

Chapter Four:

From Kanye West to Barack Obama: Black Youth, Alienation,
and the Future of U.S. Politics

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Only three days after the tragedy that would become known simply as Katrina, NBC News secured some of the top performers in the entertainment industry to participate in a one-hour live special meant to raise money for the survivors of this catastrophe. All donations would be funneled to those in need through the auspices of the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund. The lineup on this Friday evening included stars of film and music from multiple genres, with the hope that such an eclectic show of star power would not only attract fans from across the spectrum of pop culture, but also stand in visible contrast to the disproportional devastation of Katrina on the lives of poor black people who lived only days ago in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

The show began with performances from two New Orleans natives, Harry Connick Jr. and Wynton Marsalis. Other performers who appeared that evening included Randy Newman, Aaron Neville, Chris Tucker, Lindsay Lohan, Glenn Close, Richard Gere, and Leonardo DiCaprio. Despite the presence of such sought-after celebrities, the most reported-on moments of the evening came about halfway through the hour when Kanye West, who was paired with Mike Myers, went off-script and began denouncing the portrayal of those black people devastated by the flood and the racism of the Bush administration. Mr. West's comments follow:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, "They're looting." You see a white family, it says, "They're looking for food." And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help—with the set-up the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing

everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help us are at war right now, fighting another way—and they've given them permission to go down and shoot us!¹

Following the stage directions, the cameras returned to Mr. Myers, who, although visibly stunned by Mr. West's deviation from the script, began to read his lines on the teleprompter about the possible destruction of the spirit of people devastated by the flood. He then stopped, naively expecting Mr. West to dutifully return to the script. Instead, Mr. Myers and all those watching were confronted with Mr. West's most succinct and controversial statement of the night: "George Bush doesn't care about black people." At this point it seemed no one knew what to do, so the cameras turned to a shocked Chris Tucker, who made no reference to Kanye West or his comments and went back to the script and NBC's plan for this one-hour program.

The responses to Kanye West's comments came fast and furious. NBC issued a statement that evening distancing their networks from Mr. West's statements: "His opinions in no way represent the views of the networks." They went one step further, however, pitting against Mr. West the work of the other artists on the program (those who stayed on script) and those individuals who called in to donate money, writing, "It would be unfortunate if the efforts of the artists who participated tonight and the generosity of millions of Americans who are helping those in need are overshadowed by one person's opinion." Commentary on Mr. West's remarks could be found just about everywhere: in the print media, on the evening news, in the blogosphere, and, of course, on YouTube. Some have noted that prior to stating a word, Mr. West was visibly nervous and that his appearance should have been a tip-off that something was going to erupt. Others have downplayed the sincerity of his comments,

¹See www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03 or www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/09/03/katrina/printable814636

highlighting the fact that Mr. West has a reputation for such off-the-cuff rants.² Not surprisingly, blacks and whites differed significantly in their evaluations of Mr. West's comments. In a study on Katrina led by Michael Dawson at the University of Chicago, Dawson found that while 56 percent of white respondents believed that Mr. West's comments were unjustified, only nine percent of blacks agreed with that position.³

In spite of his history of outbursts, Mr. West's comments about Katrina provide insight into the struggles, frustration, fear, and disillusionment of not only Mr. West, but many other young black Americans today. When young black adults and adolescents are interviewed or asked about their lives and political views, Katrina is just one more example of what many believe to be their secondary position in the American political community. For many in this group of young people, Katrina, the Jena Six, and the exponential rates of both HIV/AIDS and incarceration disproportionately targeting black youth all serve as reminders that they can never depend on the government to fully recognize their contributions or respond to their needs and concerns.⁴ As one young black woman from Chicago explained, Hurricane Katrina reminded her that she really can't count on anyone—the government or other people. “Just like with Hurricane Katrina, you know it took a

² It was November 14, 2004, when Mr. West stormed out of the American Music Awards broadcast after learning he lost in the category of best new artist to Gretchen Wilson for her song “Redneck Woman.” He would later tell reporters, “I felt like I was definitely robbed, and I refused to give any politically correct bullshit comment... I was the best new artist this year.” www.mtv.com/news/articles/1569536/20070912/west_kanye.jhtml#

³ Dawson, Michael C. November 2005. “Katrina, Race and Poverty: Study,” conducted by Knowledge Networks.

⁴ “Jena Six” is the label given to six African American youth arrested in Jena, Louisiana, and charged with second-degree murder for fighting a white youth, Justin Barker. This fight followed a number of incidents in which black students were harassed and physically attacked by white students at the high school. The incident that gained the most attention was the hanging of three nooses by white students from a tree at Jena High School after black students dared to sit by the tree informally reserved for whites, for which they had received permission from a school administrator. The events surrounding this case, especially the racially exaggerated charges against the six black youth, first attracted attention from black media sources and eventually national media attention. Successful political mobilization around the case produced a massive march in September of 2007.

disaster for people to open up, and ‘Oh I’m going to help you’ and this and that. And now you got people from Hurricane Katrina that’s poor, that’s still in Chicago, out in the street, you know, so it’s like, I don’t know. They just [out there] for themselves.”⁵ Another young black respondent explicitly mentioned the secondary position of black people, stating, “...we [black people] come second, and, like, the rich and stuff comes first before we do.”

For this generation of young black people, Katrina is their “Rodney King moment,” that visible rendering of black people and the black body as expendable, especially in the eyes and behavior of the state. In the case of Rodney King, it was not only the physical beating of yet another black man at the hands of the police witnessed around the world, it was also the vindication of those white police officers who took part in the attack (also witnessed around the world). Both components of this event served as a reminder to black Americans across the life-course that although the formal laws of the United States may have changed, the ideologies and instruments of brutality used historically against black people were still in use and available to those in power.

Young black Americans today view Katrina as a reminder that although the rhetoric of a color-blind society has come to dominate ideological and political discussions of race,

⁵ Quote came from an in-depth interview that was part of the Black Youth Project. The Black Youth Project is a research initiative headed by Professor Cathy Cohen at the University of Chicago. This project examines the attitudes, resources, and culture of African American youth ages 15 to 25, exploring how these factors and others influence their decision-making, norms, and behavior in critical domains such as sex, health, and politics. The first phase of the research focused on mounting a new national survey of young people ages 15 to 25 with an oversample of African Americans. There were 1,590 respondents to the 45-minute telephone survey conducted between July and November 2005. The primary sampling mode was a national random digit dial conducted by NORC. A secondary oversample of blacks and Hispanics was used to supplement low N from those groups in the primary sample. Participants in the oversample came from areas of the U.S. with at least 15 percent black or Hispanic populations. There was also an oversample of respondents in the Chicago area. The response rate for the telephone surveys was 62 percent. During phase two of the project, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with African American respondents of the new national survey. The third phase of the project will explore the themes and narratives found in the most popular rap songs through the methodology of content analysis.

In-depth interviews completed as part of the Black Youth Project.

especially in light of Senator Barack Obama’s historic campaign for the presidency and the fact that the promise of black middle-class expansion has been realized for more black people, in general, black people are still thought of and treated like second-class citizens on any given day. And so on August 29, 2005, this generation of young people turned on their televisions, radios, and computers and found a barrage of images and news stories that highlighted the disproportionate impact of Katrina on poor black people, the mistreatment of those same individuals in evacuation centers and by government officials, and finally the vindication of such ineptitude and discrimination. One need only recount President Bush’s proclamation that then FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) head, Michael Brown, was effectively dealing with this calamity: “Brownie, you are doing a heck of a job.”⁶

However, when black youth talk about their political status today, their concerns do not start or end with Katrina. One is as likely to hear mention of the suppression of black votes during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the constant and increasing attacks on rap music and hip-hop culture, the mass incarceration or what I have deemed the “domestic deportation” of black men and women, as well as the treatment of blacks in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as reasons that many young black people feel like secondary citizens in this country—fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. And far from feeling that Kanye West’s moment of “speaking truth to power” was unjustified, these young people welcome and largely agree with his comments. Mr. West said what millions of young black people believe—namely, that the government does not care about people like them, that black people and young black people in general are not treated as full citizens in the political community of this country, and that young black people

⁶ <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/currentevents/a/katrinaquotes.htm>

face so much discrimination that it is hard for them to get ahead. As one black respondent noted, “To me, I really don’t think that they [the government] care about black people. They put us up there up front and say, ‘Oh, we got a lot of black people in high places.’ But things would be different if they were actually, if they had any power. You know, or if the power they had, they used it.” Another respondent succinctly stated that when he hears the word “politics,” he thinks of “a bunch of white people just trying to get together and just trying to get blacks back into slavery.”⁷

It is important to highlight that although the comments from black respondents may seem extreme, especially in their sense that black people have been neglected, marginalized, and made into secondary citizens by the government, these same young people, like Kanye West, are quick to point out their own personal faults and responsibilities. In conjunction with attacking the government for their inaction, Mr. West also acknowledged that he was a hypocrite because “I’ve been shopping before even giving a donation.” Although the balanced nature of his attack was lost on the media, Mr. West’s willingness to publicly berate himself for his own shortcomings is a trait witnessed over and over again in my discussions with young black people. Specifically, when asked what has led to the often dangerous and devastating condition that many black youth face, our respondents first articulated the personal failings of black youth, and then proceeded, sometimes after prompting, to outline the structural circumstances that make it hard for young black people to get ahead. Unlike their critics who seem focused only on the personal shortcomings of black youth, this group seems to have a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of themselves, their communities, and politics in this country.

⁷ In-depth interviews from the Black Youth Project.

