The Significance of Race and Class for Political Participation

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The organizers of this conference have asked me to write about “the changing group basis of political participation in the United States, focusing especially on race, class, and political participation.” This is at once a simple and complex task. Assessing the current state of research in political science on the significance of race and class for political engagement is the straightforward part; both independent variables almost always matter for participation. The findings for class are unfailingly consistent – those with higher standing in terms of economic resources and educational status are more active in political life. While the findings about race are more mixed, minorities are for the most part less active in U.S. politics than the average white person. Indeed, most inferential models of political participation using survey data include “controls” for race and class. Whether for specific forms of activity such as voting in Presidential elections or scales combining a variety of activities outside of the traditional electoral realm, the estimated coefficients for indicators of race and class are usually statistically significant predictors of political activity and pointed in favor of the direction of the more powerful group in society – the wealthy, the white.

More complex than documenting and describing the magnitude of the findings, however, are the tasks of explaining differences by race and class, and specifying the theoretical and normative considerations underlying expectations about the relationships. Insofar as race is concerned, scholars in the field have for the most part approached analyses with the notion that boundaries drawn across racial and ethnic lines will also manifest themselves in differences in political behavior. Whether due to a psychology of group identity, a strategy of mobilization organized around race and ethnicity, or a continuing legacy of racial discrimination in society, we expect African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans to differ systematically from non-Hispanic whites. Thus we are not surprised when Presidential candidates bone up on their Spanish to greet crowds of Latino voters, for there seems something natural about this linguistic appeal to identity. Indeed, when minority groups do not follow a discernible pattern, the finding – or the group – is often considered aberrant.

Questions about race and political participation in the United States are becoming increasingly salient as foreign immigration rapidly and dramatically alters the demographic composition of American society. In 2000, one in ten residents of the United States is a foreign-born immigrant, and 85% of these new entrants to the U.S. political system come from sending countries in Asia, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Together with their first-generation offspring, this is the highest proportion in nearly three-quarters of a century since the last great wave of immigration in the early 20th Century. The combination of foreign migration to the U.S. and higher birth rates among minorities has resulted in a remarkably diverse population, with nearly one-third of Americans classified as something other than “white.” With a view to new directions in the field, I suggest three promising areas of inquiry. What classifications of race and ethnicity are relevant to political participation, and how can such categorization be made? What aspects of the social and political context interact with race to influence political activity? In what ways do the assumptions brought to the design and conduct of research, as well as the interpretation of findings, influence conclusions about the significance of race to political participation in the United States?

With respect to the significance of class to political participation, the consistent empirical findings belie contested theoretical ground. The observation that class – measured most frequently in the study of mass political behavior in the U.S. with indicators of formal
educational attainment and income – is strongly and positively related to political participation, is uncontroversial. Rather, the contours of the debate are perhaps best illuminated by contrasting perspectives about expectations for the relationship between indicators of class and trends over time in political participation. A widespread expectation is the notion that increasing levels of the antecedents to participation, particularly education, should drive a commensurate rise in political activity and a diminution in observed patterns of participatory inequality. While many more Americans are better educated today than they were a quarter century ago, the increase in this attribute has not produced more political engagement in the aggregate, despite the fact that the strength of the relationship between education and participation has remained strong and positive at the individual-level. To some, this is paradoxical, for the trend over time goes directly counter to the expectation generated from the results of inferential models identifying formal educational attainment as the most powerful antecedent to political activity. From another perspective, however, the very same data that pinpoint the critical importance of education to political outcomes such as participation, simultaneously identify education as one of the main mechanisms driving the maintenance of “durable inequalities”\(^1\) in antecedents to political activity. To the extent that indicators of socio-economic status such as education reflect class, then the expectation of more political engagement with more education is unwarranted.

In addressing contemporary concern over the perceived decline in civic and social capital in America, the theoretical gap between scholars interested in the significance of class for political participation is exemplified by the different emphasis on individual-level agency versus structural considerations. What this divergence does not capture, however, is the range of scholarship concerned with the significance of class to social and political outcomes more generally. This is indeed a celebrated subject, accounting for perhaps more written scholarship in social science than any other relationship. In an effort to narrow the scope of the inquiry while maintaining the theoretical significance of the discussion, I will focus my attention in this paper specifically on the importance of education – as an indicator of class – to political participation in the United States. Formal education is not only the most widely-used empirical measure of socio-economic status and social class among scholars of political behavior, but it is also the case that education occupies a particularly important place within the tradition of American democratic theory as a desirable prerequisite for political participation. Within this context, I raise the following question for consideration. How can we understand the multiple causal processes of indicators of education as they relate to political participation; in other words, instead of assuming a uniform influence, to what extent can an explanatory variable have more than one type of effect on political activity?

Common to both sets of suggestions for new directions in research on political participation is a concern for the social and political context within which individual citizens operate, as well as a call for a deeper understanding of the explanatory variable in question. Further, and to the extent that scholars intend for their conclusions to influence policy and practice in the real world, I propose that it is important to elucidate the normative implications of the conclusions by providing an explanation of the epistemological and methodological assumptions in the analysis. Finally, while it is convenient and desirable for some purposes to analyze separately the significance of race and class for political participation, it is also clear that the two concepts are for many groups in question, inextricably intertwined. This observation, together with the theoretical imperative outlined above, underscores the complexity of the task.

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\(^1\) The phrase, and the perspective, are from Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (California, 1998).
that lies ahead for scholars who wish to seriously tackle the subject, yet it also highlights the potential for a significant pay-off.

