

*Adding Race:
A Proposed Model of the Determinants of
African-American Political Behavior*

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Political Science 207: African American Political Development
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“The demographic headline on the 2002 election was expected to be either "Democrats ride growing numbers of nonwhite voters to victory," or "GOP wins by attracting more minorities." Instead, non-whites played an anticlimactic role. The star turn was taken by what had become the Invisible Giant of American politics: the white electorate.”

-Steve Sailor, National Correspondent, UPI

“Republicans have to increase their percentage among blacks and certainly among Hispanics,” declared Mathew Dowd, the 2000 Bush Campaign pollster, in a well-publicized interview in July, 2001. “As a realistic goal, we have to get somewhere between 13 and 15 percent of the black vote and 38 to 40 percent of the Hispanic vote.”¹ The Republicans, Dowd suggested, are in serious danger of losing the 2004 election unless they broaden their appeal to include minority groups. In the wake of Dowd’s comments various political analysts and pundits – absorbed with the implications of census data that suggested that the African-American and Hispanic-American populations are increasing in size and of survey data and scholarly work that suggest both that the population as a whole is moving to the ideological left and that the African-American and Hispanic-American votes are (perhaps for the first time in decades) in serious “play” on the national stage – began examining both whether Republicans were indeed reaching out to minorities and how Republicans might achieve greater penetration into minority communities. In the light of academic political science, such examinations appear to make sense. “While ideologically liberal on a number of issues,” Paul Frymer writes for instance in *Uneasy Alliance: Race and Party Competition in America*, “black voters are also ideologically moderate to conservative on a number of other issues – issues that ought to allow for opposition party appeals.” (Frymer, 1999; 9)

Over the past year it has seemed that the Republicans might be doing just what Frymer suggests – appealing to African Americans and Hispanic Americans and effectively wooing

¹ Matthew Dowd, cited in “US Electorate 'Moving Steadily to the Left': As Nation Changes, Parties Are Warned They Need New Tactics to Woo Voters,” by Thomas B. Edsall, *The Washington Post*, Sunday, July 8, 2001.

minority voters from the Democrats by vigorously prosecuting the “war on terrorism” and supporting such socially-conservative issues as bans on abortion.² The 2002 midterm elections, however, appear to have demonstrated in a dramatic fashion that these analyses were completely misguided. (The elections also appear to have demonstrated that while Dowd’s fears that Republicans would fail to attract African American and minority voters were in large part realized, that failure had very little impact upon the results of the election.³) Estimates of what percentage of African Americans were planning to vote or did vote for Democrat candidates range from 84 to 91 percent; such numbers hardly reflect any minority party migration, but they do reflect the racially polarized nature of American politics. “Fully 85% of non-whites say they will vote Democratic, a figure that rises to 91% among African Americans,” explained a poll analysis from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press – an analysis which incorrectly predicted that the Democrats would take control of the House with a narrow margin.⁴ “By far the largest divide among American voters continues to be racial,” explained one Gallop Poll analysis immediately after the election. “White voters support Republicans by a 20-point margin, 58% to 38%, while nonwhites support Democrats by a 68-point margin, 82% to 14%.”⁵

The inability of pundits to predict how African Americans would behave in the voting booths – and the inability of those same pundits to explain *why* African Americans voted the way they did beyond saying that African Americans always vote for Democrats – raises important

² For one example of such predictions, see “US Electorate 'Moving Steadily to the Left': As Nation Changes, Parties Are Warned They Need New Tactics to Woo Voters,” Thomas B. Edsall, *The Washington Post*, Sunday, July 8, 2001.

³ “Analysis: Whites, not Latinos, win for GOP,” by Steve Sailer, National Correspondent, United Press International, November 12, 2002, in *The Washington Times*. Article reprinted as “The Color of Election 2002: It Might Surprise You,” by Steve Sailer, November 15, 2002. Cited online at <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-sailer111502.asp>.

⁴ “House Voting Intentions Knotted, National Trend Not Apparent: 44% Republican, 46% Democratic Final Generic Ballot Measure,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, poll analysis released November 3, 2002. Material online at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=164>.

⁵ “Higher Turnout Among Republicans Key to Victory: Major divisions among Americans across the country,” by David W. Moore and Jeffrey M. Jones, November 7, 2002, available at www.gallop.org.

questions for political scientists interested in the political behavior of African Americans. If African Americans do not simply vote for Democrats as a general rule, as Frymer argues in *Uneasy Alliances*, then how *do* they behave in American politics? Such a question can be broken down into three shorter questions: why and how African Americans decide to *participate* in politics, what elements dictate how African Americans will behave once they have made the decision to participate, and what role race plays in understanding political behavior. In order to answer these questions, we must develop and apply an appropriate model for African American political behavior.