Given the insight of young black people and their centrality to some of the most important issues facing the country, it is ironic that they should feel so tangential to the operation of American democracy. Arguably more than any other group living in the United States, black youth reflect the challenge of inclusion and equality in our current political era. Whether the issue is the mass incarceration of African Americans, the controversy surrounding affirmative action as a policy to redress past discrimination, the increased use of high-stakes testing to regulate standards of education, debates over appropriate and effective campaigns for HIV and AIDS testing and prevention programs, efforts to limit what material is taught in sex-education classes, debates about sexual and violent images in videos, or even initiatives to tie means-tested resources to family structure and marriage, most of these initiatives and controversies are focused on, structured around, and disproportionately affect young, often marginalized black Americans.

It is the relationship of black youth with the state and how such experiences shape their support for or disillusionment with politicians, the political community, and our political order that I explore in this chapter. Increased access to information through the Internet, television, and popular culture, as well as the constant presence of the state in the lives of vulnerable populations, means that the age of significant political engagement with the state and other political entities, if not formal political citizenship, is spiraling downward, especially for black youth. Daily, young black Americans interact with the state and its representatives, and those interactions inform their opinions about themselves, their communities, and their government. For example, young black people engage with the state on a regular basis through state-run health care policies such as Medicaid, through their own experiences or their children's experiences in the public schools, through the payment of

taxes, and through encounters with the police. All of these interactions shape their ideas about their political status and civic commitments. Thus, politicians, policy-makers, and even researchers are sorely mistaken if we proceed as if young people, who are often the targets of institutional and state campaigns, programs, and policies, do not have strong opinions about their position in society, their life chances, and the distribution of power in their communities and the country.

Generally, the data suggest that on most traditional markers of affect toward the government, young black Americans, like the public in general, are cynical and distrust politicians, feeling alienated from what they perceive as the government. However, little recent scholarship has attempted to understand the nature of that discontent. Specifically, is there something different about the political alienation registered by black youth compared to other young people? Are black youth upset with government policies, or do their negative feelings extend deeper to question the fundamental fairness of structure and beliefs that constitute our political order? And finally, if there is severe and differently structured political despair evident among black youth, what are the consequences of such a condition for black youth and the country at large? It is time, I believe, to once again engage in a research agenda focused on the politics of young people, not with an eye toward how such attitudes will influence their behavior when they are older adults, but instead with a determination to understand their sense and practice of politics today, believing them to be critical components in our democratic experiment.

The importance of young people to our current political process is highlighted at every rally for Barack Obama where thousands of young people, especially those in college, show up to visibly demonstrate their support for his candidacy and their potential political

influence. However, beyond the college kids for Obama crowd, other segments of the youth population in this country, especially marginalized black youth, serve as an important marker of the current strength and future functioning of our democracy. For if we are to measure the country's commitment to and success in reaching the principles of democratic inclusion, justice, and equality, made visible during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, then we must understand and attend to the attitudes, concerns, and needs of young black people. While this generation of young black Americans did not live under Jim Crow or experience the harshest realities of systematic economic, political, and social exclusion, they represent the generation of black Americans expected to benefit most from the country's attempts at societal transformation. And without the participation of young black Americans and other marginalized populations, the democracy is left vulnerable to the continued and increasing control of those with more power, more access, and more status, reinforcing and exacerbating divisions that will only lead to greater disparities, divisions, and violent recourse. Moreover, the democracy is left vulnerable to decreasing support not only of politicians and policies, but for the fundamental political order meant to ensure equality, justice, and opportunity.

Barack Obama and Kanye West both call Chicago home and both are favored sons. Senator Obama delivers a message of hope, inspiration and tough love to “urban youth,” suggesting that if he can make it so can they. The trade off, of course, is that to make it these young people (and their parents) have to do some soul-searching and decide to embrace new priorities which begin with getting an education, but also includes turning off the television and video games, and pulling up their pants. Kanye West's message is less of hope and more of learned skepticism of the government, women, and success. While probably not a “hope

monger,” West does believe in hope and fortitude. “That doesn’t kill me can only make me stronger.” This chapter is an exploration of which messages and informally which messengers resonate with black youth today. Will these young people who “never experienced the harshest realities of Jim Crow” express the hope in the government, the country, and the citizenry currently made popular by Barack Obama? Or will these young people who daily confront the “New Jim Crow” replicate the political cynicism, alienation and measured “hope” of Kanye West?

The Political Life of Young Black Americans—Ideas Matter

It is an unfortunate fact, but since the late 1970s and until very recently, there was a dearth of rigorous research and careful reporting on the political attitudes and actions of black youth.⁸ Instead, much of the writing, whether by academics or journalists that takes black youth as its primary subject seeks to describe their lives, challenges, and choices, often exploring the impact of a marginal existence on the norms, sexual choices, and cultural

⁸ During the 1970s, scholars such as Greenberg (1970), Lyons (1970), Abramson (1972), Clarke (1973), and Liebschutz and Niemi (1974) relied on small data sets generated from paper-and-pencil surveys in a limited number of schools and community programs to explore the political attitudes of black youth. Working under the rubric of political socialization, most of these studies focused on issues of trust and efficacy and did not explore the political positions of these young people on specific political and public-policy issues of the time. Even given the problems associated with these research designs, scholars identified interesting findings, suggesting that African American youth had lower levels of trust in the government, while their political efficacy varied depending on such factors as age and class. Unfortunately, instead of building on the insights learned from such studies and generating data from broader and more reliable research strategies, social science research in this area was severely neglected in the 1980s and the contemporary period. See, for example, Lyons, Schley R. 1970. “The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism,” *The Journal of Politics*, 32(2): 288–304; Greenberg, Edward S. 1970. “Black Children and the Political System,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34(3): 333–345; and Abramson, Paul R. 1972. “Political Efficacy and Political Trust among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations,” *The Journal of Politics*, 34(4): 1243–1275. For more recent work in this area, see Simpson, Andrea. 1998. *Tie that Binds: Identity and Political Attitudes in the Post-Civil Rights Generation*. New York: New York University Press.

innovations of this group.⁹ Most of the academic and journalistic studies of black youth published during this period pay no attention to the politics and political agency of this population. In recent years, however, led primarily by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), some researchers are once again turning their attention to the political and civic engagement of young people. Even with this jolt to the academic research agenda, problems still remain. For example, most of the research focuses on civic engagement or voting, and the presumed normative population of study is still white youth.

In spite of such limitations, one important question has reemerged and is being explored, namely, to what degree do we find racial and ethnic differences in the political behaviors and attitudes of young adults and adolescents? Ironically, as in studies of black political participation in the past, current researchers argue that black youth “out-participate” other young people, at least in the civic arena. Peter Levine, in *The Future of Democracy*, writes that while

education and income generally promote participation, and African American youth continue to have lower average levels of education and income than whites... Nevertheless, African American youth are well ahead of whites on several measures of civic engagement.¹⁰

⁹ See, for example, Anderson, Elijah. 1992. *Streetwise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Anderson, Elijah. 1998. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner-City*. New York: Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc.; Nightingale, Carl Husemoller. 1993. *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams*. New York: Basic Books; Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 1999. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Ferguson, Anne Arnette. 2001. *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

¹⁰ Levine, Peter. 2007. *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*. Hanover: University Press of New England, p. 92.

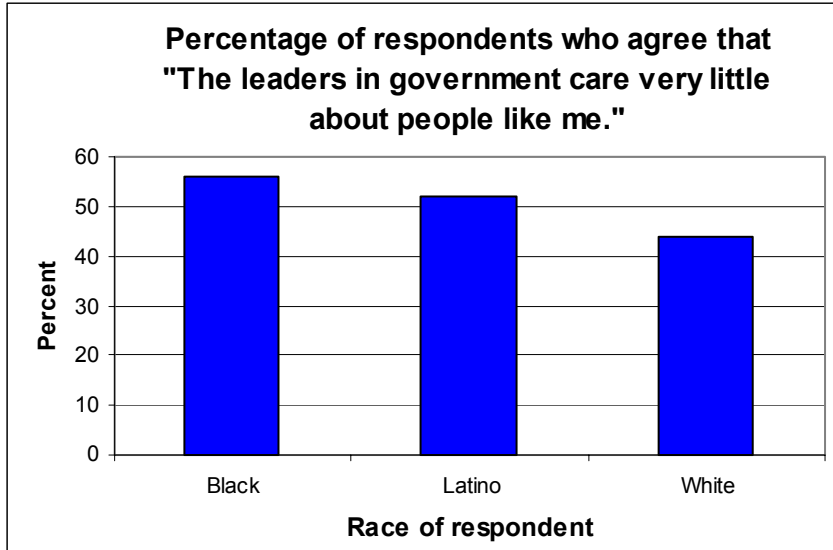
Levine’s bottom line is that “being young and black is currently a positive predictor of civic engagement.” Furthermore, he attributes their larger rates of engagement as possibly being tied to “a legacy of political organization and community-based civic education that began in the African-American church.”¹¹ I think it is important to note that while Levine is correct that on many measures, black youth are more *civically* engaged than other young people, we should remember that in general, the majority of all youth are disengaged, so the advantage of black youth is a slight one. Data from the Black Youth Project indicate that in general, very few young people reported engaging in politics.

