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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter describes the evolution of African-American political participation. Beginning with early findings in Black political participation, it discusses the major paradigm shifts in this research and their catalysts. The chapter concludes by providing a roadmap for future research in the field.

Keywords: blacks, voting, political participation, African Americans, protest, political behavior

The 1950s and '60s marked the emergence of the behavioral revolution in political science. Whereas previous research in the discipline had focused on macro-level phenomena and had been dominated by case studies, this new "scientific" approach to political science sought to systematize the study of political participation by synthesizing the correlates of political behavior into measurable psychological concepts. It was during this time that the large N probability sample survey became an important methodological tool, increasing the breadth and generalizability of political studies.

In many ways, however, the same behavioral revolution that ushered in theoretical and methodological innovation in the study of American political behavior stunted the study of Black political participation. The tendency to apply a "one-size-fits-all" model to explain political participation led political science often to miscalculate the root causes of Blacks' orientation to the political world. To be sure, Blacks were not the main focus of early voting studies. The discussion of Blacks in the pioneering works on political participation was often done in passing and as a means of explaining exceptions to the rule. Nevertheless, as the behavioral revolution overtook political science and the study of political participation became embedded in the psychology of behavior, assertions about Black participation followed suit. But, unlike that of the mainstream, Black participatory behavior is as much shaped by systemic factors and indigenous institutions as it by individual-level phenomena. Thus, by neglecting these factors affecting Black behavior,

the post-hoc theories about how and why African Americans participate politically were built on faulty assumptions. And the legacy of this approach would endure for decades.

With the creation of new datasets and the incorporation of more and more African Americans into the discipline, however, the study of Black political participation has evolved from being an afterthought to its own stand-alone field of research (Wilson 1985; Philpot et al. 2010). Scholars are presented with unprecedented opportunities to transform and test existing theories of Black political participation. In what follows, we describe in detail this evolution, highlighting early theories and key findings of research on African-American political participation. We then discuss paradigm shifts in this research. We conclude by providing a roadmap for future research in the field.

The Beginning of African-American Participation in the American Political System

African-American political participation was born from its inception in Colonial America. Arriving in August 1619, twenty Africans stepped off of the Dutch Man-of-War in Jamestown, Virginia and became indentured servants under the Judaic-Christian religious tradition operating in the colony. Required to serve seven years in this civic status before they could become a formal part of the community, these servants "were being assigned land in much the same way that it was being assigned to whites who had complete their indenture" (Franklin and Moss 1988, 53). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, freed Blacks in Virginia had the right to vote (Kolp 1998).

In 1661, however, slavery became a formal institution in the State of Virginia, thereby creating a second category of African Americans: slaves. Unlike freed Blacks, the social, civic, and political activities of slaves were heavily restricted. And as the slave population in Virginia grew, outnumbering that of Whites in some communities, slave laws became even more constricting (Franklin and Moss 1988). Eventually, the fine line between freed and enslaved Blacks disappeared (Franklin and Moss 1988) and Virginia withdrew suffrage rights from all Blacks in 1723 (Weeks 1894).

The establishment of slavery and the disenfranchisement of freed Blacks began by Colonial Virginia became the model for most of the remaining colonies with very few exceptions. None of the thirteen colonies gave slaves the right to vote (Malone 2008; Field 1982). Furthermore, "[a]ll Southern states entering the Union after 1789, except Tennessee, excluded Negroes from the franchise" (Franklin and Moss 1988, 141). By the nineteenth century, states that originally extended suffrage rights to Blacks, such as

Connecticut (1818), Tennessee (1834), North Carolina (1835), and Pennsylvania (1838), had withdrawn them.