The significance of race for political participation

Not since the critical elections of the New Deal realignment has the American populace appeared so ethnically diverse. The proportion of residents born outside of the United States has grown steadily to nearly 10% of the population from its mid-century low-point, and the absolute number of new entrants to the U.S. political system – totaling 25 million in 1996 – rivals the pace of foreign migration in the late-19th and early-20th centuries when between 500,000 and 1,000,000 immigrants entered the country each year. Immigration policy shows no imminent signs of retreat to the restrictive policies set forth by the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 (which traces some of its more insidious roots to the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 and the activities of the Dillingham Commission between 1907 and 1911), and while some political rhetoric and recent ballot initiatives in California echo President Calvin Coolidge’s restrictionist message of an “America for Americans,” the continued demand for willing and able workers from abroad foreshadows a continuation of the relatively open immigration policy of the last two decades.2

A number of politically-relevant parallels can be drawn between the pattern of ethnic diversity at the turn of the last century and the situation of a multi-ethnic polity today. Like their earlier counterparts, today’s immigrants to the United States come from a wide variety of foreign countries. While the largest number of late-19th and early-20th century immigrants came from sending countries in Europe and disembarked in New York City, new citizens from Asian and North American locations also entered through western states and U.S. territories. Like immigrants today, this earlier generation of newcomers spoke languages other than English, came from poor or modest economic backgrounds, often lived in urban ethnic enclaves, were younger than the average native-born American, and on average, had larger families. Questions about their ability to assimilate to American politics and culture were carefully examined.3 While the earlier immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe were slow to naturalize, once citizens, the strategic mobilization of these new voters by ethnic organizations and the urban political machines of their era created lasting political consequences for politics in the United States.4 As time passed, later generations moved out of the enclaves, married members of competing ethnic groups, and in the process, retained some culinary and holiday rituals, but lost the language and identities of their grandparents’ home country. One-quarter Irish, German, Italian, and English was eventually shortened to become simply white.5 This combination of social and political assimilation contributed to an altered understanding of the racial category of

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2 There are many good studies of immigration to the U.S. during the early 20th century. In my opinion, the best recent work is by Desmond King, Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy (2000).
4 Kristi Andersen’s analysis (1979) of Presidential voting between 1928 and 1936 identifies the political activation of immigrants as one of the chief reasons behind the New Deal realignment.
5 See Alba 1990; Waters 1990.
“white.” Slowly and grudgingly, the once-undesirable immigrants – the Irish, Italians, and Jews – were given and adopted the racial identity of whiteness.6

Race and ethnicity have always been an important story in the study of political participation, particularly the period in which the power of urban political machines and political parties were built on coalitions of ethnic voting blocs. Yet as these earlier ethnic identities among voters began to fade, research on the significance of race for political participation began to turn more of its attention to the differences in political behavior between white and African Americans. Coinciding with the widespread use of the large-sample survey, this line of inquiry has produced an important set of findings, particularly with regard to African Americans. Most studies showed that while African Americans were less likely to take part in a range of political activities, their rates of participation were actually higher than what would be predicted given their relatively low socio-economic status.7 In addition to resources, mobilization through religious organizations and African American candidates for office has been particularly effective in increasing political participation among African Americans.8 While these analyses report findings from a number of different data sources, many were completed with data from two national surveys – the National Election Study and the National Black Politics Study.

As the size of the Latino population in the United States began to grow, an important study of participation among this group of Americans was conducted in 1989-90. The Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) conducted interviews with a national sample of Latinos, focusing on Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans.9 Interviews with a sample of non-Hispanic whites were also conducted. While more of the published research from this data set focuses on the political attitudes of Latinos in the United States, the data reveal similar patterns of the importance of social and economic resources for political participation.10 While there are a number of additional survey data collections of Chicanos and Latinos in the United States, the LNPS and the 1989-90 Citizen Participation Study (CITPART) conducted by Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman Nie is the only other data collection of a national sample of Latinos which asked questions about political behavior. Analysis of these data showed that Latinos are substantially less likely than non-Hispanic whites and African Americans to participate, even when their level of socio-economic status is taken into account, and studies of regional populations in Texas and California found similar results.11

Studies of Asian American political participation using survey data are even more rare, though there have been a number of articles published based on state samples, mostly from

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6 Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999) provides an interesting account of these three groups. See also Noel Ignatiev’s analysis (1995) of the strategic significance for the Irish of racial conflict with African Americans in their struggle against nativism and quest for inclusion among whites. One fascinating reflection of the state’s struggle with (and manipulation of) categorizing by race is the evolution of the race question in the Census, where Jews were once counted as “Hebrews” and South Asians as “Hindus.” See Anderson (1988). In the 2000 Census, Americans were for the first time allowed to choose more than one racial category to represent themselves.

7 Verba and Nie (1972) were the first to demonstrate this finding with survey data from the U.S. population. See also Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993; Danigelis 1978, 1982; Dawson 1995; Dawson, Brown, and Allen 1990; Ellison and Gay 1989; Guterbock and London 1983; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Nelson 1979; Shingles 1981.

8 See, for example, Tate 1993; Harris 1994; Bobo and Gilliam 1990.

9 The research was conducted by Rodolfo de la Garza, Louis DeSipio, F. Chris Garcia, John Garcia, and Angelo Falcon, and the study is detailed in their 1992 book, *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on American Politics*.


California.\textsuperscript{12} The data show that there is a great deal of variation in political activity among Asian Americans based on generation of immigration, ethnic background, and to a lesser extent, socio-economic status. The findings for this group of Americans are the most uncertain, and systematic research still remains to be done. In addition to research on minority political behavior using quantitative survey data, there are also a number of studies utilizing data from in-depth interview of small populations of activists, as well as historical accounts of participatory action by groups of minority Americans.\textsuperscript{13} Some of the most interesting current research on racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. is occurring in sociology, where scholars are researching patterns of social and economic assimilation.\textsuperscript{14} There is also a growing body of research among political scientists (most of it still unpublished) using multiple methodologies to study immigrant political participation.\textsuperscript{15}

Conversely, the research in political science on race and public opinion is much deeper – both empirically and theoretically – than that addressing the significance of race for political participation. Part of this is due to the fact that opinion data on perceptions toward other racial groups and attitudes about public policies on issues of race are far more prevalent (often commissioned by the popular press). Yet perhaps a more important reason for the smaller number of empirical studies of Latino and Asian American political participation is the relatively small size of the populations nationally, their concentration in a handful of states (California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois), and the language barriers for English interviewers. This is becoming much less of an issue for the Latino population, which will soon overtake African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States, and for which Spanish language interviewers are more readily available. For Asian Americans, who make up only 4\% of the U.S. population, are concentrated in two states (California and New York), and speak more than a dozen languages, the difficulties for conducting research on a larger scale are more serious.