Feelings about the Government

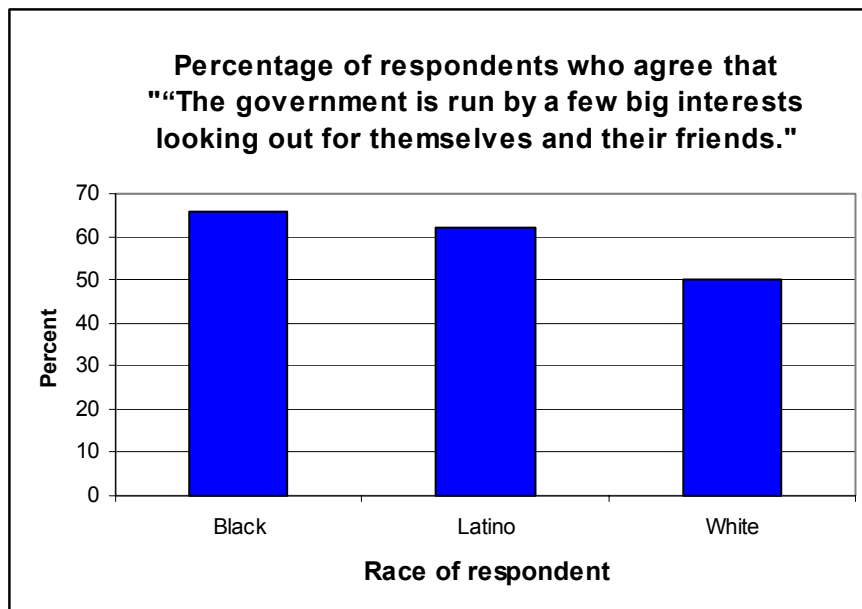
Differences in rates of civic and political participation tell us something about the political life of young black Americans and how their patterns of political activity differ from other groups of young people. However, attention to political behavior, which I interrogate fully in the next chapter, tells us only part of the story. We still have no sense of how young blacks think and feel about the political system. When we posed such questions to adolescents and young adults participating in the Black Youth Project, striking differences emerged among the racial groups under consideration. Our data indicate that on most measures, black youth, more than any other group of young people, hold negative views of the government. For example, the majority—56 percent—of black youth believe that “the leaders in government care very little about people like them.” This is compared to 52 percent of Latino youth and 44 percent of white youth. Interestingly, when disaggregated based on race and gender, the largest gap appears between black women and white women,

¹¹ Ibid. p. 92.

with 58 percent of black females and only 41 percent of white females believing that the government cares little about people like them.



Similarly, black and Latino young people are more likely than white youth to agree that “the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.” Sixty-six percent of black youth, 62 percent of Latino youth, and 50 percent of white youth agree with this assessment.



Again, when the data are disaggregated by sex, the greatest disparity is found between young black women and young white women, with 66 percent of black women and 49 percent of white women believing that the government is run by a few big interests. These negative orientations toward the government were clearly on display in our in-depth interviews with black youth. When one young woman was asked what came to mind when thinking about the government, she responded that the government was “a whole bunch of guys in suits that represent people that they don’t necessarily help. And, I think about a small population of so-called, maybe rich or wealthy people, men predominantly, controlling or making decisions about millions of people, and they have no idea what those people want or need.”¹² Another respondent explained that politicians and politics are “scams...just scams. A bunch of scams, con artists.”¹³

Interestingly, not only was such contempt expressed about wealthy, white, male politicians, but similar feelings of disappointment and cynicism were also spoken about black politicians. One young woman reluctantly said, “I hate to say a lot of, but a lot of black politicians are normally in it for them...or themselves. You know, not necessarily for what they can do and change about their race and how their race [is] perceived or how things are being dealt with in relation to their race. But I think they’re more into it for themselves. And that...that sucks. It’s like, why are you even bothering to run?”¹⁴

Data from CIRCLE suggest that the political cynicism toward the government evident in the previous quotes and findings from the Black Youth Project actually might be on the rise among black youth. For instance, data from CIRCLE’s Civic and Political Health of the

¹² In-depth interview.

¹³ In-depth interview.

¹⁴ In-depth interview.

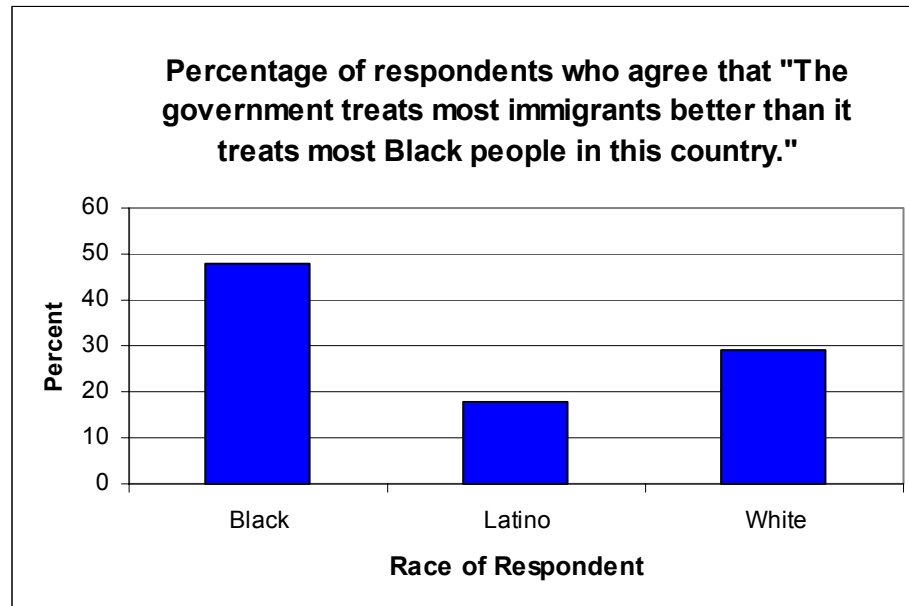
Nation Survey indicate that between 2002 and 2006, African American youth registered the greatest increase among those groups agreeing that the government is not responsive to the genuine needs of the public. Thirty-five percent of African American respondents believed the government to be unresponsive in 2002, while 52 percent called the government unresponsive in 2006. African American youth were also the only group of young people in which a majority indicated that they believed the government to be unresponsive.

Race and the Government

Barack Obama, during his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, made the statement that “there’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.” Again, after his victory in the South Carolina primary race, he underscored his color-blind approach to viewing the United States, stating, “I did not travel around this state over the last year and see a white South Carolina or a black South Carolina. I saw South Carolina.” While the social positioning and political ambitions of Barack Obama that generate such color-blind politics surely will be debated for years to come, I raise his comments to draw out the contrast in how Senator Obama sees the United States and how many of the young black people that we surveyed understand the United States. Most of these young people not only see a black and white America, they would contend that they live and negotiate the consequences of such a racial ordering every day.

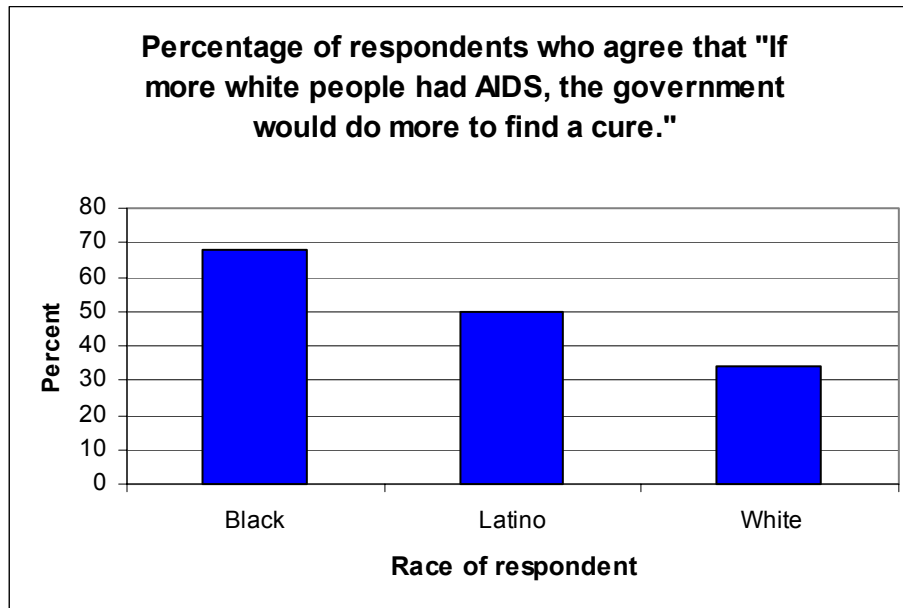
When our respondents were asked more racially explicit questions about the government’s treatment of blacks and black youth, we found even greater disparity between the attitudes of black youth and, in particular, those of white youth. For example, nearly half

of black youth—48 percent—agree with the statement that “the government treats most immigrants better than it treats most black people born in this country.” As we would expect, much smaller proportions of Latino (18 percent) and white (29 percent) youth agree.¹⁵

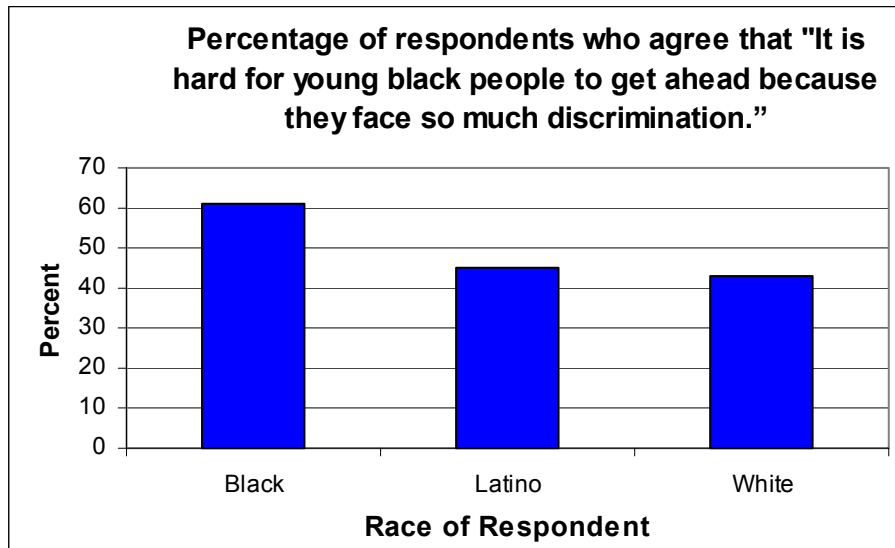


Also, like Kanye West, it seems that the majority of black youth believe that in times of crisis, the government is prone to do more when the victims are white. The overwhelming majority of black youth (68 percent) believe that “the government would do more to find a cure for AIDS if more white people had the disease.” Again, smaller proportions of Latino (but still substantial at 50 percent) and white youth (34 percent) agree.