Socioeconomic Status and Political Behavior

The Basic SES Model

The most basic rational model of political behavior is the SES (Socioeconomic Status) model, which as formulated draws a direct link between socioeconomic status and how individuals vote, run, and participate in politics (see figure 1).⁶ (Conway, 2002) The SES model is on the surface quite simple: wealthy, “upper-class” individuals are contrasted with less wealthy, “lower-class” individuals and the assertion is made that individuals participate differently depending upon how they rank on an SES scale. “Upper class” individuals, then, are said to act in certain ways – perhaps to participate more actively than others, to run for election, and to support more conservative causes – while individuals who are ranked lower on the SES scale are said to act in other ways. At its simplest, the SES model might predict that rich individuals support conservatives while poor individuals support liberals, or that the wealthy vote for Republicans while the less-affluent vote for Democrats.

⁶ General information on how SES affects political participation can be found in Conway, Margaret, Political Participation in the United States – Third Edition, (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002). While political behavior might simply be random – i.e. might not be able to be represented in a rational model – I assume for the purposes of this paper that political participants are rational-choice actors, and that African American political behavior can therefore be modeled in an understandable way.

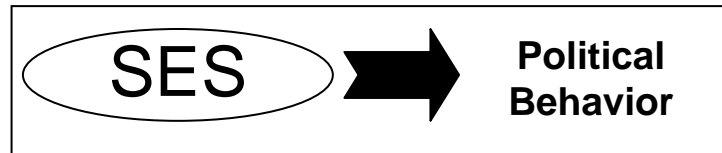


Figure 1: The SES Model of Political Behavior

While the basic SES model for political behavior both appears fairly simple and fairly accurate – apocryphal evidence suggests that the upper and lower classes *do* seem to behave somewhat differently in politics – it nonetheless proves difficult to apply on the individual level, fails to explain why African Americans with the same sorts of jobs and education as non-African Americans behave differently in politics than their non-African American peers, and lacks any description of the *mechanism* through which SES is supposed to affect political behavior.

Perhaps most problematic for political scientists attempting to understand *individual* political behavior through the SES model is the fact that the model is more assumed than defined; there is no definitive chart on which political scientists can measure where one individual or another fits on an SES framework. The most difficult problem in evaluating how individuals act in politics through the SES model thus lies in “ranking” individuals on the SES scale. What exactly does it *mean* to be “upper class” or “lower class?” While it is quite easy to suggest that millionaires are higher on the SES scale than are the destitute and homeless, it is very difficult to say whether a construction worker making \$100,000 per year is higher on the SES scale than is an associate professor making \$50,000 per year. Is the unskilled and uneducated but honest and polite day laborer of a higher or lower class than the multi-millionaire crime boss? Is, to put a racial point on the question, the neat, polite, erudite African American schoolteacher in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s of a lower or higher class than the uneducated, slovenly Caucasian town drunk? Such questions are obviously difficult, and depend very much on the context of individual situations; the African American teacher in Mississippi in

the 1960s, for instance, might have been seen or have seen himself as being “lower class” simply because of the legal racism of the American south at the time, while another African American teacher in, for instance, New York or Massachusetts, might have been seen and seen himself very differently.

As a tool for understanding individual behavior and participation, the basic SES model is obviously problematic for this very reason – variables such as income, economic worth, education, employment, residence, and even association (to what religious institutions, community organizations, or even reading groups do individuals belong) make it difficult if not impossible to rank individuals on any sort of objective SES scale. The fact that it is difficult to place individuals on an objective SES chart, however, does not completely invalidate the model, but instead makes its use as a tool in understanding and explaining individual behavior less reasonable. If it is in any way valuable, the SES model is an effective tool for predicting and understanding political participation and political behavior on the aggregate level. We are concerned, after all, not with how an African American behaves, but rather with how African Americans as a whole behave in American politics. The question that remains, then, is whether the SES model does explain *aggregate* political behavior. In this regard, the basic SES model falls short in one critical way: it fails to provide or describe the mechanisms whereby SES dictates political behavior.

The VSB Model of Political Participation

By creating what they call the “Civic Volunteerism Model” of voter participation (see figure 2), Sidney Verba, Kay Leyman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady seek to define these mechanisms in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism In American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), an impressive and important examination of how individuals

voluntarily participate politics in the United States. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady base their work around a single critical question: in the United States, how loud, clear, and equal is the voice of the public? Their analysis of voluntarism and the participatory process “suggests that the public’s voice is often loud, sometimes clear, but rarely equal.” (VSB, 1995; 509) In other words, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady conclude that participation in American politics is unequal and biased towards individuals from the “upper class.” “The voices of the well-educated and the well-heeled – and therefore of those with other political relevant characteristics that are associated with economic and educational privilege – sound more loudly,” they note. (VSB, 1995; 512)

