

African American Political Participation  
Black Youth Project Memo – DRAFT  
Andrew Dilts  
August 19, 2005

What follows is a brief exploration of African-American Youth political participation. The first section traces mainstream work in political science on participation. The early work on participation, based on the large-n survey tradition of the Columbia and Michigan election studies, focuses almost exclusively on voting, taking account of race or age only as controls. The second section deals with the emergence of the currently dominant model of participation, the “Resource” or “Civic Participation” model, which takes into account not only different forms of political activity besides voting, but turns attention to factors unique to African-Americans. The dominating question of political participation turns out to be explaining race-based differences in levels and types of political participation. Following this, Electoral and Non-Electoral forms of participation are explored in detail, with special attention to minority youth, drawing from the most recent studies of their participation.

### **Early Research on Race and Political Participation:**

McClain and Garcia (1993), in their 1993 review article on the state of minority politics research, note that political science has not historically given a great amount of attention to racial and minority group politics. Focused attention to ethnic and racial minority groups is a relatively recent development in the field. They characterize four generations of research in racial politics, beginning in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: first generation research on the “Negro Problem” with foundational work by Bunch (1928; 1941), Myrdal (1962), and Key (1949), second generation research on protest and accommodation emphasizing black leadership, third

generation research on power and the redefinition of black politics beyond electoral politics, and current fourth generational research, characterized by a heterogeneity of topics and approaches (McClain and Garcia 1993, 248-255).

Mainstream political science, however, has historically operated with a set of biases, focusing on a narrow meaning of participation as primarily voting activity, largely ignoring race as anything more than a control variable, and paying little to no attention to youth participation. These two biases, first towards electoral political participation as the only interesting form of mass political participation, and second in a narrow conception of African Americans as simply a type of ethnic or minority voter, persist in mainstream political science literature up until the 1990s.

The early work on participation by scholars at Columbia University sought to build models of participation based mainly on socioeconomic status, religion, and location of residence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Berelson 1954). Attention to race or ethnicity in this approach is scant. When it does enter the picture, it does so as a measure of what Berelson et. al (1954) call “social differentiation.” There are, they note, persistent cleavages in voting behavior that map to life long social characteristics. Grouped together in this analysis are “minority religious” groups and “ethnic status.” The key to understanding minority voting behavior, they argue, is noting that these minority groups have 1) an initial social differentiation that is 2) transmittable across generational lines, and 3) reinforced through social and physical proximity. The groups that meet these criteria not only include African Americans, but Catholics, Jews, and other ethnic minorities. In this conception, all minorities are taken as analytically similar. Concern for African American voting extends no further than the politicians’ understanding of “organizing the ‘Negro vote’ or the ‘Jewish vote’ or the ‘Italian vote’” (Berelson 1954, 63).

The conception of Black voters as merely one type of “ethnic” voters continues to be an organizing concept in Dahl (1961). Dahl characterizes all ethnic politics as “transitional phenomenon.” While his focus is limited to an analysis of what role ethnic groups play in the governance of New Haven, CT, he does develop an early theory for how ethnic minorities move from homogenous groups, reliable for group wide political support to heterogeneous participators, thus losing their group like character on the way to “political assimilation” (Dahl 1961, 34-36). This conception reflects a pervasive assumption and finding in the early participation literature: socioeconomic status is expected to trump ethnic or racial status. Dahl argues that ethnic group block voting dissipates as members of the ethnic group become more diverse in socioeconomic terms. The end result of assimilation, he argues, is that ethnic group attachments loose salience over time as they become more economic and social heterogeneous. This theory will be of great importance in more recent scholarship on just why it is that African Americans, who have indeed become much more diverse in socioeconomic terms, continue to vote as a group (Dawson 1994).