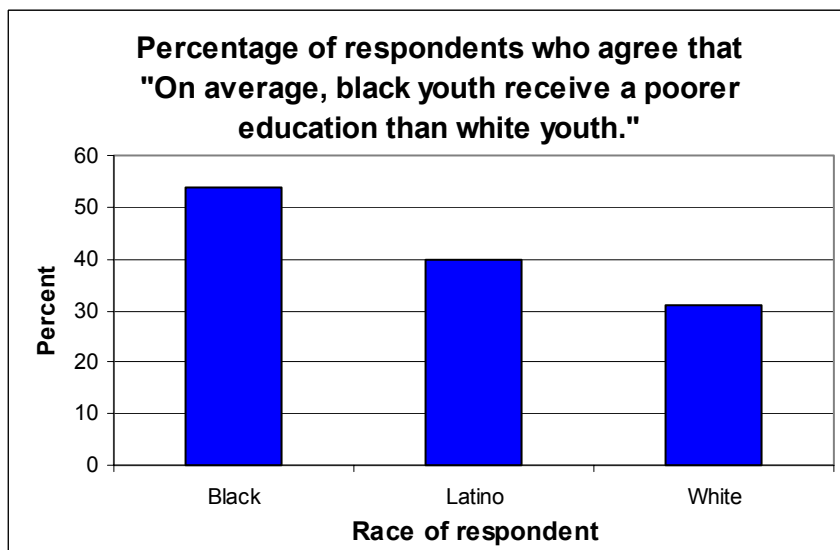
¹⁵ Latina respondents registered the lowest levels of agreement with this statement, with only 14 percent in accord, marking a 34 percentage difference between their support and the concurrence of black women, which registered at 48 percent.



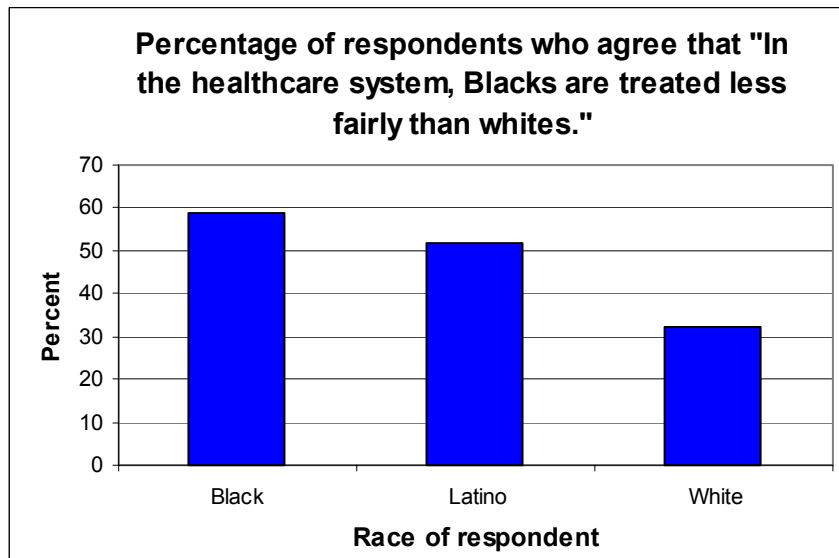
When we probed the perceived discrimination that black youth experience in other aspects of their lives, we found a similar pattern of large gaps in attitudes between, in particular, white and black youth, reflecting what might be called the viewpoint of young white America versus young black America. For example, when we asked if respondents agreed with the statement “It is hard for young black people to get ahead because they face so much discrimination,” 61 percent of black respondents agreed, 45 percent of Latino respondents agreed, and 43 percent of white respondents agreed. The largest sex gap was found between young black men and young white men, with 65 percent of black males agreeing with the statement while only 45 percent of white males agreed.



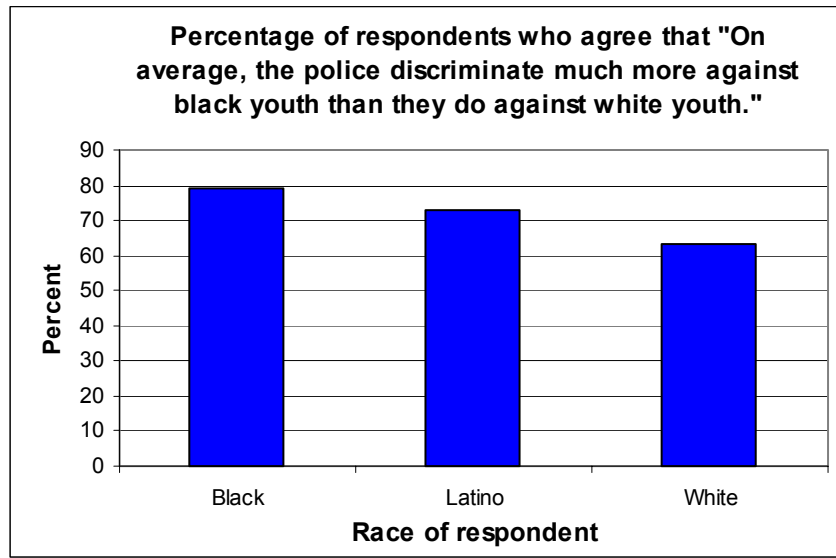
When we asked respondents if they agreed with the statement “On average, black youth receive a poorer education than white youth,” 54 percent of black youth concurred, compared to 31 percent of white youth and 40 percent of Latino youth. Of note is the fact that the gap in support between black males (56 percent) and white males (33 percent) was 23 percentage points. This substantial gap was less than the 25 percentage-point difference in agreement between black females (53 percent) and white females (28 percent).



Perceptions of the treatment of blacks in the health care system also registered interesting racial and ethnic differences among respondents. When asked if they agreed with the statement “In the health care system, blacks are treated less fairly than whites,” the majority of black (59 percent) and Latino (52 percent) youth indicated their agreement, while only 32 percent of whites agreed.



Among racialized questions concerning the treatment of black youth at the hands of state entities, the one area where there is overwhelming agreement among all young people surveyed is in their assessment of how the police treat black youth. The majority of all young people across racial groups agreed with the statement that “on average, the police discriminate much more against black youth than they do against white youth.” Seventy-nine percent of black youth, 73 percent of Latino youth, and 63 percent of white youth agreed that the police discriminate much more against black youth.



Political Alienation

As noted earlier, the focus of this chapter is on trying to understand and interrogate the attitudes of black youth toward politics and how their lived experience shapes how they feel about the government and what they believe are their possibilities for being full and equal participants in the political community with an equal opportunity to succeed. There are, of course, a myriad of factors in the daily life experiences of black youth that would make them more likely to disengage from political and civil society. But in this chapter, I want to focus on the role of political alienation—not just black youth’s feelings toward the government, but their assessment of the entire political landscape—as one reason black youth are largely disengaged actively and emotionally from the political process.

I am interested in the role of political alienation because it is so prevalent in the data generated through the Black Youth Project and because it has been around for so long. One need only read the work of Durkheim and Marx to underscore the significance of the concept

of alienation for our understanding of how individuals exist and interact in the world.¹⁶ In political science, much of the work on alienation emerged in the 1960s, in part because of the availability of survey data through the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan. Throughout the years, alienation has been conceptualized and measured in various ways. In political science, most scholars take political alienation to be a subjective condition in which feelings of inefficacy or the belief that formal political decision-making is impenetrable by the average citizen are paired with feelings of cynicism and distrust toward the government. This observation of the combination of low efficacy and high cynicism is thought to signal alienation.¹⁷

Early data gathered through the Michigan SRC Presidential Election Studies showed increasing levels of political alienation among the populace in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸ Although the Michigan data were central to the expansion of alienation studies, concern over the social and political uprising of the 1960s and 1970s, encompassing the Civil Rights Movement, Black and Brown Power Movements, opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Women's Movement, also fueled empirical work in this area. Alarm was voiced over what impact growing levels of political alienation would have on the political system and, more specifically, the political behavior of the masses. Some argued that rising alienation, especially among the young and those who were disadvantaged, would lead to political uprisings, riots, and greater political activism.¹⁹ Others suggested that amplified alienation

¹⁶ Durkheim, Emile. 1951. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. by John Spaulding and John Simpson. New York: The Free Press.

¹⁷ Herring, Cedric. 1989. "Acquiescence or Activism? Political Behavior among the Politically Alienated," *Political Psychology*, 10(1): 135–153.

¹⁸ House, James S. and William M. Mason. 1975. "Political Alienation in America, 1952–1968," *American Sociological Review*, 40(2): 123–147.