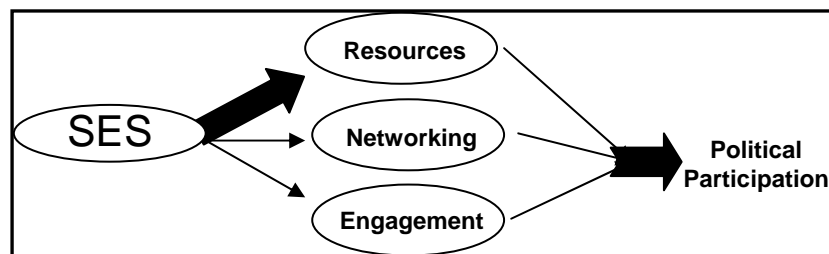


Figure 2: The Verba, Schlozman, and Brady Civic Volunteerism Model of Political Participation

SES affects how individuals participate in politics, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady explain, by affecting to what resources individuals have access, to what networks individuals belong, and how individuals engage. Most important in this model is how SES affects resources; by “resources,” VSB are not referring to such amorphous concepts as “social position” or “sense of political efficacy,” but rather are focusing on more specific measures of what individuals can be said to possess. “In the Civic Volunteerism Model,” they note, “we define resources more concretely . . . we emphasize three kinds of resources: time, money, and civic skills.” (VSB, 1995; 271) Networks, they add, are less affected by SES, but are vital in that individuals are more likely to participate or to behave in certain ways if they are asked or “invited” to participate

by individuals they know and trust. ““Requests for participation that come to individuals at work, in church, or in organizations – especially those that come from friends, relatives, or acquaintances – often lead to participation,” they explain. “Those who are asked in this way might have intended to act anyway, but the request was the triggering factor.” (VSB, 1995; 273)

VSB are harder-pressed to define “engagement,” the third of their three mechanisms. “Engagement” covers such characteristics as the interest in politics that makes individuals want to take part, the sense of political efficacy that leads individuals to feel that they can make a difference, “the group consciousness that endows individuals with a sense that their fate is linked to that of others; identification with a political party; and commitment to specific polities that individuals would like to see implemented.” (VSB 1995; 272)

Voice and Equality represents a brilliant step towards explaining how and why individuals voluntarily participate in American politics. What relevance, however, does it have for us as we attempt to model and explain African American political behavior? Behavior, after all, is not participation; we cannot simply apply a model meant for one to the other. Similarly, political participation (or even political behavior) is not *African American* political participation or political behavior; can the VSB model help us move from the general to the specific case? There are, it turns out, two answers to this question of what relevance VSB have for our attempt to model African American political behavior: first, *Voice and Equality* helps to explain how and why individuals participate in politics. While participation is not behavior, participation is a necessary prerequisite of behavior, as the public population must first participate before it acts. However we choose to model African American political behavior, then, the VSB Civic Volunteerism Model will have to be at the center of our analysis.

Second, *Voice and Equality* answers the question of whether SES specifically affects how African Americans participate – and ultimately behave. African Americans, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady note, are far less active in politics than whites, but this discrepancy in level of activity is not a result of race itself, but rather of SES differences. “When the factors that foster participation are taken into account,” they conclude, “the differences disappear. Thus, neither being Black nor being Latino itself reduces participation.” (VSB 1995; 523) What explains the fact that African Americans participate less than do whites, therefore, is the fact that African Americans *correlate* strongly to those who are lower on the SES scale. “Principle among these factors [that cause African Americans to participate less actively than whites] is the elaborated cluster that is associated with socioeconomic status: education, family income, and skills exercised on the job and in organizations.” (VSB 1995; 523) Verba, Schlozman, and Brady are not primarily concerned with the question of whether race is the cause of SES differences; they instead make the point that there is nothing about the African American community (such as political culture) that causes African Americans to participate at lower levels than their white fellow citizens.

Non-Racial Political Behavior Model

While there are problems with the basic SES model of political behavior, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady justify the use of the SES model for political participation. As political participation is the *sine qua non* of political behavior, then, SES is a vital and critical element of any model of political behavior. Understanding this, we are now in a position to suggest a rational-choice, *non-racial* model of how and why individuals behave in American politics (see figure 3). SES, through the mechanisms of resources, networking, and engagement thus affects

who participates and in American politics. SES and personal considerations simultaneously affect individual personal analyses of what individuals think is good for them and for their

