

Permanent Ties?
*The Black Utility Heuristic, “Linked Fate,” and
the Enduring Power of Race in African
American Political Behavior*

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“There's an old saying, in the days of slavery, there were those slaves who lived on the plantation and [there] were those slaves that lived in the house. You got the privilege of living in the house if you served the master ... exactly the way the master intended to have you serve him . . . Colin Powell's committed to come into the house of the master.”

-Harry Belafonte, Thursday, October 8, 2002

It is perhaps the most critical question in understanding developing African-American society, culture, and politics: which is more salient, class or race? The debate has raged in scholarly works such as William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Importance of Race*, in which Wilson argued that class was becoming far more important to Black society than race (Wilson, 1980) and Cornell West's *Race Matters*, in which West strongly criticized “new Black conservatives” whom he saw as abandoning their racial brethren (West, 1993). The debate has been influenced more than a little by contemporary politics as well: in October of 2002, for instance, the singer Harry Belafonte ignited a storm of controversy when he insinuated on San Diego radio that Secretary of State Colin Powell was essentially a “house slave” of President George W. Bush's. By questioning (and criticizing) first Powell's and then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's commitment to African Americans as a whole, Belafonte was arguing that African Americans *have* a responsibility to each other – one that runs directly across socio-economic (class) lines.

Michael C. Dawson's *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994) is a dense, well-argued book that attempts to answer this question of whether race or class is more important in African American politics. Dawson begins his work by demonstrating that with the rise of the African American middle class African Americans are becoming economically polarized into communities of “haves” and communities of “have-nots”. According to Wilson and those who argue that class will ultimately trump race as the key factor in American politics, he points out, along with this

increased economic diversity we should expect to see increased political diversity as well. In other words, we should expect to see middle-class blacks acting like middle-class whites and poor blacks acting like poor whites. The data, however, seem to indicate that there is less political heterogeneity among African Americans of differing economic and social classes than we might expect. This discrepancy leads to the major question Dawson attempts to answer in this work: why have African Americans remained politically homogeneous even while becoming economically polarized? (6) In other words, why do middle-class blacks appear to perceive their individual interests as highly correlated with black group interests?

In answering this central question, 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.” (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 notions of “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. The question then becomes 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.

In the remaining chapters of his work Dawson tests his questions with several interesting methods. He 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 African American

politics. “Within the realm of mainstream American partisan politics,” he explains, “African American political behavior remains powerfully influenced by African Americans’ perceptions of group interests.” (204-205) More importantly, he does not see the situation changing in the immediate future. “Class divisions in American politics have been masked by the extraordinary economic, social and political differences that remain between blacks and whites.” (206) As long as those differences remain, he 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 African American politics.

Dawson’s work is both impressive and interesting, but it is not without problems. In developing his notion of African Americans acting as a racial unit, Dawson has restricted himself to an economic model of class (rather than a location or occupation model) and has not adequately addressed whether the economic differentiation among the African American community is qualitatively equivalent to that in the Caucasian community. He also seems to posit a binary system of African American behavior, setting up a rational-choice world in which what is good for the African-American community is obvious – and which there is no middle ground, and in which individuals either chose what is good for the African American community entirely because they identify with their group interests or they choose the opposite out of pure economic self interest. Perhaps most importantly, in describing a rational-choice system Dawson has not adequately explained why African Americans would choose to utilize the black utility heuristic unless they were actually unable to differentiate between the well-being of the African American community and the well-being of themselves as individuals.