¹⁹ Bowles, S., and Gintis H. 1982. "The Crisis of Liberal Democratic Capitalism: The Case of the United States," *Polit. Soc.* 11:51–93.

would lead to disengagement from the political system, possibly most evident among the middle class since their absence would be noticed.²⁰ Still others suggested that mounting alienation would have little or no effect.²¹ Basically, those who had participated in the past would once again find their way to the polls or the office of a public official to voice their concerns.

In the end, researchers generally concluded that while certain “demographic groups” such as blacks and college-educated youth seemed to be more willing to engage in extra-systemic political behavior such as protest, across the populace there was a rise in political alienation but without a significant withdrawal from politics or support of the underlying political structure.²² The masses of people were fed up with political officials they viewed as corrupt and unresponsive. These feelings of frustration with political authorities and specific policies were grouped under the label of *specific support*. Yet these same individuals still harbored what esteemed political scientist David Easton called *diffuse support* for the larger political order. Easton explains the difference between specific and diffuse support:

Some types of evaluations are closely related to what the political authorities do and how they do it. Others are more fundamental in character because they are directed to basic aspects of the system. They represent more enduring bonds and thereby make it possible for members to oppose the incumbents of offices and yet retain respect for the offices themselves, for the way in which they are ordered, and for the community of which they are a part. The distinction of roughly this sort I have called “specific” against “diffuse” support.²³

²⁰ Easton, David. 1965. *A System Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley Press.

²¹ Citrin, Jack. 1974. “Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government,” *American Political Science Review*, 68:973–988.

²² House and Mason, op. cit. p. 145.

²³ Easton, David. 1975. “A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 5(4): 437.

For Easton and other scholars, diffuse support may be the most important form of support a political system both generates and depends upon. Diffuse support exists independent, to some degree, of the specific policies of any one administration. It is instead an attachment or bond that members of the political community develop to or with the broader or underlying political order. Diffuse support is rooted in an attachment to what has been called the political regime, constitutional order or political structures that design how authorities are elected, policies are produced and validated, and participants contribute to the work of the government. Diffuse support, which is thought to be developed during childhood, is durable and acts as a buffer when the outputs that authorities produce do not meet the demands of the political community, generating system stress.

Diffuse support is the component that can curb violent outbursts and sustained collective action among the masses because it calls upon a reservoir of goodwill and faith in the government and the political order during times of specific discontent. Fundamentally, diffuse support is an underlying belief that the political system is fair and that one's concerns will, on balance and over time, be recognized and addressed by those in power. Easton does concede, however, that largely stable diffuse support can be altered. He provides two scenarios in which diffuse support may erode either over time or quickly.

On the one hand, if discontent with perceived performance continues over a long enough time, it may gradually erode even the strongest underlying bonds of attachment. On the other hand, there may be instances, not so rare as they might seem, in which the sudden frustration of expectations can so jolt the deeper loyalties of the members of a system that their diffuse support falls into a precipitous decline.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., p. 445.

Researchers in the 1960s and 1970s worried that events such as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the Vietnam War, the 1968 Democratic Convention, and Watergate would not only diminish specific support among most Americans, but might also provide a significant and defining shock to diffuse support, putting political stability and persistence into question. Eventually, however, most scholars would breathe a sigh of relief when they concluded that while the white populace was registering increasing alienation toward elected officials (specific support), they still strongly supported what they believed to be the fundamental structure and fairness of the political system (diffuse support).

The same, however, was not true of black Americans, who repeatedly pointed to deep-seated flaws in the political process, questioned the legitimacy of foundational political documents such as the Constitution, and believed it their right, if not their patriotic duty, to take to the streets to demonstrate their lack of diffuse support for the political system. Many black Americans had been socialized politically since childhood to hold greater distrust of public officials and the political system. Early researchers in the field of political socialization repeatedly found that black schoolchildren registered lower levels of trust in the government and political efficacy and higher levels of cynicism than white schoolchildren.²⁵ Some researchers and politicians worried that black Americans could work to destabilize the political system if their specific and diffuse support became too weak. The feared revolution of black Americans never occurred, in part because of the social mobility experienced by some in the group. As educational, employment, political, and residential opportunities

²⁵ See, for example, Lyons, Schley R. 1970. "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," *The Journal of Politics*, 32(2): 288–304; Greenberg, Edward S. 1970. "Black Children and the Political System," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34(3): 333–345; and Abramson, Paul R. 1972. "Political Efficacy and Political Trust among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," *The Journal of Politics*, 34(4): 1243–1275.

expanded for some black people in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, diffuse support for the promise of equality and opportunity through our current political structure was stabilized among black Americans.²⁶

Ironically, nearly forty years after the heyday of political alienation studies, the political attitudes of black youth raise some of the same questions asked by a previous generation of scholars concerning the link between alienation and diffuse support for U.S. politics. Specifically, why is it that forty years after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, black youth continue to feel alienated from the government? Do their rates of discontent continue to exceed their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups? Moreover, does their alienation toward government officials, or what I am labeling *government-oriented alienation*, extend and impact their feelings toward other components of the political systems such as the political community and the regime or constitutional order, as David Easton and other system-oriented political scientists have discussed the political system?²⁷ Finally, what factors seem to be driving these dynamics, and are they the same across racial and ethnic groups?

As noted earlier, it has long been noted by scholars that black Americans exhibit more distrust and skepticism of the government than do other groups.²⁸ However, many

²⁶ A similar argument is made by Gibson and Caldeira regarding the diffuse support of black Americans for the Supreme Court in response to the limited advances in civil rights made under the Warren Court. See Gibson, James L. and Gregory A. Caldeira. 1992. "Blacks and the United States Supreme Court: Models of Diffuse Support," *The Journal of Politics*, 54(4): 1120–1145.

²⁷ David Easton has argued for a systems approach to the understanding and study of the political system. Such an approach would capture the multiple dimensions of political life that are structured around the processing of inputs into outputs through a number of functional organizational entities. A much more elaborate discussion of this approach can be found in Easton, David. 1965. *A System Analysis of Political Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For this chapter, I want to focus on a number of concepts discussed in this book: diffuse versus specific support and the authorities, the political community, and the regime as the three defining dimensions of the political system.

²⁸ Jackson, John S. 1973. "Alienation and Black Political Participation," *The Journal of Politics*, 35(4): 849–885.

believed that this generation of black youth would no longer hold the levels of government alienation witnessed among previous generations of blacks who withstood pervasive marginalization through systems such as Jim Crow. Prominent commentators and figures in black communities including Bill Cosby, Stanley Crouch, Oprah Winfrey, Juan Williams, and John McWhorter have all complained that the current generation of black youth, including those who are middle and upper-class, has a tight grasp on the victim mentality, leading them to be alienated from and unproductive in a society in which opportunity is greater than it ever has been for black people. For example, black elites ask why would young black adults at some of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities with nothing but earning power in their futures be alienated from politics and the state. While these and other critics might be frustrated with the attitudes and behaviors of young black people, the data from the Black Youth Project suggest that black youth are not the only ones exhibiting feelings of alienation from at least government officials. If we refer back to two questions discussed previously, we can begin to empirically explore and compare the levels of alienation held among white, black, and Latino youth.

Alienation and the Numbers

Two questions, in particular, seem to correspond to one dimension of alienation prevalent in most studies of political alienation, namely feelings about political officials. One question asks if respondents agree with the statement that “leaders in government care very little about people like them”—a traditional efficacy/trust question. As noted earlier in the chapter, we found that 56 percent of black youth, 52 percent of Latino youth, and 44 percent of white youth agreed with the statement. Similarly, a majority of all young people agree

with the statement that “the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.” Sixty-six percent of black youth, 62 percent of Latino youth, and 50 percent of white youth agree with the statement, suggesting that all young people, and especially black youth, harbor feelings of inefficacy and distrust directed, in particular, at political officials. In this analysis I combine these two questions to form a scale measuring what I call government-oriented alienation—one dimension of political alienation.²⁹ Although the percentages of young people agreeing with these statements provide some insight into their orientations or feelings about the government, the presentation of percentages does not tell us if the differences in feelings we observe among our black, white, and Latino respondents are significant, that is, statistically. A statistical test of the difference in the means among our black, white, and Latino respondents indicates that, indeed, the mean differences between blacks and whites in terms of their orientations toward the government are statistically different and important.³⁰

Not to be lost in our discussion of political alienation is the question of how broadly such alienation extends among black youth. Traditional measures of political alienation have often limited their target or inquiry to public officials, serving as a referendum on government officials—do you trust them and are you able to impact their decisions. Such questions are thought to tap into respondents’ feeling about political authorities, which are often represented as their specific support for the outputs generated through the political system. I believe that the political alienation that black youth feel extends beyond their feelings about government officials. So while most young people (and adults) agree that

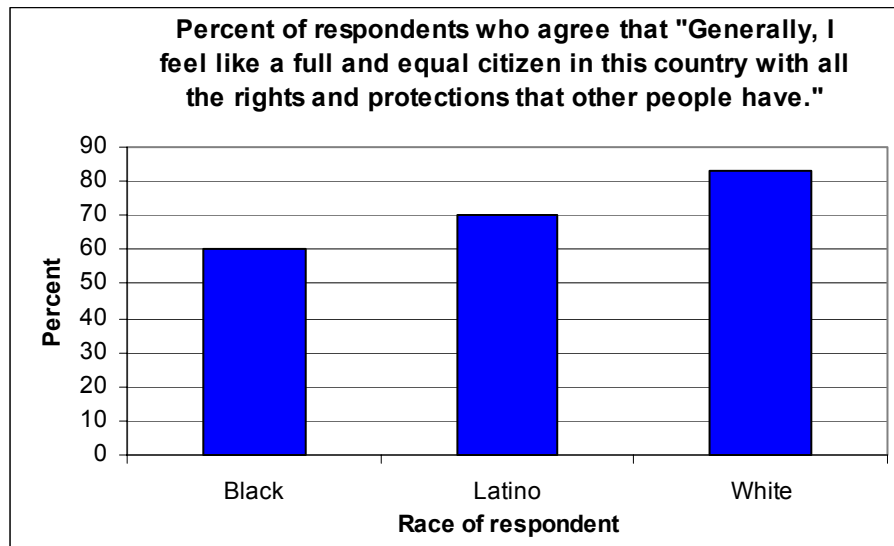
²⁹ The Cronback Alpha for the government-oriented alienation scale is .719 for all race, .728 for whites, .663 for blacks and .754 for Latinos.