There are two things that are clear from the empirical research – both quantitative and qualitative – on minority political participation. The more in-depth analyses are able to demonstrate the critical importance of the economic, social, and political context structuring the ability and willingness of African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans to take part in political activities. The findings from empirical studies based on survey data reiterate the importance of individual-level resources, particularly education and other indicators of social standing for political participation. With few exceptions, the story the significance of race for political participation told with the survey data is one where social and economic resources plays the dominant role.

As models of political behavior go, the SES model has thus far been a pretty consistent and safe bet. It has succeeded in identifying among the most important individual-level characteristics that differentiate those who are more likely to be engaged in politics from those


\textsuperscript{13} Michael Jones-Correa’s study of New York (1998) and Carol Hardy-Fanta’s work in Boston are two examples of work on Latinos. On Asian Americans, see Espiritu (1992) and Wei (1993).

\textsuperscript{14} See Portes 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Waters 1999; Foner 1987; Gans 1992; and the January/February 1999 issue of the \textit{American Behavioral Scientist}.

\textsuperscript{15} The “second generation” project headed by John Mollenkopf of the CUNY Graduate Center is currently collecting data on the political activity of the children of immigrants in New York City. See also Lin and Jamal 1998 for a study of Arab immigrants; Minnite, Holdaway, and Hayduk 2000 on New York City residents; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2000 on generational voting patterns among minorities in the U.S.; and Wong 2000 on Mexican and Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles and New York.
who do not take part. In particular, the importance of formal education to political behavior and attitudes has been described as “transcendent” and as the “universal solvent.” Almost fifty years of American National Election Study and other survey data demonstrate repeatedly that the more highly educated and those with more substantial economic resources participate in politics at higher rates than those with less formal education and more modest incomes. In this way, the SES model has been a resounding success. With respect to explaining political participation among minority Americans, the SES model has also proven useful; once higher levels of education and family wealth among whites have been accounted for, African Americans and Latinos have been found to participate at or near the same rates as their more economically and educationally advantaged white counterparts.

Yet despite its perceived success, the SES model suffers from several significant problems. First, while the SES model identifies the individual-level factors related to political activity, it says little about what it is exactly about education and income that make them such powerful predictors of participation. Second, and more damaging to its logic, is the fact that the model yields predictions about political behavior in the wrong direction over time. What has famously been described by Richard Brody as the “puzzle of participation,” is the expectation generated from the simple additive assumption of the SES model that participation should grow over time in the same direction with its determinants, at the same time that we observe a decline in electoral activity. Inconsistent with the prediction of the SES model, political engagement has not followed the upward trajectory of the main causal variable in the model; voting, campaign work, and other forms of engagement in electoral politics have declined or remained constant while average levels of formal education have increased dramatically over time. Finally, the interpretation as positive of the finding that differences in political activity with whites either disappear or recede significantly once disparities in resources are accounted for, is problematic. One could argue that making whites and minorities look like one another by holding constant what in reality amount to substantial differences in social and political resources, is an odd way to find optimism. Furthermore, a scenario of no variation in the independent variables (where everyone is well-educated and wealthy), would be impossible in the American democratic system as it currently exists. Even if we are near the “end of history” in terms of ideological diversity, the hierarchical configuration of democratic-capitalist values, structures, and the institutions that support them – including education – are in no imminent danger of extinction. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the implications of the SES model have been interpreted by fans of liberal democracy as encouraging. Potential participants in the polity can be brought into the political system by increasing their reserve of social and economic resources. In other words, resource-poor individuals can and should be compelled to participate through their incorporation into the social, political, and economic hierarchy.

While research in political science on the significance of race for political participation is in many ways making good forward progress in terms of data collection and interest in ethnic and minority politics, it has remained more stagnant in developing theory to explain the phenomena and the findings. In the next few sections of the paper, I suggest three potentially

16 Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Converse 1972.
17 In their “civic voluntarism” model, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) go beyond SES by unpacking the elements of resources, as time, money and civic skills. In addition, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, chapter 2) provide a good explanation of how and why formal education is so important to voting.
19 See chapter 6 in Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996) for a critique of the logic of the absolute education model and an explanation of rising aggregate levels of education amidst stagnant and declining political engagement.
useful strategies for enhancing the research: examining the categories within the independent variable of race, specifying the importance of context for minority political activity, and clarifying the assumptions and consequences of the findings.

*Categorizing by race*

One of the first considerations in the study of the significance of race for political participation is deciding how to categorize people into groups. Over the last few decades, this has most often been accomplished by using the simple binary of black or white, and when there are a sufficient number of Latinos, adding a third dummy variable to signify that racial grouping. This simple division is harder to justify as the U.S. population has become increasingly diverse. Nearly one-third of the population considers itself something other than white, and less than half of those are identified as black. Similar to the complex reconstruction of the category of whiteness in the early 20th century, the category of “blackness” is undergoing its own shifts as a result of international migration to the U.S. from the Caribbean, the African continent, and to a lesser degree, South America. In 1996, more than 15% of the foreign-born residents in the United States came from a sending country in the Caribbean or Africa. Most Africans identify themselves as black, but Cubans and Dominicans of African and mixed descent might, for example, feel equally comfortable with the classification of Latino. How black racial identities among immigrants are developed and altered upon arrival and assimilation to U.S. culture is the subject of recent research by the sociologist Mary Waters. In her study tracing generations of black West Indian immigrants in New York City, Waters finds that while these immigrants initially find success in a relatively smooth transition into the American economic structure, their children begin to lose positive West Indian cultural values through erosion by persistent and blatant racial discrimination against blacks in American society. The intricate interplay Waters reveals between race as a social-structural context, and ethnicity as an affective identity demonstrates the complexity of the task of sorting out who belongs in what group.