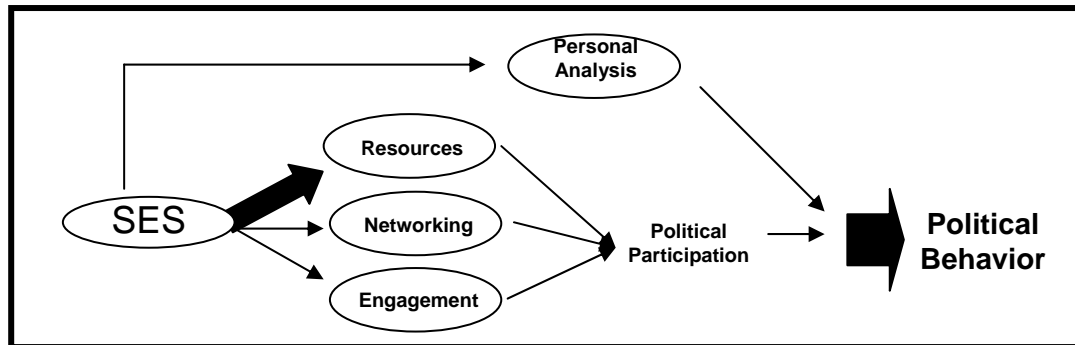


Figure 3: A Rational-Choice Model of Political Behavior

interests. Having made the decision to participate, individuals judge political options in rational-choice ways. “Given my income level, job, and residence location,” an individual might ask (either consciously or subconsciously), “is it good for me or bad for me to have a president who promises more tax cuts?” Obviously individuals do not operate entirely on the basis of their economic statuses – or else we might never see wealth individuals voting for welfare programs or poor individuals voting for less government spending – but instead frame complex questions related to their personal desires, needs for civic fulfillment, economic best interests, relationship interests, and the like. In this model, then, individuals participate because of their SES, weigh all political options under an individual-benefit heuristic, and then engage in political behavior.

African Americans and African American Political Behavior

The problem with the model proposed above in figure 3 is that it in no way takes into account race as a factor in political behavior. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady prove fairly conclusively that race *itself* does not directly affect political participation, but rather that because of a strong correlation between SES and race (and indeed a dynamic *causal* connection between race and SES) it only *appears* that racial characteristics cause individuals to participate less

actively in politics than their white counterparts. The “individual choice heuristic” suggested in the model, moreover, does not speak solely to race – and in no way accounts for group action. Does race affect political behavior? Is it possible to model African American political behavior? The answer to both of these questions is “yes,” though the proof to support that answer is not totally conclusive.

Studies – though controversial and occasionally contradictory – do seem to indicate that African Americans act differently in politics than do their non-African American SES peers. “We find that blacks generally participate at the same rate as whites of comparable socioeconomic status and that the politically engaged are the most active segment of both groups,” remark Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam in their *American Political Science Review* article entitled “Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment.” “On the other hand, blacks are more active than comparable whites in areas of high black political empowerment.” (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; 388) “Blacks therefore more often speak for all of the poor, even though the overwhelming majority of those living in poverty are white,” adds Richard Shingles in his *American Political Science Review* article on “Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link.” (Shingles, 1981; 89) Numerous works agree: African Americans *as a group* behave differently than do others. (Henry, 1992; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Harris, 1999; Shingles, 1981; Dawson, 1994) Any model of political behavior that seeks to explain and describe African American political behavior must therefore take race as a factor into account.⁷

⁷ While this seems to be a truism, it is important to reach this conclusion that race factors into African American political behavior. It is possible that African Americans might behave in politics much as all others in the United States behave, and thus a model of African American political behavior would be identical to a model of white political behavior, or Jewish political behavior, or Hispanic-American political behavior; simply because we are selecting our sample population in terms of race does not necessarily mean that race in any way matters.

Something Within: Religion and Culture in African American Political Behavior

“Race matters,” declared Cornell West in his 1993 book by the same name. Exactly how it matters in modeling African American political behavior, however, is less clear. The broadest question in this regard is whether the effect of race on African American political behavior is the result of “something within” such as religion or culture, or whether it is the result of “something without,” such as geographic location, descriptive voting, education, age, or even party capture – or indeed whether it is a combination of the two. In some sense, this is the same question as whether the effect of race on African American political behavior is quantifiable or intrinsically immeasurable.

In *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Fredrick C. Harris argues that it is religion, and specifically African-American religion, that affects how African Americans behave in American politics. “In a variety of ways,” Harris explains, “religion assists African Americans with becoming a part of the political process.” (Harris, 1999; 4) Harris acknowledges that his topic is deeply controversial, for while pundits seem to accept the theory that religion affects African American politics they tend to disagree on exactly how it functions. “This book,” he nonetheless adds, “uncovers how religion assists African Americans in the political process by describing, analyzing and explaining the various ways in which Afro-Christianity stimulates African American political activism.” (Harris, 1999; 4) Harris concludes in this work that Afro-Christianity has opened numerous avenues for African Americans to participate on the political stage – contrary to much of the scholarship on the Civil Rights era, which has suggested that the black church represented a conservative force in society. African American religion, Harris adds, strongly affects both participation and behavior by affecting both how individuals engage with the political world and with what resources they enter those engagements.

Charles P. Henry and Matthew Holden, Jr., in a sense subsume Harris' argument by suggesting the existence of and attempting to define African American political culture. "We argue," writes Henry in *Culture and African American Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), "that there is a distinct black politics based on a unique style and combination of worldviews that informs black political behavior." (Henry 1990, 11) Henry is echoing various scholars, including Holden, who in 1973 suggested that African-American language reflects five themes that reflect and define a separate African-American culture "somewhat averse to the sustained coordination required by scarce resources." (Holden 1973, 17) Both Henry and Holden argue quite strongly that African Americans do have a separate political culture, and that that political culture strongly affects how African Americans view United States politics, frame political issues, and participate in politics.

