⁰ Kim Severson, "Protests in North Carolina Challenge Conservative Shift in State Politics," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2013, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/12/us/weekly-protests-in-north-carolina-challenge-conservative-shift-in-state-politics.html>.

⁷¹ Mark Binker and Amanda Lamb, "Most Arrested in 'Moral Monday' Protests from NC," *WRAL*, June 11, 2013, <https://www.wral.com/most-moral-monday-arrestees-from-north-carolina/12540006/>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Outside Agitators? The Homegrown Roots of the Moral Monday Protests* (EPS Research, June 17, 2013).

⁷⁴ Scott Keyes, "The Biggest Liberal Protest Of 2013 In 35 Photos & Video," *Think Progress*, June 28, 2013.

with their Christian faith.” Rooted in the texts and ethics of the Bible, these Black activists felt a moral obligation to challenge social, economic, and political injustices.⁷⁵

Consistent with Li’s argument about religion as a key characteristic of grassroots organizing during the Civil Rights Movement, many Moral Mondays activists incorporated their own religious values to condemn voter suppression and articulate moral policy aspirations. At the June 23 demonstration, a protest sign criticized cuts to social programs and unemployment benefits by using a short quote from the Bible: “God wants Justice & Compassion for the poor.” Another sign read: “Hey GOP, what would Jesus do? Deny healthcare coverage to more people? Reduce and end help for the unemployed? Suppress voters?”⁷⁶ These protest signs reveal the ways in which some protestors synthesized their religious values with concerns about contemporary policies such as cuts to unemployment benefits and refusal to expand Medicaid. This can be interpreted within a longer tradition rooted in the Civil Rights Movement in which activists used religion and faith to highlight injustices and call for political change. In this way, some Moral Mondays activists argued that public policies genuinely rooted in religious values must recognize and honor the God-given humanity of each person.⁷⁷

Before each weekly protest in Raleigh, Barber hosted multi-faith prayer services where he addressed these themes of morality and religious values to express the movement’s unifying vision of human rights. Barber preached: “I want you to know that when hands that once picked cotton join hands of Latinos join hands of progressive whites join faith hands, and labor hands, and Asian hands, and Native American hands, and poor hands, and wealthy hands with a conscience, and gay hands, and straight hands, and trans hands, and Christian hands, and Jewish hands, and Muslim hands, and Hindu hands, and Buddhist hands – when we all get together, we are an instrument of redemption.”⁷⁸ This quotation illustrates several key elements of the movement’s philosophy. By framing this portion of his speech around the act of joining hands, Barber advanced the movement’s vision of unifying diverse groups of people in a shared struggle for justice. In particular, Barber’s reference to “redemption” is noteworthy because it contrasts with the common usage of the term in an explicitly Christian context. Rather than using the theme of “redemption” to force his religious beliefs on the movement’s participants, Barber used the term to inspire solidarity and articulate a vision of collective moral renewal across religious, racial, and socioeconomic lines. This is reflective of a larger theme of Moral Mondays: the movement often evoked the ethical teachings of various faith traditions in order to unify demonstrators with diverse backgrounds in support of a shared moral agenda.

As the protests increased in size during the summer of 2013, this public articulation of collective ethics helped the Moral Mondays movement empower a diverse group of North

⁷⁵ Annie Li, “Faith Without Works Is Dead: The Motivations, Convictions, and Limitations of Black American Christian Activists in the Fight for Voting Rights,” *AAS 385W: Voting Rights and Voter Suppression*, 2020.

⁷⁶ Scott Keyes, “The Biggest Liberal Protest Of 2013 In 35 Photos & Video,” *Think Progress*, June 28, 2013.

⁷⁷ William J. Barber and Tim Tyson, “Gird Up, Get Up, and Grow Up: Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II in Conversation with Tim Tyson” (2019), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/733314>.

⁷⁸ Dara Kell, *Poor People’s Campaign: How Rev. William J. Barber Uses His Faith To Fight*, YouTube (TIME, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9adyOmZa9M8>.