Further complicating the task is the fact that the categories of race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive. For instance, in the Census 2000 long form, respondents are allowed to select more than one category of “race” to describe themselves as “White; Black, African American or Negro; American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian; Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Pacific Islander; or Some other race.” The question preceding the race item asks if the person is “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino,” with the following categories: “Mexican, Mexican American or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” A few questions later, respondents are asked for a verbatim response to their “ancestry or ethnic origin,” which includes examples such as “Italian; Jamaican; African American; Cambodian; Cape Verdean; Norwegian; Dominican; French Canadian; Haitian; Korean; Lebanese; Polish; Nigerian; Mexican; Taiwanese; Ukrainian.” If you are now even more unsure about the distinctions between “race” and “ethnicity,” you are not alone. The U.S. Census Bureau itself faces political challenges from a number of ideologically- and ethnically-diverse groups regarding the way it will use the Census 2000 data to identify minority populations, which will be of particular significance to the practice of race-conscious legislative districting.

The intricacies of racial and ethnic classification extend still further, and encompass resistance to categorization into wider racial groups when subjective identities are in conflict.

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20 Waters, 1999.
with more objective racial categories, or when diverse racial and ethnic background require multiple hyphens. For instance, Cubans may chafe at being grouped with Mexicans, third-generation Chicanos may take exception to classification with new immigrant populations from Central America, and similar discomfort may be registered among recent Korean immigrants who are combined with Nisei (Japanese) in the category of Asian American. Alternatively, some minority Americans may refuse an ethnic or racial label, preferring a white honorific instead.\(^{21}\) When a respondent describes herself as a banana – yellow on the outside and white on the inside – what is the analyst to do with her classification?\(^{22}\) Finally, how are we to classify the rapidly-growing group of multi-ethnic Americans, whose parents come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds? Popular news magazines such as *Newsweek*, are asking these questions and showing the faces of native-born Americans with such racial and ethnic backgrounds such as: “Trinidadian-Sicilian; German Jewish-Korean; African American-German-Native American; Polish-African American-Puerto Rican; and Lebanese-Dominican-Haitian-Spanish.”\(^{23}\) The steadily increasing rate of intermarriage (particularly among Latinos and whites and Asians and whites) foreshadows more growth in the set of hyphenated racial and ethnic categories.

While this degree of variation and malleability can be bewildering, it also provides fertile ground from which a robust set of politically-relevant classifications for race and ethnicity can be developed. What the diversity of categories indicates is the degree to which such groupings are social constructions, created and maintained by individuals alone, and together in society.\(^ {24}\) From the perspective of studying the significance of race for political participation, political science needs to construct categories for analysis that are both relevant to the people themselves, and signify the group’s location within the political structure. In other words, a racial and ethnic classification that is salient to political action is one which must be contingent upon both affective ascription and identification, as well as the categorical boundaries imposed and maintained by the social order. A.L. Epstein describes the latter as negative identity, and uses the example of the social category of *mischling*,\(^ {25}\) where “…elements of negative identity are nearly always present where ethnic groups occupy a position of inferior or marginality within a dominance hierarchy. Abundant evidence is to be found in colonial situations, but it is no less characteristic, though in varying degree, or minority groups in modern states: it has contributed importantly to the identity of American Blacks…” (Epstein, p. 102)

Categories of racial and ethnic identity are therefore most fruitfully understood as the interplay of both internal (ascriptive positive identity) and external forces (negative identity). Using evidence from his fieldwork in the United States and New Guinea, Epstein argues that this framework is explicitly defined in structural terms. “…[E]thnicity quickly becomes intimately interwoven with questions of hierarchy, stratification, and the pursuit of political interests. In these circumstances, the categories quickly become ‘social facts’ in the Durkheimian sense, increasingly taking on a life of their own, from which it may be extremely difficult for the

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21 Andrew Hacker uses this memorable phrase to describe the location of Asian Americans in the American educational system in his 1992 book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*.
22 In a similar vein, there are a number of examples, particularly of ethnic Chinese who are native to former African slave colonies such as Jamaica, whose subjective identification is black Caribbean. See Rogers 2000. A terrific account of this ethnicity-bending experience can be found Powell’s fictional account, *The Pagoda*.
24 Omi and Winant (1994), provide a useful discussion of how racial groups were created and changed in the U.S.
25 Epstein defines *mischling* as “…the offspring of marriages between Jew and Gentile who have usually been brought up on neither a Jewish nor a Christian tradition, and where the home environment has laid little emphasis on ethnic origins.” (1978, p. 102)
individual to escape. Identity, as I have suggested, always involves a measure of choice, but here it operates within severe constraints, though these may vary in their intensity as between different groups.” (Epstein, p. 109) Nevertheless, these categories need not be durable to be useful; rather, their definition and composition should accurately reflect the social circumstances of the time of the analysis. By way of example, the reason behind the virtual disappearance in contemporary scholarship on the Irish vote (with the exception of the occasional article by Andrew Greeley), is the same reason why Irish identity in the U.S. today is most often recognized on what has become a celebratory holiday in March, and signified with a “Kiss Me, I’m Irish!” button. Being Irish no longer signals one’s place at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy along with African Americans, nor does the subjective identification carry with it as substantial a political meaning. Thus, classifications of race and ethnicity that are relevant to political participation should be ones which reflect the social structural forces at play.