The emphasis on voting as the form of political participation most worthy of analysis continues with the rise of the Michigan school, captured most fully in *The American Voter*. While they note that there are indeed other forms of political participation worthy of study, their purpose is steadfastly in explaining how voters come to their decision. Their primary concern is not the fact of participation, in why individuals vote, but in how they vote. Campbell et al. continue to explore race merely as an expression of social grouping, akin to being Catholic, Jewish, or a union member. Importantly, Campbell et al note that there are potentially two different ways in which group membership can influence political participation, first through group influence: “members come to respond distinctively because their action is informed more

or less subtly by standards of conduct extant in the group” (Campbell et al. 1976, 302-303). This is separate from “... the fact of membership in these groups locates the person in a peculiar position in social structure, which in itself ensures a distinctive pattern of life experience” (Campbell et al. 1976, 303). They note specifically, that being an African American might have a political effect “*even if the group did not exist as an entity cognized by its members*” since being an African American likely implies being of low socioeconomic status. The point, they argue, is that it is important to note the effect of group membership itself, even when controlling “life situation,” as they call it. Importantly, however, their analysis of race was limited to its effect on vote preference. Their brief analysis of turnout, for example, does not take race into account at all, but only to note the effect of extra-legal voting restrictions which persisted in the South (Campbell et al. 1976, 278-279).

Race plays a similar role, and functions in a similar way in Wolfinger and Rosenstone’s (1980) study on voter turnout. They unpack the dominant determinate of turnout, socioeconomic status (SES), attempting to identify specific mechanisms by which individual aspects of SES produce different levels of electoral participation. Their key finding is that it is education, above all other demographic variables, that drives electoral participation. Wolfinger and Rosentone theorize that this is because education makes participation easier, by reducing the costs of turnout. This view of participation, which squares soundly with the rational choice model originally laid out by Downs (1957) and further elaborated by Riker and Odershook (1968), understands voting as an entirely individuated choice, in which social effects (and in turn racial) effects are important only in the terms by which they determine levels of education, income, and social connectedness, each making participation less costly to the individual.

While they concur with Campbell et. al regarding lower voter turnout amongst black voters in the aggregate, based on data drawn during the 1970s, they find this gap to be largely attributable to SES differences. Holding SES constant, they find that Blacks actually vote more than their white counterparts to vote. In keeping with their emphasis on education, they find that the racial difference in turnout is mediated by educational level, with race effects the strongest amongst the least educated. Verba and Nie (1972) offer one of the first explanations of participation differences that takes into account factors that are unique to the minority population. Specifically, they argue that a sense of racial identity and group consciousness is the source of the turnout differential between racial groups.

Shingles (1981) focuses on the development of Black Consciousness as a powerful explanatory variable for levels of political participation by African Americans. He follows Verba and Nie (1972), using measures of Black consciousness (measured with open ended questions about community conflict and personal problems – if respondent spontaneously makes reference racial problems or racial conflict, this is taken as an indication of black consciousness), campaign participation (working in a campaign, persuading others to vote, campaign contributions, etc), community activity efforts to solve problems through groups and organizations, initiation of personal political contact), and “high-initiative” policy activity (traditional participation). Shingles finds that 1) among the poor, Blacks are more likely to have both high political mistrust and high internal efficacy, 2) Black consciousness contributes to this combination, and 3) this conditional combination leads to increased levels of high-initiative conventional policy behavior. That is, it is black consciousness that explains the seeming paradox of high levels of political mistrust along with high levels of conventional participation.

More recently, Ellison (2003) continues to trace this connection, pointing to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and the Black Power Movement (BPM) as “two distinct sets of socialization experiences” for contemporary Blacks, because they help to generate racial identification or racial pride. Ellison’s findings give a historical explanation of the effects of the CRM and BPM on voting behavior. He theorizes that racial identification and racial pride will be positively associated with electoral participation, that involvement in the social movements mentioned will increase electoral participation for both young and old African Americans. In particular, the BPM has a strong effect on young African Americans in non-south urban settings. Given, however, that the generational cohort involved in the CRM and the BPM has been replaced entirely at this point, we are left wondering if the lessons of youth/student activity learned can be applied in the contemporary setting? Is there a parallel or similar social movement available today with the same socializing potential for minority youths?