Carolínians.⁷⁹ As journalist and author Ari Berman wrote, “the Moral Monday protests transformed North Carolina politics in 2013, building a multiracial, multi-issue movement centered around social justice... the South hadn't seen since the 1960s.”⁸⁰ Representing many communities with diverse policy priorities, Moral Mondays coined the term ‘fusion politics’ to encapsulate its philosophy. ‘Fusion politics’ refers to the blending of disparate political ideologies among diverse communities and organizations to focus on shared values. The movement’s name was itself indicative of this organizing vision; rather than attaching itself to a specific political or social ideology, it identified itself as “moral”, a word that affirms its focus on collectivist values.⁸¹ Crucially, ‘fusion politics’ did not hinder the movement’s ability to support specific policies. As Barber explained in *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing*, the Forward Together Moral Movement supported anti-poverty legislation, equality in education, equitable healthcare access, criminal justice reform, voting rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights, and women’s rights.⁸² These policy areas reflect the movement’s desire to guarantee equality and justice for all North Carolínians. Forging this inclusive vision of human rights, the Forward Together Moral Movement relied on ‘fusion politics’ to combat the divide and conquer governing tactics of Pat McCrory and Republican state legislators.

Consistent with its values-based approach, the movement used grassroots organizing tactics to promote long-term community engagement. This was part of a longer tradition of strong social ties playing a central role in grassroots organizing during the Civil Rights Movement. Charles Payne’s book, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, outlines the community organizing tradition in rural Mississippi. This tradition emphasized the long-term development of grassroots leadership among community members, and it differed from the community mobilizing tradition that focused on attracting large crowds and media attention for isolated events such as the March on Washington. Payne’s book addresses this tradition of community organizing by detailing the history of grassroots civil rights activism in the Mississippi Delta region. He focuses much of his book on SNCC, an organization known for its bottom-up approach to civil rights activism that helped engage communities across the South.⁸³

Perhaps unsurprisingly given SNCC veteran Bob Zellner’s leadership in Moral Mondays, this community organizing tradition was the most direct antecedent for the 2013 movement. As sociologist Jen Schradie argues, strong social ties were critical to the emergence of Moral Mondays, and these ties were particularly important for sustaining activism beyond the first few months. Schradie contrasts the movement with Occupy Wall Street, which was much more

⁷⁹ Zoë Schlanger, “North Carolina’s Moral Mondays Are Back With Massive March,” *Newsweek*, February 10, 2014, <https://www.newsweek.com/n-carolina-progressive-group-kicks-2014-massive-march-228585>.

⁸⁰ Ari Berman, “North Carolina’s Moral Mondays,” *The Nation*, July 17, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/archive/north-carolinas-moral-mondays/>.

⁸¹ Jen Schradie, “Moral Monday Is More Than a Hashtag: The Strong Ties of Social Movement Emergence in the Digital Era,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (February 5, 2018).

⁸² Liz Theoharis, R. H. Lowery, and William J. Barber, eds., *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2018).

⁸³ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

dependent on weaker digital ties and relied heavily on the spontaneity of social media. She argues that Moral Mondays lasted longer than Occupy Wall Street because it used social ties rather than digital ties to recruit and engage its participants.⁸⁴

College students like Tyler Swanson used their social networks on campus to register voters and recruit other young people to join Moral Mondays protests.⁸⁵ Despite the charismatic leadership of Reverend William Barber II – sometimes referred to as this generation’s Martin Luther King Jr. – the weekly protests strived to highlight grassroots participation rather than top-down leadership. Weekly demonstrations in Raleigh provided a platform for affected community members to address the crowd of protestors and make their concerns heard.⁸⁶ The homepage of the Forward Together Moral Movement website emphasized that community leaders should “inform *their own grassroots campaigns* [emphasis added] to fight injustice and oppression that their communities face.”⁸⁷ This explicit reference on the Moral Mondays website to the importance of home-grown leadership confirms that the movement understood itself as part of a tradition of grassroots social change. Inspired by SNCC’s community organizing tradition during the Civil Rights Movement, Moral Mondays centered the voices of local community leaders and activists.