**Specifying the structural context**

Having just made the argument for the explicit consideration of social structure in classifications of one of the independent variables – race and ethnicity – a companion set of challenges for political science is to specify and operationalize a set of measures that capture the structural context of opportunities and constraints within which Americans conduct politics. In other words, what are the aspects of the social and political context that interact with race to influence political activity, and how might we measure them?

Scholarship in political science and complimentary disciplines provides ample evidence of the racial biases in American political institutions, jurisprudence, and public policies such as welfare. While there is disagreement among scholars as to the scope of the bias, and the intention of the policymakers who created the policies and institutions that continue to structure government in American today, there is nevertheless wide acceptance of the notion that race, broadly speaking, has played a major role in American political development, and that minority citizens have usually been on the short end of the stick. While much research on citizen participation in the political behavior tradition is mindful of this legacy, the emphasis on individual-level survey data and the practice of estimating inferential statistical models predicting political participation, often leads analysts to see individuals in greater social isolation than is warranted. The complaint here is less one of model specification – that is, for including some independent variables that help to reflect the structural context of individual citizens – and directed more at the interpretation of these findings. I will have more to say about this in the next section.

My argument here is that is that it is necessary to both generate better measures of the relevant aspects of the social and political context and provide companion explanations for why these structural indicators are important, in order to understand the significance of race for political participation. There are a number of excellent examples, of research moving in this direction. In their analysis of participatory activity among minority residents of Texas, Jan Leighley and Arnold Vedlitz demonstrate the significance of psychological resources, social connectedness, group identity and consciousness, and group conflict in addition to measures of resources, for minority participation. While not explicitly a structural argument, they include indicators of the structural constraints and opportunities relevant to minority Texans. In identifying a number of causal models of political activity, Leighley and Vedlitz argue that the

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26 See, for example, Lieberman 1998; Skocpol 1995; Smith 1997.
explanations do not apply uniformly across the groups. A second example will be familiar to conference participants as the new research by Burns, Schlozman, and Verba on gender and political activity. They analyze the effect of home and family environment on women’s participation, but more importantly, consider explicitly what being a woman means to where she finds herself in the social structure, for instance in non-political institutions. Their integration of the structural constraints for individuals within politically-relevant groups is more explicit, and as such, they attempt to demonstrate the linkages between individuals, institutional contexts, and the eventual participatory consequences. Eric Oliver’s work on the importance of the local political context, and more specifically, the effect of the phenomenon of suburbanization on civic engagement, will also be familiar. The significance of his research is the creative efforts he takes to link individual participatory behavior with aggregate characteristics of the local political context.

What this research does is move us in the right direction in three important ways – proposing and testing varieties of inferential models of activity, theorizing about and then operationalizing the mechanisms by which structural inequalities constrain individuals in subordinate groups through institutional context, and marrying aggregate-level data of the local political region with individual-level data. Together, this research underscores the observation that a fruitful way to understand the significance of race for political participation is to train more analytic focus on the nexus between institutions, context, and individual behavior. More forward progress can be made if we shift our attention to uncovering how particular institutional and structural contexts present systematically different opportunities and constraints for political activity for people classified by race.

Clarifying assumptions and evaluating normative consequences

Developing politically-relevant categories of race and then specifying important aspects of the structural context will go a long way toward reaching the goal of the final suggestion I want to make – that of clarifying the assumptions brought to the analysis, and working out the normative consequences that result from the findings. Yet even with the innovations and progress made in recognizing the importance of context for participation, the 500-pound gorilla representing the logic of the SES model still remains. SES is the gorilla because it always eats up (or sits on, depending on your version of the analogy) the biggest chunk of variance in models predicting participatory behavior. In this regard, no one – not even those who identify and analyze the importance of identity-based mobilization, or structures of local government – can avoid the gorilla in their empirical results. The fact that the gorilla is always there is uncontroversial, rather, what is at issue is the interpretation the relevance of his omnipresence. The consistency of the findings about the significance of SES has contributed to a more reflexive rather than purpose response, and in the process, has helped turn what should be an explicit assumption about individual agency into more of an implicit one. The interpretation that has most often prevailed is an assumption about the equality of individual agency that is best exemplified in model specifications including separate controls for race and class. A companion assumption is one about representation; that more participatory input from citizens means that there will be more responsiveness from political representatives. These are reasonable assumptions, neither of which I am in disagreement with in principle. At the same time, however, they are precisely that – assumptions about which individual-level data on political behavior data provide little certainty. The more significant problem, however, arises when these
two assumptions are bundled with a particularly popular normative perspective about democracy that advocates more political activity. This combination encourages conclusions from the findings about the significance of race for political participation that may be contradictory at best, and at worst, counter to the interests of minority populations.

The equality of individual agency assumption makes a lot of sense in that it is something we want to believe; one more year of education will garner the same increase in political engagement for whites as for blacks. But if there is evidence that there is an interaction between antecedents to political activity – a set of structural constraints that present unequal contexts for opportunity among individuals classified by race – then the assumption becomes much more problematic. The same is true for the representation assumption. If it is the case, both objectively and subjectively, that a black man’s letter to his Congressman receives the same attention and action as the white man’s, then this assumption is justifiable. But if there is something systematic in the political process that makes the campaign contribution from the Asian American worth less than the same dollar amount from a white American, we can be less sure about this assumption, and we need to find ways to account for the interaction between race and representative responsiveness.