### **Moving Away From the Mainstream: Alternate Explanations for Racial Differences**

The mainstream research on participation up to this point arrives at three major points of consensus: 1) in the aggregate, there is a persistent racial gap in participation rates, 2) but African Americans actually participate more than whites when SES characteristics are held constant, and 3) this can be explained by factors unique to African Americans, such as high levels of group consciousness (Verba and Nie 1972; Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Shingles 1981). Bobo and Gilliam (1990), however, argue that this explanation rests on data drawn from a period in which blacks were still actively struggling to gain formal inclusion in political processes, and as such, the effects of group consciousness might be overstated. It is notable that

Verba et al find no effect of group consciousness on black participation in their Civic Participation Study, with data collected in 1989 (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Bobo and Gilliam (1990) offer an alternate explanation for differential levels of participation focusing on characteristics unique to African Americans. They argue that the level of African American “empowerment” in a given geographic area effects participation among African Americans. They find that blacks living in “high-empowerment areas,” areas in which African Americans hold high levels of political office, are more active civically and politically. The effect of black office holding translates to individual participation by increasing attentiveness and political efficacy on the part on blacks in those communities which have high levels of empowerment.

Of particular importance to African American communities, however, might be environmental factors, rather than individual ones. Cohen and Dawson (1993) report an important effect of social isolation resulting from neighborhood poverty. That is, despite individual characteristics that might indicate higher levels of political and civic participation, there might be strong constraints on opportunities for such participation in black communities. Neighborhood or contextual poverty reduces the level of mobilization that occurs within these communities, in turn reducing the likelihood that individuals will give money to political candidates, groups or parties, talk with family or friends about politics, or attend meetings about community problems.

In addition to an increase in works focusing specifically on African American participation, the 1990s saw two important developments in the mainstream participation literature. First, a far more complete understanding of how and why SES determine political participation, and second, an expanded notion of what activities count as political participation.

Based on the work stemming from the Citizen Participation Study, we can distinguish political participation from the resources that enable it and better understand the mechanism by which high levels of SES turn into higher levels of participation.<sup>1</sup> The so-called “resource model of participation” takes SES into account, but notes it is the key resources of time, money, and civic skills that are provided by a high SES that lead to participation. These scholars note that these resources are distributed unevenly amongst whites, African-Americans, and Latinos. Controlling for these resources, they argue, the likelihood of participation is equalized across race/ethnicity.

Central to the Resource Model, is a broader attention to other forms of activity that should be counted as participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) explicitly broaden their list of traditional forms of “political” participation, identifying two broad classes of participation: electoral and governmental. Electoral participation includes the following, all captured in large-N survey data from the American National Election Studies: 1) Voting, 2) trying to influence how others vote, 3) financial contributions to political parties and candidates, 4) attendance at political meetings or rallies, and 5) working for the campaign. These are, according to NES data gathered from 1952-1990, the electoral activities most consistently taken part in by Americans (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 42-43). Government participation, distinguished from electoral participation, covers activities such as 1) signing a petition, 2) attending public meetings on local or school affairs, 3) writing or otherwise contacting a congressional or senate representative, 4) attending political rallies or speeches, 5) making a speech, or 6) writing articles for newspapers and magazines. Again, these are the most common non-electoral political activities Americans take part in. The researchers at the Civic Participation Study likewise work with a broader conception of political participation, additionally paying attention to measures of civic and

---

<sup>1</sup> (Verba et al. 1993; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995)



religious participation (Verba et al. 1993; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

The key contribution from Rosenstone and Hansen make is in noting the importance of mobilization as a determinate of participation. Minorities, they argue, are the most sensitive to targeted mobilization (because they are the least likely to vote, they have the greatest margin for increase) (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 173). For example, increased levels of voter turnout among African Americans during the 1980s was largely attributed to the high-profile candidacy of Jesse Jackson combined with a strong distaste for Regan's political agenda (Tate 1991, 1994). Given the relatively low turnout rates of African American voters, a dynamic campaign such as Jackson's, combined with widespread dislike of President Ragan had a particularly strong impact on African American voters. Additionally, scholars of Black politics traditionally point to the powerful mobilizing effects of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and Black Power Movements (BPM) in generating their theoretical models of Black participation.

These movements were able to increase participation in a number of ways: "[the CRM] increased political awareness, political efficacy, racial identity, social expectations, and acceptance of personal risk among black Americans" (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 192). Importantly, the substantive outcomes in removing legal barriers for participation and extending the franchise greatly increases the likelihood of voting (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 62; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

But as material resources expand for African Americans, increasing aggregate levels of participation, those resource gains have not been distributed equally. Yet in the face of increasing economic heterogeneity amongst African Americans, a related literature has developed to explain the persistence of African American homogeneity of attitudes and policy preferences.