The statutory recognition of slavery, as a systemic force, brought with it an enduring shift in the nature of African-American political participation. With first one class and later both classes of Blacks being barred from formal participation in the American political system, Blacks began to employ both *unconventional* and *conventional* political participation procedures. Methods of unconventional political participation "are not accepted as appropriate by the dominant political culture, even though they may be legal … Unconventional political behavior can be viewed as a continuum, ranging from participation in peaceful protest marches to engaging in terrorist violence or civil war" (Conway 2000, 4). On the other hand, conventional political participation "refers to those activities that are accepted as appropriate by the dominant political culture" (Conway 2000, 4). Examples include voting, running for elective office, campaigning on behalf of a candidate or organized interest, supporting one of the two major parties or forming a third party, running long-shot and independent protest candidates, and bloc voting (Conway 2000). This type of participation includes the formation of interest groups that lobby and petition for group rights along with raising and giving campaign funds, passing out campaign buttons and bumper stickers, and getting out the vote on Election Day.

Because Blacks, by nature of their early exclusion from the political and electoral process, were forced to engage in unconventional participation, any conceptualization of African-American participation must include both forms (Walton 2003). Central to this conceptualization must be the role and function of the systemic variable; that is the role of the colony, the state, and/or the federal governments in creating indentured servitude, slave and freed populations, and social systems like slavery, segregation, and desegregation that largely determine whether Blacks will conventionally or unconventionally engage American politics.

The Definitional Literature on African-American Political Participation

The initial definition of the concept known as political participation took place in the midst of the behavioral revolution with the appearance of the first edition of Lester Milbrath's (1965) *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?*. Much like the dominant trend at the time, Milbrath's study focused on the individual-level psychology of political participation. In particular, Milbrath writes: "the

major concern of the book is to explain individual human behavior as it relates to the political system. Therefore, the human organism, rather than groups or the political system, usually is taken as the unit of analysis" (3). Without providing a formal definition of political participation, Milbrath developed a diagrammatic model of this psychological concept, which attempted to list and identify the sundry variables that shaped and influenced political participation. Based on the division of chapters, one can surmise that Milbrath defines political participation as a function of (1) stimuli, (2) personal factors, (3) political setting, and (4) social position.

It is under the fourth category, social position, that Milbrath offers some comments and insights about African Americans. In this chapter, after the author goes through all of the well-known standard variables in the demographic category, the final one discussed is: Racial and Ethnic Minorities. In this section of the book, Milbrath notes that "Negroes participate in politics at a much lower rate than whites" and offers two explanations for why these differences exist (138). First, we are told in the opening sentence that "relative social position of racial groupings" is responsible for lower levels of Black political participation (Milbrath 1965, 138). Secondly, he states that *"the higher the percentage of Negroes in an area, the greater the pressure to keep them from voting.* This generalization holds especially clearly in the rural South" (Milbrath 1965, 139).[1] Although the author makes some additional remarks about African-American participatory behavior, his two statements give us the essence of the concept about African-American political participation in the 1960s. Such findings not only exclude systemic variables, however, they reduce the concept in the African-American community to two variables.

In the second edition of the book, Milbrath and Goel (1977) provide a more formal definition of political participation. This new formal definition asserts: "political participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 2). Beyond voter turnout, "the operational definition of political participation was broadened to include other electoral activities such as campaigning, attending political meetings, giving money to a candidate or a party, running for office, and so forth" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, viii). The new definition included "not only active roles that people pursue in order to influence political outcomes but also *ceremonial* and *support* activities" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 2). Nevertheless, this expanded definition still failed to include the ways that systemic variables constrain and circumscribed racial and ethnic groups' political participation, making it different from mainstream political behavior.

Not surprisingly, the added generalizations about African-American political participation (seven versus one in the first edition) appeared disparate and contradictory. Building upon the generalization that Blacks participate at much lower rates than Whites, the authors included findings from then-recent attitudinal studies of Black political

participation. In the second edition, the proposition about Blacks in the South, which evolved from aggregate registration and election data analyses in work like V.O. Key's (1949) *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, is elevated in the second edition to a full-fledged, bold-faced generalization. Thus, the authors restate that "regardless of controls for other factors, Negro voting registration in southern communities goes down, as their share of the population goes up" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 121). A co-related and new generalization in this second edition states: "the larger the percentage of blacks in a southern community, the smaller the number who are politically active" (121). At the same time, there is the finding that proffers: "once Negroes become engaged in politics, they are as likely (and sometimes more likely) to participate at high levels" and another which says "class by class Negroes are as active as whites (and sometimes more)" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 120). Clearly, these two new generalizations stand in contradistinction to the original one. Moreover, they also contradict the standard and dominate theory about socioeconomic variables (SES) and political participation due to the fact that most African Americans in this time period fell within the lower levels of the SES strata of American society, particularly in the South.