Finally, I think it is worth reconsidering, within the context of what we know about the significance of race for political participation, one of the more enduring normative positions that more participation is good. More political participation is usually considered to be a good thing, particularly during a period in history in which democracy has few ideological rivals. Indeed, more political activity – that is, more liberal democracy in the form of expanded expression of voice and deliberation among citizens – has been advocated as a procedural and substantive solution for distributional inequities in social and political goods. Increasing political activity among those traditionally disadvantaged and politically underrepresented can help create public policies that take their interests into account as well as empower those previously disenfranchised to take political stands in order to develop and forward their interests. Because minorities tend to participate in politics at comparatively lower rates, people in these groups have become the target for calls for political activity through naturalization and voter registration drives. Such well-intentioned campaigns seek greater equality in political outcomes by making the electorate more descriptively representative of the population at large. The inference is that policies beneficial to those previously disenfranchised are most likely to be adopted when the face of the electorate mirrors the face of the polity. Conversely, undesirable political outcomes are reasoned to be the result of the lack of political activity among those whose interests are at stake. Under circumstances of relatively modest rates of political activity among minorities, what falls under scrutiny for change are the individuals who supposedly influence the institutions and practices themselves. In this regard, the analytic emphasis on the individual-level subject has trained the focus for change on the non-participant citizen while at the expense of a critical examination of the structure and institutions of democracy in which agency is acted out.

27 This has not always been the case. Important traditions of thought, frequently characterized as “elitist” theories of democracy take the opposite position regarding the desirability of greater popular sovereignty. Arguments against more citizen participation reflect concerns about the political, moral, and cognitive capability of the mass public, regime stability, and decision-making gridlock. See, e.g., Schumpeter 1942, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lipset 1960; Michels 1962; Huntington 1968; and Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975. While silent about the desirability of more citizen participation, perspectives from rational choice suggest that we should simply not expect more activity from individuals.
But if we relax the assumption that the political process – the democratic culture, practice, and institutions of democracy – provides equality of agency for all regardless of race or some other politically-relevant category, then the comparatively low rates of participatory activity among minority Americans can be interpreted in another way, as an indicator of the structural inequalities present. The analytic strategy of holding the assumption to greater scrutiny does not necessarily imply a structurally functionalist argument. Rather, it asks us to consider the location of the significance of race for political participation on the dichotomy between structure and agency that make up the ends of the continuum from the debilitating determinism of a system continually reenacting domination, to the unwarranted optimism of unencumbered agency. To the question of “Were they pushed or did they jump?”\textsuperscript{28} (perhaps more appropriately for participation, were they held back or did they sit out), studies of citizen participation has too often answered from the agency pole.

The significance of class for political participation

Following from the discussion above is the next question of how indicators of class are relevant to political participation. I suggest that one useful way to approach this discussion is to attempt to understand the multiple causal processes of indicators of class as they relate to political participation. Rather than assuming a uniform influence, to what extent do explanatory variables have more than one type of effect on political activity? This strategy involves digging deeper into the independent variable in question. In this section of the paper, I discuss the role of formal education plays for political participation, and consider how education provides both opportunities for political action as well as barriers to individual agency.

Reconsidering education: locating structure and agency

If there is a consistent refrain in the vast literature concerning education in America, it is that it is good – good for democracy, for employment, for social mobility, for building strong communities, and for democratic values. For the most part, the scholarly research implies a system now open to all, but still with fewer opportunities for minorities and the poor. Education is most often viewed as a resource that, when fairly distributed, can provide equal opportunities for individuals in society to succeed. It is easy for scholars to be drawn into the claim that more education is better, not only for its normative appeal, but also because of the sheer quantity of evidence that supports the notion that education contributes in a positive sense to many individual-level outcomes that concern us.

Over the last half-century in the United States, social scientists have presented highly consistent empirical findings demonstrating a strong and positive relationship between level of formal educational attainment and political, economic, and social phenomena. The better educated vote more, have higher-paying jobs, and are more socially active in their communities than those individuals with less education. Extending these findings suggests that more education will help the disenfranchised to participate in politics, the unemployed to get jobs, and the socially disconnected to engage with their communities. Moreover, historians have most often characterized public education in the United States as a democratizing force, where schooling enhances opportunities for all.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} This phrase is from the title of Diego Gambetta 1987 book on decision making in education.

\textsuperscript{29} See, for example, Cremin 1961.
Since Brown and the Civil Rights movement, expanded access and the elimination of many racial barriers to public and higher education have clearly improved the lives of many minority and poor Americans. It is reasoned that more education is good because of the individual-level consequences of education, which include a number of desirable outcomes, including enhancing political knowledge, worker productivity, and social trust. In so doing, more education creates “human capital” and “social capital” that are considered beneficial for society, resulting in a Pareto-optimal situation for both individuals and society at large. The reasons for this positive bias toward more education may be best understood as the manifestation of a strong and pervasive liberal democratic philosophy among scholars, which conceives of education as an equalizing force, and as a powerful producer of individual agency.

Early educational theorists, notably John Dewey of the American democratic school, argued that formal education ought to have developmental as well as integrative and egalitarian effects.30 This position strongly influenced the development of the institutions of public education in the U.S., and has continued to inform educational reform since Dewey's writings first appeared at the turn of the century.31 The expectation for education to enhance achievement, that is, what goes on inside the minds of students, is perhaps best exemplified today by the preoccupation of educators with student test scores. The success or failure of curricula and new educational programs is most frequently evaluated on the basis of changes in these achievement scores.32 Economists, most recently within the human capital school of labor economists, concur with the developmental imperative of education, arguing that its greatest significance is the effect education has on the growth of knowledge, skills, flexibility, and problem-solving ability in workers. Indeed, labor economists have identified formal education and training as the most important investment one can make in human capital.33 Their concern with these characteristics of human capital is due to the positive effect that such qualities have on productivity and income earnings, as employers reward higher wages to those workers with educational credentials. Political scientists and sociologists also find education to be a particularly important individual-level resource and predictor of social and political behavior. Even before the advent of the large sample survey, formal education was identified as the primary causal influence behind increased participation, interest in politics, and adherence to democratic values.