Tate (1994) notes that while there is increasing attitudinal diversity amongst African Americans, with the wealthiest and most educated more likely to become conservative, those same individuals are also most likely to be strong race identifiers, moderating the ideological effect. This explanation is more fully developed by Dawson (1994) as the Black Utility Heuristic, which, Dawson writes, "... simply states that as long as African-Americans' life chances are powerfully shaped by race, it is efficient for individual African Americans to use their perceptions of the interests of African Americans as a group as a proxy for their own interests" (Dawson 1994, 61).

Dawson notes the high degree of homogenous voting preference amongst blacks in spite of increasing heterogeneous social and economic circumstances amongst blacks as a whole. Blacks tend to vote together (for Democrats), both before and after re-alignment in the south (see Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) for a discussion of black voter's roles in re-alignment) and despite newfound economic diversity amongst blacks.

That this is the case is because of three inter-related factors. First, as expressed by the strength of the Black Utility Heuristic, African Americans rationally turn to racial group measures of well-being instead of individual measures to calculate their individual utility. Second, "the constraint of the American political ideological space by comparative standards masks much variation among African Americans regarding ideas about the best strategies for pursuing common goals" (Dawson 1994, 63) That is, while there are in fact great differences between African Americans in terms of political ideologies, interests, and strategies, the mainstream political environment tends to suppress these differences, making them all but invisible from the outside. Third, those individual-level differences that do exist can be explained by differences in socialization rather than differences in economic or class standing: "...

individual differences among African Americans can also be explained by different conditions of socialization (e.g., between age cohorts or between those who grew up in urban as opposed to rural environments) and by the severity and salience of individual experiences with discrimination” (Dawson 1994, 63).

In addition to attention to unique mobilizing factors for African-Americans, the Resource Model begs the question of precisely what resources have unique importance for African-Americans. Focusing again on electoral participation, Tate (1994) identifies four potential candidates, some of which have already been mentioned above: 1) race identification, 2) membership in Black political organizations, 3) church membership, and 4) Black officeseeking (Tate 1994, 76). These are, in her words, examples of group or collective resources for African-Americans. She finds that of these, it is church membership that has the most consistent and strongest effect on African-American electoral participation. This finding is not surprising, given the historical importance the Black Church played in the Civil Rights Movement (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; Harris 1994; Calhoun-Brown 1996; D'Apolito 2000).

One explanation for the importance of these resources, and the church especially, is explained by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The key, they argue, is that being Black does not in itself affect participation, but rather is connected to resources that do. While African Americans lag behind Whites in terms of political participation, they make up for it in religious participation. African Americans are more likely to attend protestant churches, locations, they argue, that are especially useful for civic training. Given lower endowments of material resources, the participation gap is the greatest in terms of donating money to campaigns, political parties, and candidates. Where resources of time are

more relevant, such as volunteerism, religious participation, or campaign activity, African Americans equal or exceed whites on average (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 236).

## **Electoral Participation**

### Racial Effects

Rosenstone and Hansen note that these forms of participation are characterized by a persistent racial gap between whites and non-whites. Miller and Shanks (1996) characterize the racial vote differential stating, “NES Data ... suggest a relatively constant racial differential in voter turnout, with Blacks voting about 10 percent less often than non-Blacks in the Reagan-Bush-Clinton elections” (Miller and Shanks 1996, 255). Controlling for SES, the difference drops to around a 4% gap between blacks and non-blacks (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 131). The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement’s (CIRCLE) survey results from their Youth Politics Survey indicates that while the voting gap was closing throughout the 1980s (in large part explained by the Jackson presidential candidacy in 1984 (Tate 1991, 1994)), by the end of the 1980s, the gap between racial groups had returned to 1972 levels (Lopez 2002).