Holden, the former president of the American Political Science Association, presented his understanding of African American political culture in a chapter he wrote on "Centrifugal Influences in Black Politics." (Holden 1973) He focuses on African American language in order to determine whether he might identify common traits among African Americans. "The ordinary language of Afro-Americans," he writes, "expresses *five themes*, as we see it, which reflect a culture . . ." (Holden 1973, 17) Those five themes, he concludes, reflect five characteristics: the hope for deliverance, the wish for defiance, Dionysian independence; moralism; and cynicism-and-fear. Holden argues that the most prevalent characteristic of African American culture is a belief in either temporal or ethereal salvation. "Perhaps the single most common theme in all Afro-American culture is the hope for deliverance some day." (Holden 1973, 17) The second most important characteristic of African American political culture, he adds, is the theme of defiance. "The spirit of defiance serves a need that prudence has usually forbidden people to

gratify: to compensate for the pervasive insults and humiliations of past and present by telling ‘the white man’ where to go and what to do, and making him go and do it!”(Holden 1973, 18) This sort of defiance, Holden explains, is characterized by stories of oppressed African Americans who strike out violently against their tormenters, even knowing that such resistance is futile and will mean their deaths.

Holden’s three remaining characteristics of African American political culture – Dionysian independence, moralism, and cynicism-and-fear – are somewhat less important than either the hope for deliverance or the wish for defiance, and so receive somewhat less attention in Holden’s work. These characteristics are, however, still important, Holden argues, and reveal much about African American political culture. Dionysian independence and individualism, he explains, are important themes for younger African American males. “The *standard*,” he explains, “is a ‘culture of swagger.’” (Holden 1973, 21) Far more universal among African Americans is the understanding that African Americans have a greater sense of moralism than is standard in the population as a whole. “The ordinary conversational language of black people,” Holden writes, “seems to express the self-image that black men, in contrast to white men, possess a greater ‘sensitivity,’ a greater ‘humaneness,’ or (in one version), ‘more soul.’” (Holden 1973, 23) Still more prevalent in the African American community is a sense of cynicism-and-fear regarding the United States government and political system. African Americans, Holden points out, have been treated harshly by the government and have no particular reason to trust governmental officials.

These five characteristics, then – the hope for deliverance, the wish for defiance, Dionysian independence; moralism; and cynicism-and-fear – frame for Holden the definition of African American political culture. Charles P. Henry, the former president of the National

Council for Black Studies, presented his own view of African American culture in his 1990 work, *Culture and African American Politics*. Like Holden, Henry believes that in order to identify African American culture scholars must examine African American language. “The search for a black ideology,” he explains, “must begin with the oral tradition and must encompass all types of black beliefs.” (Henry, 1990; 7) Accordingly, he adds, he attempts to examine the cultural values of “the black masses” by examining the oral traditions of the black community and by analyzing those traditions both for content and also for form and style of presentation. By examining such traditions as the blues, black folklore, and the communications of black leaders and black institutions, Henry attempts to identify trends in black culture and black cultural values. “In summary,” he writes, “we have been arguing that lower-class black Americans are not a people without a culture.” (Henry, 1990; 35)

Henry’s definition of African American culture is not as clearly explained as is Holden’s, but it appears to mirror Holden’s in many important details. Like Holden, Henry identifies some sort of belief in deliverance (“God was alive and working for the oppressed”) and a wish for defiance (“the continuing legacy of the black bad man”). Henry also implies that he accepts notions of African American independence and cynicism-and-fear, though he does not state that acceptance explicitly. He also adds several characteristics to a definition of black political culture, including the presence of Jeremiads in African American religion, the importance of African roots for folktales and proverbs, and the existence of simultaneous loyalty to individual and community. This last point seems especially important to Henry: “The ability of blacks to combine individualism and community as well as the sacred and secular,” he writes, “is a hallmark of black politics and distinguishes it from mainstream politics.” (Henry, 1990; 94)

As I noted in a previous paper, there are problems with both Henry's and Holden's arguments: Holden in effect simply observes that such an African-American political culture – presumably separate from “white” political culture – exists, and fails to prove its existence, while Henry seems blindly to accept Holden's argument as a key premise in developing his own work.⁸ Holden's definition of African American political culture is thus curiously weak and unfounded, while the derivation of Henry's own definition is unclear. Nevertheless, it is clear that both Henry and Holden believe that a separate African American culture exists and that that culture affects how African Americans act in politics. There are serious problems with constructing models of African American political behavior from Holden's and Henry's theories: most importantly, such models would generally lack any mechanisms whereby race would affect political behavior. Such models would also be extremely nebulous and unhelpful: race would either obviate all other considerations or would be connected to everything, and would so explain nothing. Nonetheless, together Harris, Holden, and Henry present strong arguments for how African American political behavior is affected by “something within” – something that by its nature is unquantifiable and immeasurable, but that nonetheless must be taken into account when examining how African Americans act in American politics.