This conception of education, however, is at odds with a seemingly divergent conclusion that places education among the most powerful stratifiers in modern post-industrial society. The very same data that pinpoint the critical importance of education to social, political, and economic outcomes and inform the position that more education is good, also simultaneously identify education as the main mechanism driving the maintenance of inequality and hierarchy where the outcomes are scarce. In these instances, rather than adding aggregate value to society and economy, more education may have either no positive effect on enhancing equality or instead, a negative effect. More education in American society over the last quarter century has not produced a commensurate rise in many social, economic, and political outcomes. For example, citizen political participation in various forms of voluntary activity has remained steady, and voting has declined precipitously; the nation's stock of social capital is by some accounts dangerously low; and real income has remained stagnant despite the aggregate

30 Dewey 1916.
31 See Katznelson and Weir 1985.
32 See, for example, Ravitch and Finn 1988.
increases in education. At the same time, education is more important than ever as a prerequisite for getting a job that pays well. Labor economists demonstrate that a student who invests in a college education will reap rewards in future income that far offset the cost of obtaining the degree. However, as more people have become better educated, the labor market has also become increasingly stratified, leaving those without the requisite educational credentials even further behind. At a time in which nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population is college-educated, we also have an unprecedented unequal distribution of wealth accompanied by growing disparity between rich and poor. For instance, since 1980, median wages for those with a high school education or less have fallen by 6 percent, while earnings for college graduates have risen by double that amount.

Echoing the findings from research in economics on the relationship between education and income earnings, sociological studies of social mobility, status attainment, and stratification point to the strong relationship between years of education and occupational position. The common theoretical strands in this work are the meritocratic and functional theories of social stratification which posit that formal education provides individuals with the skills necessary for performing the tasks of occupations. Within this tradition, measures of intelligence have been identified as a critical intervening variable in the process of status attainment, though strong critiques of meritocratic theories have also been articulated. In short, a meritocratic approach implies that individuals with more education are smarter and better qualified, and therefore deserve to occupy higher positions in the occupational and social hierarchy. The role of education in status attainment has also been interpreted as the result of the organization of society around an education credential system. Instead of acting as an agent of change on the mind of the individual, more education and degrees simply convey information about past performance or a pre-existing advantaged status, rather than adding further ability. Other scholars have questioned the efficacy of formal education as it is presently constituted for the positive development of cognitive ability, noting the lack of a relationship (either positive or negative, except at the extreme margins) between standard measures of intelligence and educational attainment. In their influential work on the relationship between education and economy in the United States, Bowles and Gintis highlight the strong and positive relationship between family wealth and level of schooling. By juxtaposing this set of findings, they suggest that it is not those who go to school who get smarter, but rather, it is the rich who are better able to go further in school, and who then get certified as being smarter and better qualified.

This perspective provides another way to look at education as an individual-level resource. While formal education may indeed encourage the development of cognitive ability, it may also be the case that these skills are far less relevant to securing one's place in the social hierarchy of American life. Instead, the important of education to stratification may be the role it plays as a powerful socialization device, teaching students who are successful and who progress through educational institutions to also become initiated into the hierarchical norms of commerce, politics, and social life. In short, education may be a particularly effective means of reproducing cultural, political, and economic practices. Most students in higher education

34 Classic works on education and social stratification include Blau and Duncan 1967; Lipset and Bendix 1959; Eckland 1965; Sewell and Hauser 1975; and Sewell, Hauser, and Featherman, eds. 1976.
35 In support of IQ meritocracy theories, see Duncan, Featherman and Duncan 1972; Duncan 1968; Herrnstein 1971; and Herrnstein and Murray 1994. Critiques of this perspective include Bell 1972; Olneck and Crouse 1979; and Krausz and Slomeczynski 1985.
37 See, for example, Bourdieu 1987, 1989, 1990.
succeed by developing analytic and communications styles (in English) consistent with those 
rewarded in the marketplace of jobs in the U.S. This may be precisely what the human capital 
economists are after – educated workers who can assimilate easily into the workforce. As one of 
the primary mechanisms behind social stratification, education can also be conceived as exactly 
the opposite from an equalizing force. Instead, at the macro-societal level, education may 
reproduce and legitimate structural inequalities which in turn drive vast disparities in wealth, and 
nurture the persistence of the dominance of the in-group to the systematic disadvantage of out-
groups.38

How can education be understood simultaneously as both an equalizing force and a 
stratification mechanism? Education may be positive and empowering at the individual level, yet 
at the macro-societal level, education may at the very same time have negative consequences and 
debilitating effects for those at the bottom of the social, economic, and political hierarchy. If we 
acknowledge that educational institutions both function within and are products of the American 
democratic-capitalist system, then the revelation that education is at once a potential equalizing 
as well as stratifying mechanism is a predictable redundancy rather than a contradiction requiring 
explanation. Education both enables and restricts; it is a location for the development of both 
individual agency and structural constraint.

The value of the resources conveyed upon individuals by educational attainment must be 
considered in relation to what level of resources are held by others in the society. The value of 
education to social outcomes like income earnings and political participation must be assessed in 
relative terms to how much everyone else has. More education in the aggregate does not 
necessarily improve conditions at either the macro-societal level or the individual level. Instead, 
more education simply shifts the baseline upward. If the pace of gains by disadvantaged groups 
does not keep up with the growth in education by advantaged groups, the former fall further 
behind even as they are making progress in level of educational attainment in an absolute sense. 
Far from a simple theoretical exercise, this situation reflects the current reality of more rapid 
gains in education by the advantaged over African-Americans and Latinos, who continue to 
operate at a distinct educational disadvantage.39 The gap in educational attainment between 
whites and Asians on the one hand, and African-Americans and Latinos on the other, remains, 
and since the 1980s, is once again increasing. In addition, there are significant differences in 
wages by race, even among those with the same level of education.40 These conclusions about 
the collective outcomes of education are sobering for minorities and the poor, who have more to 
l loose from the educational progress of advantaged groups. The role of education as a social 
stratifier has debilitating and negative effects for those who occupy the lower positions in the 
social, economic, and political hierarchy.41