One of the many home-grown leaders in Moral Mondays was Rosanell Eaton, the 92-year-old North Carolina native who joined the movement to fight for voting rights.⁸⁸ While Eaton marched in Raleigh on June 23 to protest voter suppression in North Carolina, the Supreme Court was in the process of dismantling the most powerful legislative achievement of the Civil Rights movement: the Voting Rights Act. In a 5-4 decision on June 25, 2013, Chief Justice John Roberts and the four conservative justices ruled that Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional. The majority opinion in the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision invalidated the formula created in 1965 that required federal oversight in specific states with the worst history of voter discrimination. Following this landmark Supreme Court decision in June 2013, North Carolina no longer required federal oversight to change its voting laws.⁸⁹

The *Shelby County v. Holder* decision prompted a speedy legislative response by Republican lawmakers and their conservative backers in North Carolina. By mid-August, the state legislature passed House Bill 589, one of the country’s harshest voting laws. In one stroke of Pat McCrory’s pen, North Carolina instituted strict voter identification requirements, rolled back early voting, ended same-day voter registration, eliminated preregistration for teenagers,

⁸⁴ Jen Schradie, “Moral Monday Is More Than a Hashtag: The Strong Ties of Social Movement Emergence in the Digital Era,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (February 5, 2018).

⁸⁵ “Tyler Swanson – North Carolina NAACP Youth...,” April 18, 2016, sec. Portrait of a Millennial Activist.

⁸⁶ NC Forward Together Moral Movement Channel. 2013. “NC Attack on Voting Rights | Moral Monday 12,” YouTube (July 24, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCMPFYeT2e8>.

⁸⁷ “Forward Together Moral Movement” (Forward Justice, n.d.), accessed September 30, 2020, <https://forwardjustice.org/movement/forward-together-moral-movement/>.

⁸⁸ Barry Yeoman, “Can Moral Mondays Produce Victorious Tuesdays?,” *The American Prospect*, January 19, 2015, <https://prospect.org/api/content/251b1c6e-f9c0-5569-b816-689d45c5407e/>.

⁸⁹ Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*, chap. 9.

and banned the counting of votes cast in the wrong precinct.⁹⁰ The law had a decisive impact; it made it much harder for North Carolinians to exercise their constitutional right to vote.⁹¹

Amidst this legislative rollback of voting rights in North Carolina, Moral Mondays exploded in popularity. Weekly protests in the summer of 2013 attracted thousands of demonstrators. Each week, volunteers wore green arm bands to indicate their intention to get arrested; for many, this was their first time participating in acts of civil disobedience.⁹² In a telling sign of the movement's popularity, the police often brought empty buses to Moral Mondays protests in anticipation of a large number of arrested protestors.⁹³ By mid-July, 838 people had been arrested since the weekly protests began on April 29. Inspired by the nonviolent civil disobedience tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, these protest strategies were effective; Moral Mondays was becoming a mass movement.

One of the most remarkable displays of the movement's grassroots strength was the Moral March in early 2014. Although a similar annual march had taken place for several years under the leadership of the Historic Thousands on Jones Street People's Assembly Coalition, the event on February 8, 2014 was historic and record-breaking.⁹⁴ Building on momentum from the previous summer, the Moral March attracted approximately 80,000 people, making it the largest civil rights rally in the South since the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.⁹⁵ On the day of the event, nearly 100 buses transported people to Raleigh from across the state. Demonstrators began their march at Shaw University, the place where SNCC was founded in 1960.⁹⁶ The location of the Moral March was not accidental; by choosing to begin the march at Shaw University, Moral Mondays reaffirmed its connection to the Civil Rights Movement. It was a powerful allusion to a generation of SNCC activists who inspired the community organizing philosophy of the Moral Mondays movement.

The Moral March brought together North Carolinians with a broad range of concerns and policy priorities. Instagram posts depict protestors braving a chilly winter day in Raleigh as they marched with signs demanding women's reproductive rights, voting rights, LGBTQ rights, a minimum wage increase, and an end to the influence of money in politics. Notably, the Moral March exuded fun and optimism; social media video clips show groups of protestors dancing and finding joy in democratic participation.⁹⁷ The light-hearted nature of the march helped the movement engage a diverse group of participants and advance its vision of 'fusion politics'.