³⁰ Mean differences between blacks and Latinos were not statistically significant; however, mean differences between Latinos and whites were statistically significant.

political officials are not to be trusted and just want to “throw the bums out of office,” black youth are also questioning the fundamental fairness of the political order and their standing in the larger political community. Thus, borrowing from Easton’s delineation of the political system, which includes political authorities, the political community, and the regime, I investigate whether there are significant differences in the feelings that young people from different racial and ethnic groups have toward not only politicians, but also the political community and their sense of fundamental political fairness in the regime or political order. I argue that the diffuse support that young black people hold for the political system is made more evident by examining their feelings toward the political community and the regime. Moreover, it is only when we explore black youth’s attitudes toward political officials and their feelings of support for the political system and their sense of inclusion in the political community that we are truly able to assess their feelings of *political* alienation, not just *government-oriented* alienation.

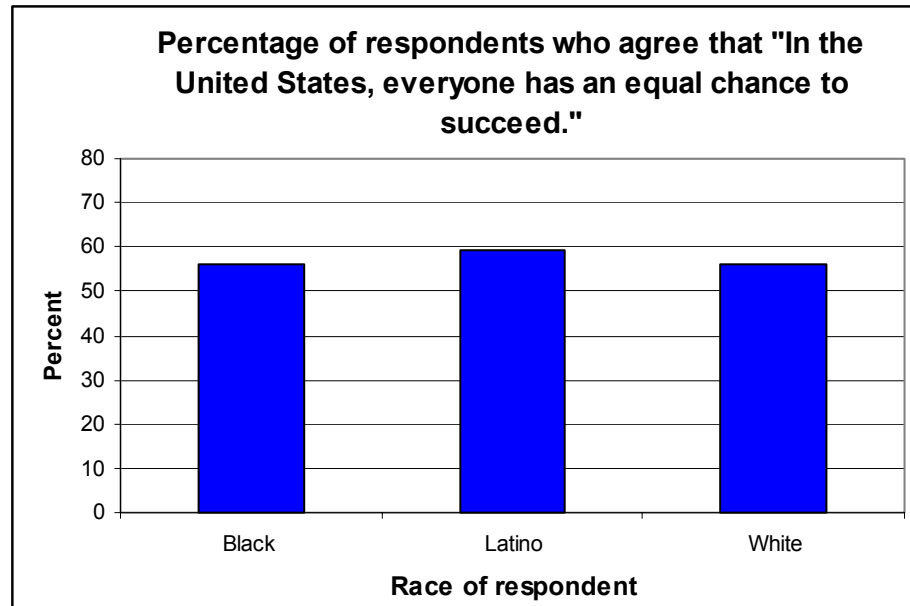
To more fully interrogate how young people think about the fairness of the political order and their place in the political community, I turn to two questions in the Black Youth Project data set. The first question asks respondents to what extent they agree with the statement “Generally, I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have.” This measure I label the *political community* dimension of political alienation. This question is an indicator of how fully integrated and respected black youth feel as members of the political community. While there might be shared skepticism toward elected officials among young people, their experiences with the government and their general life experiences may differentiate their feelings of political status and equality. Data from the Black Youth Project suggest that a significant number of

black respondents—60 percent—feel like full and equal citizens; however, this was 23 percentage points less than the 83 percent of white respondents who feel like full and equal citizens and the 70 percent of Latino respondents who believe they hold such status. Again, the difference of means between white and black respondents was statistically significant, while the difference between blacks and Latinos was not.



A similar important distinction in the attitudes that black youth hold toward the political system might also be found in their sense of the fairness of the political order. Do they believe that independent of corrupt politicians, the system is fair and could work even if it does not currently? To explore these feelings, I use another question on the Black Youth Project survey: "Do you agree with the statement that in the United States everyone has an equal chance to succeed?" This question is an indicator of what I am calling the *regime opportunity* dimension of political alienation. I should state upfront that this is not an ideal indicator of this dimension. Preferably, I would use a question that asks specifically about the underlying fairness of the political system, independent of politicians. We did not ask such a question on the Black Youth Project survey. So given the constraints of our data, I use the

question gauging an equal chance to succeed as a measure of the fairness of the regime. I do believe that any assessment of whether everyone has an equal chance to succeed substantially includes and is led by an evaluation of the political system as a structure or scheme that guarantees equal opportunity.



Interestingly, for this question there is less marked disparity among racial and ethnic groups. Our findings indicate that 56 percent of whites, 56 percent of blacks, and 59 percent of Latinos all agree that in the U.S., everyone has an equal chance to succeed. As we would expect, there is no statistically significant difference among the means of these three groups.

For many, it is this last question and the general consensus evidenced among young people that causes the greatest pause. How is it that young blacks who are more alienated from the government officials, who are less likely to believe that they are fully included as equal citizens in the democracy, similarly feel that everyone has an equal chance to succeed? To provide even a partial answer to this puzzle, I again rely on the idea of diffuse support and relativity. It is possible that while young black Americans are disgusted with the current

running of this political system and are willing to withhold their specific support, they are conflicted about whether there is any hope short of revolution that can right the democracy. These young people seem torn between a feeling of being secondary in the political community as expressed by Kanye West and the promise of opportunity and mobility they hear from politicians like Barack Obama, read in their textbooks, and see on the television and Internet. I daresay that while one component of political alienation, namely, disgust with political authorities, seems to be standard fare, with young Americans and young black Americans in particular holding disdain for this segment of the population, the feelings of black youth about being full members in the political community and the fundamental equality in opportunity provided by the political order are still up in the air. The one thing we do know is that when we examine the index of political alienation as conceptualized with three dimensions we find race-based differences. Specifically, like previous dimensions of political alienation there is a statistical difference in the means in the political alienation scale between black youth and white youth with black youth registering higher levels of political alienation.

Given the results delineated above, we are left with at least two substantial questions. First, where does *political* alienation among black youth come from? Second, what is the impact of political alienation on the political behavior and general decision-making of young black Americans? In the rest of this chapter, I take up the first question. The next chapter interrogates the relationship between alienation and political behavior.

What Is Driving Political Alienation?

To understand what factors might contribute to the political alienation registered by young black Americans, I turned to statistical analysis to explore which factors in the lives of young black Americans contribute to the different dimensions of political alienation. For example, is there a direct relationship between “disadvantage” and alienation, as nearly every study suggests? Specifically, will we find that black youth who come from families who have more money and whose parents received more formal education will hold lower levels of alienation than those whose families are struggling to gain needed resources? In addition to financial capital, are there new sources of information that heighten alienation across the class divide, such as rap music and videos? Do young people who listen to rap music and watch rap music videos, irrespective of class background, exhibit more alienation and less diffuse support for the political order?

To answer these questions and others, we³¹ ran a number of regressions on each dimension of political alienation—government alienation, political community, and equal opportunity—as well as the combined scale of political alienation.³² Because we are primarily interested in the structure of political alienation and diffuse support among black youth, we divided our sample into three groups—blacks, whites, and Latinos—and ran the same model for each group of young people. The first dimension of political alienation explored focused on one’s trust and efficacy toward the government. As noted previously, for this analysis, we created a government-oriented alienation scale that is the composite score from questions/statements : “The leaders in government care little about people like me” and

³¹ Jamila Celestine-Michener is the project manager for the Black Youth Project and was significantly involved in the statistical analysis presented.

³² The statistical technique used for this set of analyses was the ordered probit. Ordered probit was used because the dependent variables under examination are ordinal scored as a Likert scale.

“The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.”³³ The second dimension of political alienation, as I conceptualize it, is measured by the statement “I feel like a full and equal citizen.” Likewise, the third dimension of political alienation—regime equal opportunity—is operationalized with the statement “Everyone has an equal chance to succeed in the United States.” Finally, the political alienation scale includes all three dimensions.

Included in our models of political alienation were essential control variables such as age, sex, family SES index,³⁴ respondent’s education, political efficacy,³⁵ personal efficacy,³⁶ parents’ interest in politics, and religious-activity index.³⁷ Also included in our model were a number of nontraditional variables thought to be essential when studying black communities such as linked-fate,³⁸ rap-music exposure index,³⁹ perceptions of systematic racism,⁴⁰ perceptions of government-based racism,⁴¹ and personal discrimination index.⁴²

When exploring the first dimension of political alienation, negative orientations toward the government among black youth, it is the absence of family SES that jumps out

³³ The reliability or consistency score (cronbach alpha) for the government orientation dimension of my political alienation concept is .663 for blacks, .728 for whites, and .754 for Latinos.

³⁴ Family SES index is an index of responses to questions about father and mother education, reception of government assistance, did the family rent or own, and neighborhood condition

³⁵ Level of agreement with the statement “I believe that by participating in politics I can make a difference.”