What accounts for these higher levels of political participation? The authors of the second edition provide one more new generalization: "Blacks who manifest racial pride and a sense of group consciousness participate substantially more than the average black" (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 121). This sweeping generalization not only undercuts and vitiates all of the preceding generalizations but it cleverly elevates the attitudinal variable and approach over the systemic variable which was then and somewhat now dominant in the African-American political experience and the American political system in the South.

The empirical bases for these new generalizations are provided by two major attitudinal studies on African-American political behavior, which appeared in the twelve years between the first and second editions of *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* This first one was Donald Matthews and James Prothro's (1966), *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, which omitted any focus upon the impact and influence of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA). It goes without saying that this Act removed a significant number of systemic barriers and obstacles from the southern African-American electorate, just like the Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright* did earlier in 1944. These federal interventions caused the collapse and disintegration of some of the state sponsored disenfranchisement techniques that had suppressed Black political participation since Reconstruction. Yet, here was a book using pre-1965 VRA attitudinal data on African-American political behavior that neglected to incorporate these systemic factors.

Furthermore, the book focused less on the African-American electorate[2] and more upon southern African-American college students who were engaged in the sit-ins, "Freedom Rides," prayer-ins, and sundry protest movements and marches, which were deemed at the time unconventional political participation. This made their findings limited, short-sighted, and highly questionable because they were analyzing the wrong group of political participants. And in so doing the systemic variable basically dropped out of analytical sight.

The second major study was Sidney Verba and Norman Nie's (1972) *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. This book argued that the increase in African American political participation was not caused by the collapse of systemic barriers and obstacles but rather by a rise in racial group consciousness as the dominant causal variable as if it was a brand new variable. Based on historical and empirical evidence, however, nothing could have been further from the truth. Racial group consciousness was hardly something new to the African-American political experience. To be sure, it had been a feature of Black political outlook since Colonial Virginia. But this group did not and could not secure voting rights until 1965, resulting in subsequent increases in political participation. But the impact and influence of this book, which at the time had almost as much impact and influence on the field as Campbell et al.'s (1960) *The American Voter*, simply eclipsed the explanatory power of the VRA and had the profession and discipline embrace a psychological variable known as racial group consciousness as the catalyst to increased levels of African-American political participation. This book shifted the focus away from the political system to the individual. The logic here dictated that in other periods of American political history, the African-American electorate did not have regular levels of political participation simply because they did not have high levels of racial group consciousness. Wow!

This twisted logic seemingly bothered very few, nor did the fact that this generalization was based on wafer-thin empirical evidence yielded from a sample of less than 200 African Americans. After appearing in this book, survey and polling research placed Verba and Nie's measure of racial group consciousness,[3] in its original formulation and/or some modified version (or some index of questions), on every instrument that sought insights into African-American political behavior. Soon, however, methodological criticism (Miller et al. 1981) joined with historical and empirical evidence exposing its logical flaws (Walton 1985) undermined and undercut Verba and Nie's conceptualization and measurement of racial group consciousness and it declined in importance and influence (Chong and Rogers 2005).