Something Without: The Black Utility Heuristic, SES Considerations, and Electoral Capture in African American Political Behavior

While Harris, Henry, and Holden argue that something “within” African Americans directs African American political behavior, political scientists such as Michael Dawson, Richard Shingles, Katherine Tate, Lawrence Bobo, Franklin Gilliam, and Paul Frymer suggest that it is instead something “without” that affects how African Americans engage in political action. Because these “without” influences are external, they are by their nature far more

⁸ “The Importance of Uniqueness: Attempting to Define Characteristics of African American Political Culture,” Samuel Brenner, PS 207, October 2002.

quantifiable than the religion or culture described by Harris, Henry, and Holden. The central question, of course, remains: what affects African American political behavior, and how can we best model that behavior given these influences?

Michael C. Dawson attempts to model African American political behavior by addressing the concept of “linked fate” and proposing the “black utility heuristic” as an explanatory tool in *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), a dense, well-argued book that addresses the question of how important race is in African American politics. In response to data that seems to indicate that there is less political heterogeneity among African Americans of differing economic and social classes than we might expect, Dawson asks the central question of his work: why have African Americans remained politically homogeneous even while becoming economically polarized? (Dawson, 1994; 6) In other words, why do middle-class blacks appear to perceive their individual interests as highly correlated with black group interests, and why do African Americans act differently than do non-African Americans of similar SES backgrounds?

In answering these two questions, Dawson posits that at some point (before the 1960s) race was an overwhelming factor in the lives of African Americans. “It is quite clear,” he explains, “that until the mid-1960s race was the decisive factor in determining the opportunities and life chances available to virtually all African Americans, regardless of their own or their family’s social and economic status.” (Dawson, 1994; 10) Consequently, he suggests, it was easier for African Americans to structure their political activities around what was better for the group (African Americans as a whole) with the understanding that that was the most efficient way to improve their own individual positions. African Americans, he argues, had strong notion of the existence of a “linked fate” between themselves and the members of their racial group, and

utilized what he calls the “black utility heuristic” to pursue their own goals by pursuing the common goals of the group.⁹ In the “Black Utility Heuristic Model” (see figure 4), race strongly affects SES, and so affects political participation. At the same time, race affects the black utility heuristic, which in turn strongly affects how those who *do* choose to participate then act on the political stage. The question for understanding and modeling African American political behavior, then, is whether African Americans of all social classes continue to use the same heuristic; if so, Dawson argues, race is still predominant in African American politics and affects African American political behavior.

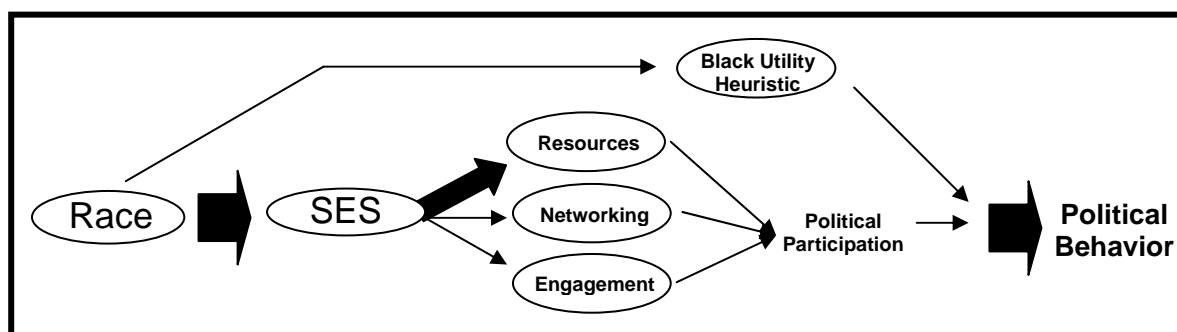


Figure 4: The Black Utility Heuristic and Political Behavior

Dawson ultimately concludes that the black utility heuristic is still being used across class lines, and thus that race continues to be of overwhelming importance in affecting African American political behavior. “Within the realm of mainstream American partisan politics,” he explains, “African American political behavior remains powerfully influenced by African Americans’ perceptions of group interests.” (Dawson, 1994; 204-205) Dawson does not see the situation changing in the immediate future: “Class divisions in American politics,” he explains, “have been masked by the extraordinary economic, social and political differences that remain

⁹ While it may seem unusual to categorize the notion of “linked fate” as an external, quantifiable characteristic, it is measurable through survey response data. As Bobo, Gilliam, and Shingles – and even Dawson himself – demonstrate, it is possible for political scientists to come up with quantitative judgments of to what extent individual African Americans judge their fates to be inextricably tied to that of their community.

between blacks and whites.” (Dawson, 1994; 206) As long as those differences remain, Dawson argues – and indeed there is evidence to indicate that they will remain even as more African Americans move into the middle class – and as long as African Americans can continue to equate their well-being with that of their communities, then race will remain a critical element in understanding how African Americans behave in the political sphere.