³⁶ Composite scale from three questions assessing one’s personal efficacy: I am able to do things as well as other people; when faced with a problem I can figure out the right solution; and I am confident I can deal with unexpected events.

³⁷ Composite score from three questions: How often do you attend religious services; how often do you engage in activities at your place of worship; and how often do you engage in religious activities outside of your place of worship.

³⁸ The degree to which black youth believe that what happens to most black people in this country affects them.

³⁹ Composite score from two questions assessing how often the respondent listens to rap music and watches rap music videos. This variable is a possible alternative and maybe oppositional source of information about the government and the political system.

⁴⁰ Composite score from two questions: blacks treated less fairly than whites in health care system and police discriminate much more against black youth.

⁴¹ Response to question asking their agreement with the statement “If more white people had AIDS, the government would do more to find a cure.”

⁴² Composite score from four questions asking respondents how often they faced discrimination because of their race, sex, age, and class.

initially. Amazingly, there is no direct relationship between the education and income of one's parent/s and the degree to which one is distrustful and cynical of government officials. Across the class divide in black communities, one can find young black people fed up with government officials. Interestingly, while family SES was also not related to the attitudes that Latino youth hold about the government, there was a relationship between family SES and white youth's attitudes about the government. As the family SES of white youth increased, so too did their alienation toward government officials.

Beyond the absence of family SES, there are other important factors driving black youth alienation toward the government. For example, the more exposure to rap music and videos a young black person has, the greater his or her levels of alienation toward the government. This is an especially interesting finding because numerous articles have crowned hip hop as the defining cultural form in the lives of young people, not only in the United States but also in many different parts of the world. By all reports, hip-hop culture—rap music, graffiti, break dancing, and DJing—comprises much of what young African Americans listen to, watch, talk about, and possibly emulate. Our data confirmed that a majority of black youth (58 percent) indicate that they listen to rap music every day. And while a substantial literature has emerged detailing the history and current manifestations of hip-hop culture, there has also developed substantial writing and some research warning of the possible negative impact of hip-hop culture on young African Americans, stemming from its perceived focus on and promotion of sex, drugs, crime, misogyny, consumerism, and nihilism. Many “experts” surmise that hip-hop culture, especially rap music, has a negative impact on young people in any number of domains of their life, but especially in terms of their sexual decisions. There is, however, very little systematic work that has empirically

tested such propositions. Our finding suggests that rap music does have the ability to influence political attitudes, especially those directed at the government.

In addition to rap music and videos leading to greater alienation, so too do perceptions that blacks are the victims of systematic discrimination and the targets of state-based discrimination. One might predict that perceiving that blacks are the objects of acts of discrimination would lead to greater alienation. Interestingly, feeling that what happens to other black people will affect oneself and feeling personally efficacious both lead to greater negativity toward the government. Only the belief that one is political efficacious diminishes negative feelings toward the government in this model.

When we attempt a similar analysis to understand what factors influence the political community dimension of political alienation, far fewer clues materialize. In this instance, however, family SES emerges as a significant component shaping feelings of inclusion. Thus, as black youth have greater access to material resources, they are more likely to feel like a full and equal citizen. Experiences with personal discrimination, however, and the perception that the government is willing to do less to meet the needs of black people than it would do to address the needs of whites depresses feelings of equality and being a full and equal citizen. Our findings suggest that one's daily experiences with discrimination influence whether he or she feels a part of the political community. So while political socialization from childhood may have instilled a sense of belonging for some youth, in particular white youth, the political socialization many black youth receive may make them more willing to use their individual experiences with discrimination to reinforce their existing perception that they hold a secondary position in the political community.

The final dimension of political alienation as conceptualized here is that of equal opportunity. As with our previous models, personal experiences with discrimination and the perception that the state discriminates against black people diminish one's belief that in the U.S. everyone has an equal chance to succeed.⁴³ Also, age and linked-fate lessen one's belief in an equal chance to succeed. Specifically, as black youth get older, if you can call moving from 15 to 25 getting older, their agreement with the idea that everyone has an equal chance to succeed weakens. Correspondingly, the more black youth see their life tied to what happens to other black people, the less likely they are to accept the idea of an equal chance to succeed. Thus, as black youth grow older, feel more tied to other black people, and have more personal experiences with discrimination their belief in the fundamental fairness and the availability of equal opportunity in the United States begins to fade.

Finally, when we explore those factors influencing one's overall feelings of alienation a number of conditions prove to be important. Again, age and linked-fate are shown to drive up political alienation. Similarly, increased exposure to rap music and rap music videos also seem to be related to political alienation, with more exposure leading to greater levels of political alienation. Perceptions of state-driven racism, systematic racism, and personal experiences with discrimination also drive up alienation. Only feelings of political efficacy can lessen the political alienation registered by black youth. Interestingly, what is missing again from those important factors that systematically influence political alienation is family SES. Thus, the political alienation measured among black youth is not curtailed by the class

⁴³ Although the mean scores of our three groups—whites, blacks, and Latinos—were not statistically different, race is significant in our overall model of the opportunity dimension, signaling that the factors leading to respondents' ideas about opportunity may, in fact, be different.

status of one's family. Political alienation among black youth is found across the many class divides in black communities.

Why Are They Alienated?

Given the findings I just discussed, it may seem puzzling, if not disturbing, to most people that in a historical period when black youth have more opportunities than ever before, they still are alienated, at least politically. Why should a population of young people who benefit from policies such as affirmative action (or at least its remnants) feel that on average, black children receive a poorer education than white youth? Why should young black Americans who never formally experienced the poll tax or other legal mechanisms that denied black people the right to vote feel that the government will work to deny them the right to vote and if given the chance to cast a ballot their votes (literally) won't be counted? Why should black youth who live at a time when, for the first time, a black man has a realistic chance to be elected president believe that black youth face so much discrimination that it is hard for them to get ahead?

Part of the answer to these questions is undoubtedly rooted in the lived reality far too many young black Americans face daily. By now, most people know, as was discussed in chapter 1, that black youth suffer disproportionately in the economic, political, and social realms compared to young people from other racial and ethnic groups. Black youth are more likely to be in jail, in prison, or on parole; out of school; unemployed; and living in poverty than white and sometimes Latino youth.⁴⁴ But how can we explain the alienation of black young people across class categories? It might make sense that someone who lives in poverty

⁴⁴ Black Youth Project Research Summary.

and attends a school with few of the needed resources would feel alienated from the government and maybe the political process in general, but why should middle-class black youth hold similar feelings of distance and disgust?

Here I believe the answer lies in the systematic pathologizing of all black youth. It is the rare young black person who has not experienced being pulled over by the police because he or she looks suspicious, being followed through a store under the assumption that he or she is there to steal something, or being chastised by an older person for listening to “that” rap music. The surveillance and demonization of black youth is pervasive in this country and extends across class lines and across racial and ethnic communities, although it is clearly concentrated in poor communities. Even young black people with privilege and access talk about how they believe race and racism structure and limit their experiences in the classroom and boardroom. One recent example might better illustrate our current willingness to criminalize black youth culture, often independent of class. Recently, the *New York Times* and the *Miami Herald* published articles on the emergence of sagging-pants laws across the country.⁴⁵ It seems that city councils and state legislatures are debating and, in some instances, passing laws that criminalize wearing one’s pants too low below the waist. Amazingly, in a time of war, when the housing market is in a free-fall, and with many cities facing economic shortages, some city officials have decided that the issue that needs addressing is how low many black youth, in particular black males, wear their pants. As Robert Samuels of the *Miami Herald* wrote in his article, there is a “nationwide movement to curb youth from being too small for their britches.” The penalties for such an offense range

⁴⁵Robert Samuels. October 15, 2007. “It’s a Boxer Rebellion over Opa-locka’s Saggy Pants Ban,” *Miami Herald.com*, www.miamiherald.com/494/v-print/story/271840.html; Niko Koppel. August 30, 2007. “Are Your Jeans Sagging? Go Directly to Jail,” *NYTimes.com*, www.nytimes.com/2007/08/30/fashion/30baggy.html.

from a mere admonishment to community service to a fine of \$500 and up to six months in prison. It seems the supporters of such laws believe that it is part of the tough love that black youth need to get them on the straight and narrow. As one state representative from Louisiana said, “Hopefully, if we pull up their pants we can lift their minds while we’re at it.”⁴⁶ Predictably, many of these laws have originated in black communities with the backing of the local black leadership.

At the heart of this move to criminalize sagging pants is the belief that this appearance is the marker of truly dangerous and deviant individuals. As Koppel writes in the *New York Times* article, “Behind the indecency laws may be the real issue—the hip-hop style itself, which critics say is worn as a badge of delinquency, with its distinctive walk conveying thuggish swagger and a disrespect for authority.”⁴⁷ Of course, criminalization of what is perceived as an oppositional, deviant, often racialized male style is part of our history. Thus, sagging-pants laws should be understood in the context of moral panics that surrounded zoot suits and the black leather jackets and berets worn by the Black Panthers and their followers. The example of sagging-pants laws, I believe, helps to illustrate both how quickly those with dominant and indigenous power can unite to criminalize black youth and black youth culture and how such actions facilitate feelings of alienation traveling across class divides in black communities. Such targeting of black youth contributes to their feeling of cynicism and alienation and to the lessening of their diffuse support for the legitimacy of our democracy.

⁴⁶ Bethany Thomas. May 13, 2004. “La. Proposes Crackdown on Belly-baring Pants,” MSNBC.com, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4963512/?GTI=3391.

⁴⁷ Koppel, August 30, 2007.