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) look specifically at the ebb and flow of Black voter turnout over time. While the white vote has steadily declined since the 1950s, Black voter turnout increased dramatically, especially during the period between the 1950s and the early 1970s. While the bulk of the change in participation amongst whites is attributed to changes in the level of elite mobilization, the prime determinates of change during this period for Black turnout are legal and resources changes. The removal of legal barriers to voting in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 alone led to a 15.8-percentage point increase in Black turnout. Even more

dramatic, increases in personal resources can account for nearly a 19-percentage point increase in aggregate turnout. This is in addition to a 6.6 percentage point increase due directly to mobilization. Overall, Black voter turnout increased by nearly 45 percentage points during VRA era, two-thirds of which is explained by legal easing of registration laws and increases in personal resources (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 219-222).<sup>2</sup>

When Black turnout began to fall by the end of the 1980s, the story shifts to mobilization. While continued increases in formal education and additional easing of voting restrictions moderate the decline in turnout, the combined effect of weakened party attachments, a direct decline in mobilization, and declines in voter registration efforts result in a 12.8 percentage point decrease in turnout by the end of the 1980s (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 222-223).<sup>3</sup> Unlike the preceding period, with increases in turnout being driven by legal and personal resource gains, the period of overall decline was driven by “... the atrophy of instruments of mobilization” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 223). Rosenstone and Hansen argue that, “As political parties, campaigns, and social movements subsidized few costs and created fewer benefits, black voter turnout declined by 11.4 percentage points. Curtailed mobilization accounts for nearly two-thirds of the drop in African-American voter participation since 1968” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 224). More recently, the importance of direct mobilization was illustrated by an experimental study on the effect of canvassing shortly before the 2002 elections in California. Michelson (2003) reports that 1) Latino canvassers were better at mobilizing Latinos than non-Latino canvassers, and 2) that Latinos overall are more receptive to canvassing than Non-Latinos.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Table 7-2 in (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 220) for a detailed breakdown of factors of increase in Black turnout from 1950s to 1968/72.

<sup>3</sup> See Table 7-3 in (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 223) for detailed breakdown of factors of decrease in Black turnout from 1968 to end of 1980s.

By the mid 1990s, the consensus was that once economic and other status variables are controlled for, there are little if any differences between Whites and Blacks in terms of electoral participation. What differences do exist are the result of different histories of political socialization and life experience. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) report that even in the aggregate, “The difference between African-Americans and Anglo-Whites are small in magnitude and inconsistent in direction” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 233). While Blacks report lower levels of voting, they are nearly indistinguishable from Whites in terms of campaign work and contributions. Latinos, on the other hand, lag considerably behind on all these electoral measures (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 233). But, as noted above, mobilization efforts that target young Latino have especially strong effects.

#### Age, Education, and Work

It is well established in that age plays some part in determining turnout (Lipset 1960; Milbrath 1965; Flanigan 1968). Controlling for education and sex, Campbell et. al (1976) find that voter participation can sometimes have a steady and dramatic increase based solely on the increase in one’s age. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) summarize the conventional view, stating that turnout is “... lowest at the beginning of adult life, rises to a plateau in middle age, and declines as maturity fades into old age” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 37).

Wolfinger and Rosenstone argue that while this trend holds true based on 1972 data, the effect of age is not independent of other factors, importantly sex and marital status. They argue that age is a factor on turnout *through* other demographic factors: “Age is related to other demographic characteristics that are related to turnout in at least some circumstances: sex, marital status, education, and income” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 41). Earlier work indicates that voting is part of taking on an “adult role.” The key component of such a role is

marriage. But Wolfinger and Rosenstone find that the effect of marriage on turnout, while still positive, is weakest among the young, increasing with age. They conclude that marriage and age are related only in terms of mutual reinforcement, rather than signaling the adoption of an adult role. They reject the “adult role” hypothesis, instead arguing that it is the greater level of political learning produced by aging that drives increases in turnout. “Life experience,” they write, is a substitute for school” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Education turns out to be the strongest determinate of turnout and the primary way in which age determines turnout. It is a classic indicator of transformation from childhood to adulthood as well as an powerful source of civic knowledge. “The start-up costs of voting are not borne equally by all young people. The cost of entering the political system is relatively small for the educated, but for those without such skills the costs are nearly three times as great. Many people in this group learn by the experience of continued exposure to politics as they grow older” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 60). Becoming educated increases turnout in two ways, by lowering the costs of participation permanently, leading to otherwise higher levels of turnout throughout life, but also during the time spent in school. Thus, it is not just being educated that increases turnout, but the fact of being in school has its own effect. “[C]ommunity norms, social interaction, and the lower costs of registering and voting all facilitate student turnout. When people leave the university, they generally enter a less politically stimulating environment” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 57). It is for this reason, that we see conventional life-cycle trend: rising turnout in college, decline after leaving school, followed by gradual gain until the mid 50s plateau. Verba et al.(1993) explain the importance of education this way:

[F]ormal education itself fosters organizational and communication skills that are germane to political activity and imparts attitudes such as a sense of civic duty or political efficacy that are associated with political involvement. In addition, those with high levels of education are in a position to acquire further political

resources: they are much more likely to have the kinds of jobs that pay high salaries and ... to have opportunities in several arenas to develop skills that are relevant to politics” (Verba et al. 1993, 457).