Dawson is not the first to address the question of how perceptions of linked fate affect African American political behavior, though he may be the first to subject the question to such rigorous empirical testing. Various authors, including Richard Shingle, Lawrence Bobo, Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., and Katherine Tate addressed this same question, although they did not on their own come up with (or challenge) Dawson’s concept of truly “linked fate” and restricted their analyses to African American political participation, rather than African American political behavior. Just as Verba, Scholzman, and Brady’s analysis of why individuals participate in politics is important in modeling political behavior as a whole, however, these analyses are vital in explaining African American political behavior – for African Americans choose for whom to vote until they choose to vote at all.

In an article in the *American Political Science Review* entitled “Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link,” Richard D. Shingles argued that a history of oppression and what Dawson comes to call “linked fate” explains why poor African Americans are more politically active than Whites of similar socio-economic backgrounds. “The increases during the 1960s in racial consciousness, political participation, political cynicism, and self-esteem of black Americans,” Shingles reported, “are related.” (Shingles, 1981) African Americans, he concluded, developed “Black consciousness” which (combined with an understanding that the federal government was primarily responsible for the economic fate of *all*

African Americans) brought African Americans who had the desire to pursue racially common goals into the political arena in increased numbers.

Lawrence Bobo and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. took Shingles' both took Shingles' explanation of increased political participation in the African American community farther and also challenged Shingles' "linked fate" argument by providing data that African Americans different in political behavior and opinion based upon their residence location. Writing in the *American Political Science Review* in an article entitled "Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment," Bobo and Gilliam explained that they found that blacks living in what they called "high-empowerment" areas were more active than either blacks living in low-empowerment areas or whites of similar socioeconomic status. (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990, 388). "The significance of race for sociopolitical behavior has evidently changed," they conclude. African Americans apparently participate at the same levels as whites, they noted, and "the politically engaged are the most active segment of both groups." Resisting the "tempting" impulse to conclude that race is less important in African American politics than it once was, Bobo and Gilliam instead conclude that race "now shapes sociopolitical behavior in different ways and for somewhat different reasons than held in the past." In short, race is still of importance in African American politics, though by at least one measure (residence in high-empowerment versus low-empowerment areas) African Americans act and think very differently based upon non-racial criterion.

Writing in 1991 in an article entitled "Black Political Participation in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Elections," Katherine Tate argued that race identification (and thus what Dawson calls "linked fate") had a less consistent effect on political participation than did education, political interest, partisanship, and age. Like Bobo and Gilliam, Tate (rightly) resists the

temptation to conclude that race is less important than socioeconomic factors in predicting African American voter turnout. “Black participation appears to be firmly anchored to a number of individual level demographic attributes,” Tate argues, “including socioeconomic status.” (Tate 1991, 1172) Race identification did have an impact on participation, she notes, but “fluctuations around this baseline of participation are better explained by political variables.” While Shingles can be said to be emphasizing the importance of race and racial identification in African American politics and Bobo and Gilliam reservedly conclude that race and “linked fate” are becoming less important in understanding African American participation and beliefs, Tate takes a middle-of-the road stance. Race, she says, *was* not as important as other factors in 1984 and 1988, but it remains vital, and while there is such economic fluctuation in the African American community it remains a valid element in predicting African American participation.

Paul Frymer’s *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America* represents a slightly different concept of “linked fate”: instead of focusing attention on individual African Americans perceiving their fates as being linked to the fate of the African American community, Frymer focuses attention on how the African American community as a whole perceives its fate as being linked to the fate of the Democrat party. Frymer argues that African Americans have in a sense been “captured” by the Democrats, and so all African American political behavior can be understood as existing primarily as support for the Democrats. “By electoral capture,” Frymer explains, “I mean those circumstances when the group has no choice but to remain in the party.” (Frymer, 1999; 8) In Frymer’s model of African American political behavior (see figure 5), Race affects both SES (which in turn affect political participation) and also party/electoral

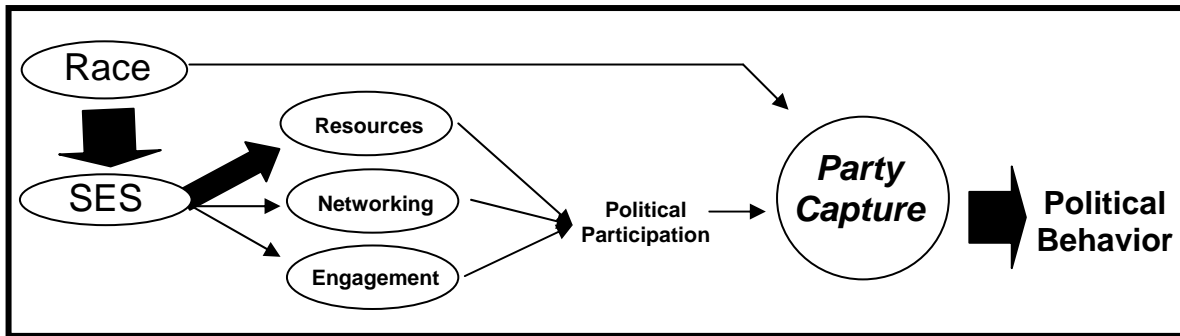


Figure 5: Electoral Capture and African American Political Behavior

capture. All other considerations – whether individual, “linked fate” related, religious, culture, or even economic – are completely masked by the black hole of electoral capture. Frymer’s understanding of African American political behavior is thus oddly truncated: African Americans have particular beliefs and respond to certain political desires, but the ties to the Democrats are so overwhelming that they render all other considerations moot.