Disadvantaged groups stay that way not only by virtue of their relatively low placement 
in the educational hierarchy, but also because the legitimacy of this unequal structure is 
propagated in party by American educational institutions themselves. Rather than sitting outside

38 This "revisionist" perspective identifies education as critical to the maintenance of capitalism. See Bowles and 
Gintis 1976. But also see Willis 1977 for his analysis of the "Hammertown lads" subjectively reproduce labor power 
through resistance to and rebellion from middle-class educational imperatives.
39 See Murphy 1990.
40 See Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce 1989.
41 MacLeod's original 1984 study and follow-up of black and white teenagers and their educational aspirations and 
occupational opportunities in "Clarendon Heights" provides a poignant account of how the objective and subjective 
realms intersect. Of similar lower class position as the "Hallway Hangers," the "Brothers" face the double 
disadvantage of being black and poorly educated.
of the political, economic, and social structures that reinforce inequality and domination, education is a part of it. Education plays two important roles in the maintenance of an ideology of meritocracy in the United States. In its sorting function, formal education confers certification, degrees and other scarce outcomes that places those with what are defined as the best credentials at the top of the hierarchy, and those with lesser near the bottom. In its role as a powerful socializer, education teaches the ideology of meritocracy, by grading on normal curves and assuring those who finish on the right tail that they will succeed because they deserve to. The second role is critical, for it is necessary to have some mechanism which reliably reproduces the ideology that maintains the positions of power for those at the top who benefit from the system as it already exists.  

When outcomes are positional or scarce – when not everyone can be rich, and not everyone can be granted admission into a top school – the liberal democratic ideology must have an answer to its production of unequal outcomes. Merit can be used as a justification for inequality of outcomes in a system where the rules are supposed to be fair.

This discussion of education as a location for the development of both individual agency as well as and structural constraints is intended as a gentle if unpleasant reminder that policies that seek to redress the consequences of political inequality cannot assume that providing more resources for competition in an unequal system will eliminate the inequality. To the extent that education contributes to the maintenance of social stratification, sorting those with high attainment and credentials to the top and those with less toward the bottom, while at the same time reproducing an ideology of meritocracy, we cannot expect that mechanism in its same form to also dismantle the hierarchy.

Thus, education, the most frequently used indicator of class in political behavior research, is neither a monolithic concept nor an independent variable with a simple causal influence. The extent to which similar patterns pertain to other indicators of class is unclear, and the task of digging deeper to uncover the possibility of multiple causal effects for critical explanatory variables of political participation remains incomplete. The search – and digging – could lead to some interesting results, for what may appear to be non-political and non-contextual explanatory variables may in fact be of structural importance to political participation. One example to consider is the analysis of gender by Burns, Schlozman, and Verba on the formation of individual interest in politics. “The disparity between women and men in the taste for politics turns out, at least in part, to have political roots. The legacy of centuries of de jure and decades of de facto exclusion from politics is a residual difference in the extent to which women and men know and care about politics.” (p. 34) This may indeed be an instance of a process at work that helps to create durable inequalities.

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My hope is that this paper generates discussion on issues surrounding the three general arguments I have made about the significance of race and class for political participation. In sum, I have argued that recognizing the contingent nature of race within the contemporary social context of the United States is an important first step toward understanding how classifications by race are relevant to citizen activity. This contention is one aspect of the larger proposition that many of the explanatory variables we identify as indicators of political activity have multiple meanings for the dependent variable in question. Digging deeper into the various ways in which

42 In Tilly’s terms, these are the processes of “emulation” and “adaptation.”
43 Many others have made similar points, however most with regard to income. See, for example, Jencks 1993.
measures of race and education help structure the set of opportunities and constraints for engagement, dovetails with the second of my arguments for more explicit consideration of the social-structural factors at play that influence individual actors. It is clear from the findings from political behavior research that race and education serve as markers of inferior or superior positionality in social, economic, and political hierarchies. Yet to make inferential progress, we need to do more than demonstrate descriptively that these inequalities exist. Instead, analyses that combine a more explicitly structural theory about how context systematically influences individual agency, along with creative efforts to measure this context, will provide the most insight into the question of the significance of race and class for political participation. Durable inequalities in social and political structures that are located in antecedents to participation can easily be misperceived exclusively as settings for the enhancement of individual agency, rather than simultaneously as a negative constraint on action. Finally, an effort to examine more carefully the assumptions brought to the analysis – particularly that which presupposes equality of agency among individuals – will be very much worthwhile in helping to clarify the normative consequences of the conclusions about the significance of race and class for political participation.

By doing so, we will be better able to answer timely questions about race, class, and political participation, such as uncertainties about how the growing number of minority and immigrant Americans will vote, and what can be done about declining rates of political activity. It has been observed that no candidate for President of the United States has won the election without the state of California, and it is also the case today that no candidate can win California without substantial support from the Latino, African American, and Asian American voters. Whether to vote, for what reasons, and for which candidates these increasingly powerful electoral groups choose is a timely set of questions. A companion query is one that asks how persistent and politically-relevant a new set of racial and ethnic identities will be. Who, among the more recent group of immigrants will “become white”? Between which groups will alliances and cleavages appear? In order to investigate these kinds of questions, we will need better data than are currently available, and national surveys designed to include oversamples of minority populations in high-immigration states, and that ask a deeper set of questions about ethnicity and citizenship would speed the task substantially. Combining such data with the forthcoming Census 2000 data will provide a powerful source of information to answer such questions. Finally, it is also possible that thinking more carefully about the independent variables that we use to measure socio-economic status, such as education, will help to draw our attention from puzzling over a paradox that exists only as a function of misplaced assumptions, and move toward addressing the substantive issues that underlie the causes of declining civic engagement.


_____ . 1988. Latinos and the Political System (University of Notre Dame Press).