⁹⁰ Adam Liptak and Michael Wines, "Strict North Carolina Voter ID Law Thwarted After Supreme Court Rejects Case," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2017, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/us/politics/voter-id-laws-supreme-court-north-carolina.html>.

⁹¹ Anne De Mare, *Capturing The Flag* (Bullfrog Films, 2018), <https://docuseek2-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/cart/product/1677>.

⁹² Ari Berman, "North Carolina's Moral Mondays," *The Nation*, July 17, 2013.

⁹³ Scott Keyes, "The Biggest Liberal Protest Of 2013 In 35 Photos & Video," *Think Progress*, June 28, 2013.

⁹⁴ Jaime Fuller, "80,000 people protested in NC this weekend. Here's why," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/02/10/why-tens-of-thousands-of-people-were-rallying-in-raleigh/>.

⁹⁵ Zoë Schlanger, "North Carolina's Moral Mondays Are Back With Massive March," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2014.

⁹⁶ Ari Berman, "North Carolina's Moral Mondays," *The Nation*, July 17, 2013.

⁹⁷ Zoë Schlanger, "North Carolina's Moral Mondays Are Back With Massive March," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2014.

In his speech, Barber introduced the next chapter of the Moral Mondays movement: "This Moral March inaugurates a fresh year of grassroots empowerment, voter education, litigation and nonviolent direct action," Barber told the energized crowd. 2014 was, in fact, an important year of growth for Moral Mondays. The movement gained national attention as Barber travelled across the country making appearances on television programs and talk shows. The summer of 2014, dubbed the "Moral Freedom Summer," saw an effort by the Moral Mondays coalition to register new voters across North Carolina. The name was an allusion to the Freedom Summer of 1964; in a political landscape defined by the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision and subsequent voting restrictions in North Carolina, the Moral Mondays movement sought to tie the contemporary struggle for voting rights with past efforts to fight Black voter disfranchisement during the Civil Rights Movement. Tyler Swanson personally registered 115 voters that summer. Although the work wasn't flashy, activists like Swanson did the heavy lifting of democracy, registering approximately 5,000 new voters in one summer.⁹⁸ Propelled by its popularity during the first year of grassroots organizing, Moral Mondays developed a sustainable framework for long-term impact in 2014 and beyond.

As a grassroots movement founded less than a decade ago, the historical significance of Moral Mondays is due to its remarkable victories in a relatively short period of time. Leaders and activists in North Carolina crafted a multi-faith movement that uses religious traditions and 'fusion politics' to unify various communities in a diverse coalition. On a rhetorical level, the movement has, at least to a certain degree, reclaimed the rhetoric of religious values from the Evangelical right; drawing on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, some activists within Moral Mondays use the language of religion and faith to highlight social injustices and call for political change. By articulating a shared, values-based agenda, Moral Mondays has made religion and faith a source of inspiration for many members of a diverse coalition without alienating others.

In addition to its rhetorical achievements, Moral Mondays has seen important legislative and public relations victories. In July 2016, the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down North Carolina's strict voting law as unconstitutional. The Court ruled that the law had been "targeting African-Americans with almost surgical precision," by excluding photo identification held disproportionately by African Americans and eliminating a week of early voting that Black churches typically used for 'souls to the polls' events.⁹⁹ While Moral Mondays cannot be directly credited for the court's decision, the weekly protests raised awareness about the effects of voter suppression by amplifying the voices of North Carolinians who were targeted by these strict voting laws; Rosanell Eaton, the 92-year-old voting rights activist who spoke at

⁹⁸ Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*, chap. 10.

⁹⁹ "Federal Appeals Court Strikes Down North Carolina's Restrictive Voting Law" (American Civil Liberties Union, July 29, 2016), <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-appeals-court-strikes-down-north-carolinas-restrictive-voting-law>.