Much of Dawson's argument in *Behind the Mule* depends upon the related yet independent notions of the "black utility heuristic" and "linked fate." The black utility heuristic is (as the name suggests) as tool for individuals to use in making political decisions. "The black utility heuristic," Dawson explains, "is a mechanism enabling one to specify the conditions under which African American group interests become stronger or weaker relative to individual interests." (61) The heuristic functions by suggesting to African Americans what political decisions they can make in order to advance the common goals of the African American community, African Americans as a whole, or perhaps even African Americans as a separate interest group. The heuristic is not a normative theory, but rather a tool by which African Americans can easily measure their own political goals, actions, and efficacy. Its validity depends upon the assumption that "the historical experiences of African Americans have resulted in a situation in which group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest." (77)

The heart of Dawson's argument thus lies not in the postulated existence of the black utility heuristic, which might simply be described as a function that answers the question "what is better for African Americans," but rather in the understanding of "linked fate." "A construct of *linked fate* is needed to measure the degree to which African Americans believe that their own self-interests are linked to the interests of the race," Dawson argues. (77) As long as African Americans' life chances are shaped by race, African Americans (who, like all actors, are rational choice actors in Downs' view) *should* link their individual fates with that of African American community. Clearly African Americans were right to link their fates with that of their community in the period before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dawson concludes, and so now all that remains to be determined is whether the current levels of racial discrimination and inequality in the economic and social spheres are sufficient to

overpower the inclination of African Americans to see their fates being somehow separate from that of African Americans as a whole. In other words, if class-theorists such as Wilson (Wilson, 1980) are correct, the data should show increased political differentiation correlated to increased class differentiation. If Dawson is correct, however, that race remains important in analyzing African American political behavior, then it must be that “perceptions of linked fate act as a liberal counterbalance to the greater conservatism of the more affluent.” (99)

Dawson has thus set the stage for the remainder of his book (much of which consists of survey and empirical-data testing of his theory). “If among African-Americans the black utility heuristic is used widely and more or less uniformly across social classes,” Dawson explains, “and if perceptions of group interest prove to be more politically salient than perceptions of individuals interests,” then the adherents of class-theory are incorrect, and race is still of preeminent importance in African American politics. (68) His logic to this point is clear and effective: class theory suggests that increasing class differentiation (economic differentiation) ought to be correlated with increasing political differentiation. If increased political differentiation is absent, and it can be demonstrated that African Americans are utilizing a heuristic that is correlated to *racial* good and *racial* goals, then it must follow that African American politics is more dependent upon race than upon class. Dawson’s tests are similarly clear and effective: chapters five, six, and eight (which focus on political partisanship, political choice, and political behavior respectively) clearly apply empirical data to his question, while chapter seven (which measures presidential approval over time) is less relevant but still interesting. Dawson has presented a theory, explained his assumptions, and has tested his theory with several empirical measures; *Behind the Mule* is in many senses an exemplar of social-science method and thought.

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. Regardless, these authors helped frame the questions Dawson seeks to answer in *Behind the Mule* and suggest why he writes the work 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.

As noted above, Dawson's work is not without problems. Most obvious and most important is that Dawson has restricted himself to a purely economic model of class. Class differentiation in his study is measured as a function of income differentiation; his basic premise, that if class is important increasing political differentiation should follow increasing economic differentiation supposes that the same models apply in other populations. Dawson specifically does not examine the roles location, education, and occupation might play in understandings of "class" – and so it is still possible that increased political differentiation *does* follow increased class differentiation, but that class differentiation does not necessarily correlate exactly or solely to economic differentiation. This conclusion seems logical, as common sense reasoning suggests that there is more to "class" than simple income; a public librarian might well make less than a hard-working janitor, but it is quite difficult to measure class on that sole criterion. Dawson's book, however, might better be said to be about whether race or *income* is more salient in African American politics – not whether race or *class* is more important. Dawson does not perhaps need to add full analyses of location, occupation, and education to his definition of "class"; instead, he simply needs to add data showing that his comparison (White) population sees increasing political diversity solely with increasing income diversity, and that that correlation is not simply an artifact of increasing diversity in residence location, education, and occupation. Especially given Bobo's and Gilliam's conclusions about different levels of political

activity and different political perceptions among African American residents of high-empowerment versus low-empowerment areas, Dawson's argument seems deficient.