Following these three books, M. Margaret Conway published multiple editions of *Political Participation in the United States*. The initial edition came out in 1985, the second edition arrived in 1991 and the third edition in 2000. Like the multi-edition work of Milbrath,

which it eclipsed and replaced, all of the volumes were concerned with mainstream (White) political participation and African-American political participation was treated as a subcategory like ethnicity. Hence, the Conway book in its chapter on social characteristics and political participation had a three- or four-page section entitled "Race" where the standard SES variables were used to explain African-American political behavior. Next, and unlike the Milbrath books, there was a chapter entitled: "The Legal Structure and Political Participation" where all of the state-based legal barriers and restrictions on women and minorities were discussed. This was followed by a section on "Registration and Election Procedures" that described and explained early voter registration laws and voter registration systems and turnout without any reference to the African-American electorate. Although the author makes references to the Voting Rights Act, the political contextual conditions which the VRA addresses is never translated into a systemic variable that can be used in testing theories about African-American political participation. In fact, in the third and final edition, Professor Conway uses the numerous renewals of the VRA as an opportunity to strongly declare that these systemic problems have almost disappeared from the African-American community without explaining why there is a continued need for renewal (Conway 2000).

In the midst of the publication of these books arrived several articles that sought to explain the determinants of Black political participation by challenging the conventionally accepted assumptions. Of these articles, three stand out. First, Salamon and Van Evera's (1973) "Fear, Apathy, and Discrimination: A Test of Three Explanations of Political Participation," transformed systemic variables into the psychological variables: fear, discrimination, and apathy. Measuring fear as a function of Blacks' economic interdependence on Whites and suppressed Black organizational development, Salamon and Van Evera conclude that the system of social, political, and economic oppression that existed in the Jim Crow Deep South prior to the Civil Rights Movement continued informally even after the VRA. As a result of this systemic subjugation, Blacks experienced a sense of vulnerability and fear of retaliation that their engagement in politics might bring, and this fear is a better predictor of Black political participation than apathy or discrimination. Moreover, they argue that the "income-education-apathy thesis" can only be applied to political systems that are "truly open" (Salamon and Van Evera 1973, 1288).

Likewise, Nicholas Danigelis' (1977) "A Theory of Black Political Participation in the United States," examines the bevy of contradicting theories and scattershot findings on Black political participation. In particular, Danigelis proffers a theory that attempts to resolve inter- and even intra-study contradictions in observed levels of African-Americans' relative electoral participation. He notes that historically Black participation is transitional; furthermore, given the history of race relations in the United States,

variability in Black political participation should be expected. The source of this variability is a function of "formal and informal white rules governing black political behavior, white attitudes toward those rules and black attitudes toward those rules" (38). Labeled "political climate," Danigelis' theory incorporates both attitudinal and systemic factors as determinative and causal with respect to Black participation (see also Ellison and Gay 1989).

Yet despite the historical and empirical evidence suggesting otherwise, Richard Shingles' (1981) "Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link" reverts to conceptualizing Black political participation as driven purely by psychological variables. Similar to Verba and Nie (1972), Shingles attributes the increased levels of political participation among Blacks during the 1960s to an increased sense of group consciousness. To this he adds that Black group consciousness fuels internal political efficacy and political mistrust, which leads to policy-related participation. Interestingly, Shingles defines the U.S. Government's role in Black participation as follows:

> The federal government has had an important, if unintended, role in shaping the nature of black political participation. It is second only to the civil rights movement in spurring the development of black consciousness. By declaring war on both poverty and racial discrimination in the 1960s, the federal government legitimized and politicized black goals of social and economic equality (89).

In other words, it was not the dismantling of the South's disenfranchisement tools and the enforcement of the VRA that led to Blacks' increased participation but rather the political rhetoric surrounding the passage of civil and economic rights legislation that fostered a sense of group consciousness among Blacks, which mobilized them politically.

Thus, by the mid-1980s, the defining literature on Black political participation ended where it had started. The dominant paradigm categorized Blacks' engagement in the political arena as largely a function of psychological orientations towards politics. With few exceptions, researches failed to connect the psychological to the systemic, leaving the discipline with an ahistorical and logically faulty account and narrow definition of Black political participation.