We must remember that the criminalization of black youth is just component of the systematic pathologizing of these young people. Even among those who we might argue have a commitment to better the condition of young black people one hears an almost instinctive return to stereotypes and partial truths when describing this group of adolescents and young adults. We might take Barack Obama as an example. Senator Obama has repeatedly focused on his days as an organizer, working among the poor and young people, as reasons why he turned to politics, namely to improve the condition of those most marginalized—including and especially black youth. This exchange between Obama and voter in Iowa is illustrative of possibly the unintended but still detrimental pathologizing of black youth that happens daily both inside and outside of black communities. A woman complained to Obama about how “inner-city” kids don’t know how to dress for a job. Below is Obama’s response as reported in the *Washington Post*.

‘Pull up your pants!’ Obama interjected, as the crowd laughed. ‘Pull up your pants!’ Appearance is key to urban youth succeeding, he stressed. ‘You’ve got people coming in, heads hanging down, hat cocked. They’re mumbling. [Obama mutters a few nonsensical words.] You can’t understand what they’re saying. The employer asks them to do something and they’ve got an attitude. Why do I got to do it? Why didn’t you ask Pookie to do it? They come in late. The employer says, why are you late? I don’t know.’ The crowd laughed and cheered as Obama spoke.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Cornel West has probably been the most even-handed and genuinely concerned scholar with the condition of black youth to argue that black youth are nihilistic. West in *Race Matters* suggests that nihilism must be a concept that researchers concerned with African American youth make central to their analyses. West argues that we must tread “into

⁴⁸ http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2007/11/25/post_212.html

the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America. To talk about the depressing statistics of unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and violent crime is one thing. But to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America is something else.”⁴⁹

While the prospect of nihilism among black youth is a realistic fear, especially given the lived condition many inhabit, young black people seem to be resisting a fall into nihilism by holding onto the belief that opportunity and inclusion either are or may be available to them if they play by the rules. It is just this teetering on the brink of full-blown political alienation that I believe stands in contrast to the nihilism of black youth predicted by scholars such as West. For those young people who have seen a few or maybe some family members benefit from the lessening of racial restrictions on jobs, housing, health care, and education, this optimism probably makes sense. Others who have not experienced such mobility and the opening of society directly may have seen it on television, in movies, or witnessed it in the lives of their favorite rap artist or sports hero. This is a generation who witnessed both the continuing marginalization of black people, in particular poor black people, while also witnessing the growing power and prosperity of some black people. It was simultaneously the best of times and the worst of times for black people, and the political attitudes of this generation of young people reflect the confusion, unease, and disjuncture generated from such dueling narratives.

It is also important that we qualify our understanding of the willingness of black youth to embrace the idea of equal opportunity in the United States. Through our in-depth

⁴⁹ Cornel West. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 12.

interviews young black respondents explained their belief in the fairness of the U.S. as true relative to other countries. Many of the young black people we interviewed compared the United States to other countries that they believe are less well-off and have fewer rights. Thus, in more than one interview a respondent would point out the discrimination that black youth face in the United States but would qualify that criticism by mentioning the greater sense of fairness they believe exists in the U.S. One young woman explained what she meant by the relative fairness of the United States: “I think it’s a lot more fair than other countries. I don’t think it’s a lot, like, *so* great as they make it out to be. But if you compare it to other countries, I think it is *a lot* better than those other countries.” Another respondent explained, “I see a lot of different countries that seem like they have more freedom than a lot of countries. And, like, they’re more, hmm, like they more strict, but the United States, to me it seems like a 50/50. Like you free but then again you’re not.”⁵⁰

In light of the findings presented in this chapter one might predict that the higher levels of political alienation that black youth hold will drive them away from any civic or political activity, believing that the system is not only closed to them but out to get them. And while that might be true, another interpretation of this very basic data might be that such feelings of anger and frustration function as a motivator, leading young black people to act: we need only look at the mobilization surrounding the Jena Six as an example. So we are now left with the question of how political alienation impacts black youth. Does political alienation really matter or affect anything that matters? Specifically, does the political alienation evident among young black Americans hinder their political engagement? This is a question I pursue in the next chapter. But as we move forward in our investigations of black

⁵⁰ In-depth interviews.

youth and their politics, let us not forget the continuing and disproportionate social, political, and economic marginalization of African American youth. Without serious investigation into how living with constrained opportunities, fewer resources, and systematic racism impacts their feelings about this country and their resulting political engagement, we will never completely comprehend or address the political lives of African American youth.

Appendix A: Ordered Probit Estimates for Black Respondents

Predictors of Government Orientation Dimension

govorienta~n	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Educ	.0226655	.0311685	0.73	0.467	-.0384238 .0837547
main_age	-.0129343	.0276617	-0.47	0.640	-.0671502 .0412816
main_sex	.060336	.1276554	0.47	0.636	-.189864 .310536
FamilySES	.0032635	.0138655	0.24	0.814	-.0239123 .0304393
linkedfate~e	-.1174975	.0679929	-1.73	0.084	-.250761 .0157661
polefficac~e	.3309372	.0917854	3.61	0.000	.1510412 .5108332
parentinte~e	.0625927	.0583183	1.07	0.283	-.051709 .1768945
systematic~m	-.1797499	.0487663	-3.69	0.000	-.2753302 -.0841696
personaldi~m	-.0107449	.020652	-0.52	0.603	-.0512222 .0297323
stateracism	-.2693608	.0642667	-4.19	0.000	-.3953211 -.1434004
rapexposure	-.051382	.0248801	-2.07	0.039	-.1001461 -.0026178
personalef~y	-.1064904	.0483071	-2.20	0.027	-.2011707 -.0118102
religiousa~y	-.0030379	.0175174	-0.17	0.862	-.0373713 .0312956
immigrants~s	.0121877	.0344477	0.35	0.723	-.0553286 .0797041

Predictors of Political Community Dimension

Inclusion_~y	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Educ	-.0250288	.0323323	-0.77	0.439	-.088399 .0383414
main_age	-.0231188	.0285323	-0.81	0.418	-.0790411 .0328035
main_sex	-.0315438	.1316658	-0.24	0.811	-.289604 .2265163
FamilySES	.0242744	.0145316	1.67	0.095	-.0042071 .0527558
linkedfate~e	-.0996054	.0700112	-1.42	0.155	-.2368249 .037614
polefficac~e	.1174324	.0939144	1.25	0.211	-.0666364 .3015011
parentinte~e	.0356805	.0601401	0.59	0.553	-.082192 .1535529
systematic~m	-.0401356	.0492644	-0.81	0.415	-.136692 .0564208
personaldi~m	-.0531288	.0215729	-2.46	0.014	-.095411 -.0108466
stateracism	-.130654	.0654684	-2.00	0.046	-.2589697 -.0023383
rapexposure	-.0150216	.0256021	-0.59	0.557	-.0652007 .0351576
personalef~y	.0409244	.0495059	0.83	0.408	-.0561053 .1379542
religiousa~y	-.012626	.0180741	-0.70	0.485	-.0480506 .0227986
immigrants~s	.0097062	.0355315	0.27	0.785	-.0599342 .0793467

Predictors of Opportunity Dimension

Opportunity	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Educ	.0425841	.032363	1.32	0.188	-.0208463 .1060145
main_age	-.0940258	.0289877	-3.24	0.001	-.1508405 -.037211
main_sex	-.0058059	.1321479	-0.04	0.965	-.264811 .2531993
FamilySES	-.0039285	.0144262	-0.27	0.785	-.0322033 .0243464
linkedfate~e	-.1867666	.0702582	-2.66	0.008	-.3244702 -.049063
polefficac~e	.0640231	.0938574	0.68	0.495	-.1199341 .2479802
parentinte~e	.079066	.0605672	1.31	0.192	-.0396435 .1977754
systematic~m	-.0508378	.0494239	-1.03	0.304	-.1477069 .0460314
personaldi~m	-.0484582	.0214892	-2.26	0.024	-.0905763 -.0063401
stateracism	-.154152	.0657369	-2.34	0.019	-.282994 -.0253101
rapexposure	-.0196875	.0253198	-0.78	0.437	-.0693133 .0299384
personalef~y	-.0008652	.049506	-0.02	0.986	-.0978952 .0961648
religiouosa~y	.0153204	.0180853	0.85	0.397	-.0201262 .0507669
immigrants~s	-.0271309	.0354476	-0.77	0.444	-.0966069 .042345

Combined Political Alienation Scale

alienation	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Educ	-.0338921	.0320835	-1.06	0.291	-.0967746 .0289904
main_age	-.0171181	.0284311	-0.60	0.547	-.072842 .0386058
main_sex	.1229695	.1320752	0.93	0.352	-.1358932 .3818322
FamilySES	.0208386	.0146186	1.43	0.154	-.0078134 .0494906
linkedfate~e	-.0281875	.0685627	-0.41	0.681	-.1625679 .1061929
polefficac~e	.4554458	.0936465	4.86	0.000	.271902 .6389897
parentinte~e	.0527482	.0700201	0.75	0.451	-.0844886 .189985
systematic~m	-.1059871	.0447065	-2.37	0.018	-.1936102 -.0183639
personaldi~m	-.0781475	.0207044	-3.77	0.000	-.1187275 -.0375676
stateracism	-.166005	.0640206	-2.59	0.010	-.2914832 -.0405269
rapexposure	.0015645	.0225408	0.07	0.945	-.0426147 .0457437
personalef~y	.0697053	.0518628	1.34	0.179	-.031944 .1713545
religiouosa~y	.0505358	.0164738	3.07	0.002	.0182477 .0828239
immigrants~s	-.0710355	.0476489	-1.49	0.136	-.1644255 .0223546