A second problem in Dawson's study is that in simply developing the question of whether African Americans utilize the black utility heuristic he seems to posit a binary system of African American behavior. Dawson is supposing that if the system is class-based every political actor is faced with two choices: one of which is to support the community, and implicitly to act *against* individual economic interests, and the other of which is to act for individual interests, and so implicitly act against the common good. Again, Dawson's problem is his limited definition of class; given the purely economic definition he uses, he will have to explain situations in which individuals might choose the options that would be suggested by the black utility heuristic but that would *also* be chosen by rational-choice actors looking for individual gain. In other words, Dawson does not explain why with increasing economic differentiation *should* bring increasing political differentiation in all areas. "If other interests," he writes, "for example, economic interests – become more salient, the choices available to African Americans become more numerous and one should begin to see . . . political heterogeneity . . ." (134) It is, however, possible (to examine what is probably Dawson's most telling chapter, that on partisan affiliation) that middle class, affluent African Americans are democrats rather than republicans because their own individual economic interests suggest that they should support the party that promises the largest government, and so the greatest number of civil service positions. Similarly (given that in chapter eight Dawson discovers that class rather than race served as the heuristic with which to evaluate economic redistribution policies and black autonomy policies, but that race served as the heuristic with which the evaluate racial policies) it is possible that it is economically and individually advantageous for middle-class

African Americans to support the racial policies suggested by the black utility heuristic, and thus that the evidence that class does not matter much in this policy preference is actually exactly incorrect.

A third problem with Dawson's work is that he does not adequately address why African Americans would ever choose to utilize the black utility heuristic, except after prompting from such African American cultural institutions such as the Black church. Dawson creates a rational-choice model and posits a situation in which African Americans choose to utilize the black utility heuristic because it is *easier* to use the heuristic than to use some other (presumably class-based) heuristic. The key to his argument is that (at least initially) well-being for individual African Americans was so linked to the well being of the African American community in United States society that the black utility heuristic was an effective means of identifying political goals. In other words, rational-choice actors were acting *correctly* in utilizing the black utility heuristic, because it benefited them almost as much or as much as utilizing class heuristics and it cost far less to identify and copy. Being black, Dawson writes, was so important in determining the well being of individuals that "determining what political and social policies would provide the most utility for each individual African American by calculating the benefits for the group was more cost-effective than the calculation of individual utility." (57)

What Dawson does not make clear is why this would be the case: why should it be consistently easier for African Americans to calculate the benefits of the group than of themselves as class become more differentiated and economics more polarized? In other words, the black utility heuristic seems like a sloppy answer – the tool of those not sufficiently motivated to discover their true self-interest. This argument depends upon the conclusion that the costs of utilizing some other heuristic would outweigh the benefits of using that heuristic in

favor of the black utility heuristic, because otherwise individuals would use individual welfare heuristics *as long as there was the slightest measurable difference between what they hope to gain from the individual heuristic as opposed to the black utility heuristic*. In a rational choice system Dawson seems dangerously close to positing the existence of irrational actors – individuals who use the black utility heuristic instead of an individual welfare heuristic when they are not *sure* of which will give them the best outcome (measured on a cost-benefit scale). Dawson’s argument that African Americans use the black utility heuristic is not in question – his work in the second part of his book clearly substantiates his point that they do. The question is rather whether Dawson’s rational choice model of cost-benefit analysis should be accepted without debate and whether Dawson has proven his point that individuals use the black utility heuristic because it is more efficient than using individual welfare heuristics.

Dawson has produced a serious and powerful work of scholarship. Beginning with the question of whether race or class is more salient in American politics, Dawson has suggested a theory, has structured empirical tests to analyze the strength of that theory and has subjected his theory to those tests, and has drawn logical and truth-preserving conclusions from his results. His main problems lie in his decision to restrict his understanding of class to economics and his perhaps too simple explanation of why individuals would choose to use the black utility heuristic (an explanation that could have been strengthened by increased emphasis on the role of the African American church). Despite these shortcomings, *Behind the Mule* is an important work in understanding the question of whether race or class is most salient in African American politics, and so stands as a work that must be read and answered by any scholar working in the field.

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