Moral Mondays protests, became one of the plaintiffs in the case against the state of North Carolina.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, efforts by North Carolina Republicans to delegitimize Moral Mondays among the general population were largely unsuccessful as the movement gained public support. A poll conducted by Elon University in September 2013 found that approximately 60% of North Carolinians had heard of Moral Mondays, and 48% of those who were familiar with the movement had a favorable opinion of it. In other words, approximately 30% of the state's population supported Moral Mondays just five months after its founding. This was a major achievement for a grassroots movement, especially one that formed just five months earlier because of student activism by Swanson and other members of the 'Greensboro Four of 2013'. The same poll found that disapproval of Governor McCrory skyrocketed from 25% to 46% by September 2013.¹⁰¹ Given the number of unpopular conservative policies that McCrory signed into law during his first eight months in office, it is impossible to attribute his rising disapproval solely to the rise of the Moral Mondays movement; nonetheless, the movement certainly played a role in highlighting McCrory's failures and swaying the tide of public opinion against him. While reputable public opinion data about the movement is not available after September 2013, 80,000 citizens attended the Moral March in February 2014, suggesting that the movement continued to gain public support over time.¹⁰²

Moreover, the Moral Mondays movement succeeded in effecting change at the ballot box, albeit not immediately. The 2014 election did not lead to the outcome many protestors had hoped; Thom Tillis, speaker of the House of Representatives in North Carolina, won the U.S. Senate race, and Republicans remained in control of state government. By 2016, however, North Carolinians voted to unseat Republican governor Pat McCrory in favor of Democrat Roy Cooper. This was in spite of rampant voter suppression efforts during the 2016 election that targeted Democratic voting blocs in North Carolina such as African Americans and college students.¹⁰³ Cooper's victory proves that Moral Mondays was not just a popular social movement; it was also effective at amassing political power to unseat an influential governor.

Lastly, the movement grew nationally by highlighting the effectiveness of a values-based 'fusion politics' philosophy and reaffirming the importance of grassroots organizing tactics in a participatory democracy. Barber articulated this vision in an interview; he explained that "some people think a movement is national because you have a march in Washington, or... an address in Washington. Selma became national because you nationalize a local movement.... Movements don't come from D.C. down. They come from Birmingham, Greensboro and

¹⁰⁰ Barry Yeoman, "Can Moral Mondays Produce Victorious Tuesdays?," *The American Prospect*, January 19, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Michael Schulson, "North Carolina Went Red in 2016. But Can It Be a Model for Democrats?," *POLITICO Magazine*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/north-carolina-went-red-in-2016-but-can-it-be-a-model-for-democrats-214736>.

¹⁰² Zoë Schlanger, "North Carolina's Moral Mondays Are Back With Massive March," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2014.

¹⁰³ Michael Kasino, *Rigged: The Voter Suppression Playbook* (American Issues Initiative, 2020); Anne De Mare, *Capturing The Flag* (Bullfrog Films, 2018).

Montgomery up. And that's something we've got [to] recapture.”¹⁰⁴ In the years after 2013, chapters of the Moral Mondays movement developed in states such as Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. In more recent years, Reverend Barber founded two national organizations inspired by the local successes of Moral Mondays.¹⁰⁵ These organizations, Repairers of the Breach and the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, joined the Moral Mondays coalition, each addressing a different constituency to help expand the movement's unifying moral values and 'fusion politics' on a national scale.

In the backdrop of the rightward shift in North Carolina and the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, the Moral Mondays movement grew as a site of resistance against the extremist policies and democratic backsliding in the state. Informed by veteran activists and inspired by strategies used during the Civil Rights Movement, Moral Mondays used tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience to gain media attention and attract more people to join the movement. Grassroots organizers galvanized popular support and built a sustained movement by articulating a positive vision of a shared moral agenda that encompassed many different communities. The Moral Mondays movement offers a blueprint for successful community organizing around a values-based vision of 'fusion politics.' By taking an inclusive approach to grassroots organizing, movements can unite a diverse group of citizens around a shared moral agenda to effectively bring about positive social change.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Schulson, "North Carolina Went Red in 2016. But Can It Be a Model for Democrats?," *POLITICO Magazine*, February 4, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Schulson, "North Carolina Went Red in 2016. But Can It Be a Model for Democrats?," *POLITICO Magazine*, February 4, 2017.

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