Adding Race: Proposed Model of Racial Political Behavior

African American political behavior is clearly enormously complex. As a group, African Americans appear to respond both to internal influences such as the African American Church, African American political culture, and notions of community responsibility and linked fate, and external influences such as economic considerations, personal analyses, geographic locations, and linked party fate. Any proposed model of African American political behavior must take all of these elements into account (see figure 6).

In this proposed model of African American political behavior, SES is vital in deciding who participates, while race affects both SES itself and *how* people participate. SES is not decided solely by race, but it is clear that race does impact and correlate to economics, employment opportunities, and educational opportunities. Race, moreover, affects to which networks individuals have access or are exposed, and also how individuals engage with ideas and cultures. SES – and so race, at least indirectly – also affects both personal analysis and political

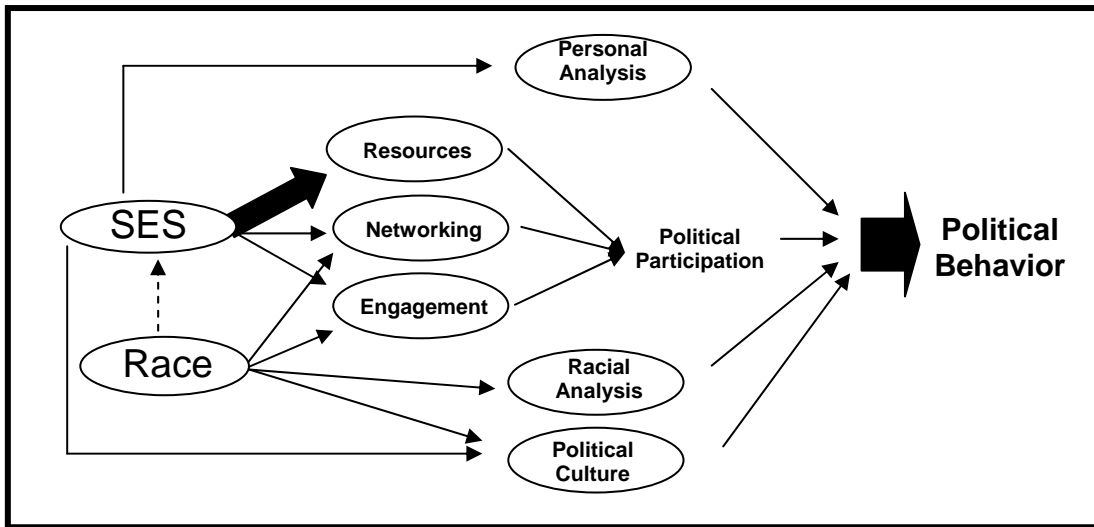


Figure 6: Proposed Model of Racial Political Behavior

culture. Race itself has a far more direct impact upon racial analysis and political culture. In the final analysis of the racial model of political behavior, then, political behavior is directed by how personal analyses, political culture, and racial analyses pull and operate on those who choose to participate in American politics.

Conclusions

We began this paper with three basic questions: why and how African Americans decide to participate in politics, what elements dictate how African Americans behave in politics, what role, if any, race plays in understanding African American political behavior. These questions were then subsumed by the larger question of how to best model African American political behavior. In addressing these questions we have examined the basic SES model of political behavior and political participation, the Verba, Schlozman, and Brady “Civic Volunteerism” model of political participation, a basic rational-choice, non-racial model of political behavior, the implied religious and cultural models suggested by Michael Holden, Charles Henry, and Fredrick Harris, the Black Utility Heuristic model suggested by Michael Dawson, and the electoral capture model suggested by Paul Frymer. Each of these models has significant

strengths and weaknesses; ultimately, no single one of these models seems sufficient to explain the complexities of African American political behavior.

African American political behavior seems to be governed by four elements: participation, individual analyses, racial analyses, and political culture. None of these models addressed more than three of these elements; several addressed only one. In response we developed a model that speaks to all four competing elements and that seeks to explain how internal factors such as culture and religion and external factors such as economic concerns and electoral capture can best be reconciled. This model is not without problems of its own, but hopefully it does represent a useful compendium of the arguments and studies advanced by such writers as Dawson, Henry, Frymer, and Harris. In the end, whether or not this model represents an accurate portrayal of how African Americans behave in American politics, what seems most clear is that the concept of race – whether it is intrinsically real or is simply a social construct of societal or self-perception – strongly influences the determinates of African American political behavior in complex and interesting ways.

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