Broadening the Scope and Moving Forward

As more Blacks entered the discipline, the study of Black political participation was reinvigorated and the focus of studies shifted from explaining Blacks as exceptions to the rule to a group worthy of study in its own right (McClerking and Philpot 2008). Yet, as

Rich (2008) tells us, "political participation poses a special problem for African American political scientists" (105). Up until then, Black political scientists were faced with a concept that had drawn all of its knowledge, dimensions, and characteristics from the mainstream and applied them essentially uncritically to the African-American community. Furthermore, the discipline accepted and acknowledged this practice and the findings it yielded. To overcome these problems with the extant literature, Black political scientists needed (1) a new operational definition of African-American political participation; (2) a new conceptualization that drew from African-American political history and experiences; (3) new operationalization and measurement; (4) greater electoral success of Black candidates beyond local offices and the House of Representatives; and (5) data sets with large enough Black samples to empirically test competing theories and variables.

Many of these requirements have been met. Some of that came with the 1984, 1988, and 1996 National Black Election Studies and the 1993 National Black Politics Study. Some came with the elections of Senators Carol Moseley-Braun in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2004 to the U.S. Senate and the victories of Black candidates in several statewide elections in the South. Finally, the achievement of the 2008 presidential election and the failures of the 2010 midterm elections have unveiled some new questions and potential answers.

Out of some of these necessary attainments grew critical variables extracted from the African-American experience. First and foremost is the African-American church and the powerful "religious" variable. Research in this area has revealed the importance of the Black church in fostering civic skills, psychological motivation, theological orientation, and social networks that lead to increases participation (McKenzie 2004; Harris 1999; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Reese et al. 2007). Recent work has also demonstrated how religious institutions can serve as political conduits when other, more traditional avenues for political participation are constricted (McDaniel 2008). Other important indigenous institutions identified as spurring political participation include civic and fraternal organizations and the Black media (Tate 1993; Dawson et al. 1990; Hanks 2003). Cohen and Dawson (1993) identify the concentrated neighborhood poverty found in cities with large Black populations like Detroit as inhibiting political participation, above and beyond an individual's socioeconomic status.

There have also been a myriad of systemic variables identified as affecting African-American participation. For instance, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' (1968) report, *Political Participation*, described the huge array of disenfranchisement tools that southern states had in place, even after the passage of the 1965 VRA. More recently, research on felony disenfranchisement laws demonstrates that political participation is suppressed among Black voters, not just because those convicted of felonies have had their suffrage rights rescinded but also because these laws quash turnout among non-

disenfranchised Blacks (McLeod et al. 2003). The drawing of majority-minority districts that resulted from the passage of the 1982 amendment to the 1965 VRA has identified a potential systemic source of political mobilization, with research in this area yielding mixed results (Gay 2001; McGowen 2010). In the wake of allegations of Black vote suppression during the 2000 election, scholars (e.g. Mebane 2004) have explored the impact of state-level voting rules and technology on the ability of Blacks to cast their ballots *and* be counted.

As more and more Blacks attain elective office, research has been discerning how African-American elected leaders are shaping political participation. For instance, in their pioneering and inventive (1990) article, Larry Bobo and Franklin Gilliam, Jr., transformed the climate concept put forward by Danigelis into a theory of political empowerment, finding that African Americans living in cities with Black mayors experience higher levels of political trust and efficacy and participate at much greater levels than those who do not. Tate's (2003) study of Black Members of Congress produces similar results (but see Gay 2001). Philpot and Walton (2005) find a gendered effect, with Black female voters experiencing a sense of empowerment motived by the presence of African-American women mayoral candidates. At the presidential level, a Black candidate running for the nation's highest office stimulated voter turnout in the 1984, but not the 1988, Democratic primary (Tate 1993) and resulted in one of the highest levels of Black voter turnout in modern times in 2008 (Philpot et al. 2009).

With respect to psychological variables, the most important innovation was arguably the replacement of the old concept of Black consciousness with the concept of linked or common fate (Gurin et al. 1989; Dawson 1994). Common fate is a function of a Black individual's awareness of interdependence with other Blacks and the centrality of race to the lives of individual Blacks (Gurin et al. 1989). Unlike Verba and Nie's (1972) conceptualization of group consciousness, linked fate takes into account "the more complex political or ideological elements of group consciousness" (Chong and Rogers 2005, 351). In an examination of the two presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson, Sr., Tate (1993) found that linked fate was positively correlated with voting in the 1984 presidential primary and the 1984 and 1988 general elections. Interestingly, linked fate did not predict voter turnout in 2008 election, which resulted in the nation's first Black president being elected. Survey evidence suggests church attendance and being contacted by a political party incite political participation, more so than psychological variables such as group identity, political efficacy, and political interest (Philpot et al. 2009; also see Mangum 2003; Wielhouwer 2000).

Beyond electoral participation, there have also been significant inroads into understanding non-electoral and unconventional African-American political participation,

including political protest, social movement, and organizational participation (Harris 1999; Reese et al. 2007; Chong and Rogers 2005; Secret et al. 1990). For example, Berger (2006) demonstrates how "intersectional stigma" can be a politicizing force among marginalized groups, leading them to become activists and advocates. Harris, Sinclair-Chapman, and McKenzie (2006) use longitudinal data to illustrate the push and pull economic and political forces have on nonvoting civic participation. Lastly, Shaw's (2009) *Now Is the Time!: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* describes the necessary tools to ensure successful grassroots social activism.

The Future of the Study of African-American Political Participation

Collectively, the research that emerged during the mid to late 1980s and continues today provides a more comprehensive portrait of African-American political participation than was initially conceptualized. Scholars have been able to combine qualitative and quantitative data, cross-section and longitudinal data, and aggregate and attitudinal data, all analyzed with a multitude of statistical, experimental, and ethnographic tools Though ever-evolving, this literature establishes African-American political participation as a function of external system forces, indigenous institutions, and psychological orientations towards politics. Not only do these elements influence each other but each element shapes political participation. Further, the salience of each has varied over time.

Still, there is much about Black political participation left to learn. For instance, recent work by Hutchings and Stephens demonstrates the need to examine more closely the motivating factors that lead to Black primary and caucus participation (Hutchings and Stephens 2008; also see Walton 1985; Walton 1992). The influx of African and Caribbean immigrants necessitates the need to look at subsamples within the Black community (see e.g. Rogers 2006). Changes in electoral rules, including the Voter ID laws adopted by states, mandate an examination of whether and how systemic forces continue to impact Black participation (see e.g. Barreto et al. 2009).

Nevertheless, the current literature on African-American political participation now includes variables derived from the African-American political experience that confront and conflict, if not undermine, those few variables of the early years. However, with each new year, additional variables emerge that are both indigenous and external to the Black community. Coupled with this are shifts in the demographic composition of the category of "Black." Students of African-American political participation need to keep pace with these changes by creating and analyzing datasets large enough to capture this

heterogeneity. Furthermore, the stage has been set for a major synthesis that provides empirical tests of various systemic, attitudinal, and indigenous variables simultaneously while resolving enduring conflicts in the extant literature. Such an endeavor requires envisioning Black political participation as a dynamic and multifaceted process.

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Notes:

([1]) About these reported findings he notes: "In the text, propositions are distinguished by level of confidence. Those in italics are propositions for which there is some evidence, but of which the author is not as confident as he is of those propositions in bold-face type" (4).

([2]) With which they were familiar because they conducted interviews in Mississippi during this time period with Negro teachers under a contract with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and wrote up their findings for the Commission's *Report on Mississippi.*

([3]) Verba and Nie's measure of group consciousness is based on spontaneous mentions of race when Blacks were asked a series of "open-ended questions about the groups that were in conflict within their community, and on the problems they faced in personal life, in the community, and in the nation" (158).

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Political participation refers to voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies. Examples of these activities include voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on issues. The Civic Voluntarism Model and other recent studies have also demonstrated that people participate more in response to recruitment or mobilization. (Both terms refer to efforts by one person to increase the activity of another.) The Political Action project has shown that people have expanded their 'political action repertory' to encompass both protest and conventional participation.