There is, however, variation between young minorities in who goes to college, who works instead, and who does both, working while in school. Given an understanding of political participation that looks precisely to the kinds of resources generated by experiences in school or on the job, if these access to these are racially distinct, we should expect to see an effect on participation based on the intersection of education and employment. Jarvis et. al. (2005a; 2005b) report that working youth do indeed have lower levels of political participation compared to college students. For those who do not pursue higher education, activities that develop civic skills (like letter writing, leading meetings, etc.) are especially important and have a greater impact on participation than for college students (Jarvis, Montoya, and Mulvoy 2005b). What is most common, however, is for a student to also work while in school. These student workers, not surprisingly, report the highest levels of political interest, skills, mobilization, and participation (Jarvis, Montoya, and Mulvoy 2005a). Even though student workers score lower on traditional political socialization measures (parents who talked about politics or were active in politics, have more friends and close contacts, etc.), student workers ended up being more engaged in political activity, talk about politics with others, and have built political skills (writing letters, organize meetings, give speeches, etc.). While this research does not challenge the importance of education for political participation, it shows that there are important other ways in which political participation, especially for young people, is enhanced by other activities.

Most troubling is the high incidence among minority youth of detachment from both school and work. A 2003 report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern



University states that in 2000, 23.3 percent of African Americans, and 23.4 percent of Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 nationally were neither in school or a job. For Non-Hispanic whites, only 10.2 percent were out of school or work. If we focus on those youth between 20 and 24, the disparity grows. African Americans and Hispanics both have roughly 30% of their population detached from school or work, compared to 13.6% of Non-Hispanic whites. The most extreme disparity is amongst 20-24 year old men, in urban settings. In Chicago, for example, nearly 45% of African American men between the ages of 20-24 are not in school and without work. Only 25.4% of Hispanic young men and 8.2% of white male youth are likewise disconnected in Chicago (**Youth Labor Market and Education**

## Indicators for the State of Illinois 2003).

### The Problem of Disenfranchisement

The greatest increases in voter turnout for minorities (particularly African Americans) came following the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965. The removal of formal legal barriers to voting allowed for a massive expansion of African American voting. But there remain important formal barriers to participation that have pronounced effects on minority voters. This is particular relevant given that 1) voting restrictions on felons impacts predominantly younger black males through their higher rates of incarceration<sup>4</sup> and 2) the historical tradition of such practices is often explicitly racial: these restrictions were intended to prevent blacks from voting.

---

<sup>4</sup> In 1995, one in three African American males between the age of 20-29 were under some form of supervision in the criminal justice system (Mauer and Sentencing Project (U.S.) 1999, 124-125).

In all but two states, persons convicted of felonies are stripped of their voting rights. Each state establishes its own voting eligibility. As such, there is a large amount of variation between states as to which classes of persons (ex-felons, probationers, parolees) are allowed to vote. For detailed accounts of state-by-state differences see (Fellner and Mauer 1998; Taifa 2002; Kalogeras 2003). For an account of the effects of such variation see (Pettus 2002).

In 1998 3.9 million Americans had lost their voting rights due to felony conviction (Fellner and Mauer 1998). By 2002 the number was estimated at 4.7 million, most of whom are poor (Uggen and Manza 2002). Of these, 1.4 million of them have completed their sentences and yet remain unable to vote. That means a little over 2 percent of the United States' eligible voters are disenfranchised (Simson 2002, 24). It has been estimated that this marginal group of potential voters is statistically relevant to election outcomes. Seven recent senate races and the 2000 presidential election might have had different outcomes had felons and ex-felons been allowed to vote (Chambers 2001; Uggen and Manza 2002).

Even though African Americans are only 12% of the general population, Black men make up a third of the disenfranchised population. In fact, 13% of African American males cannot vote due to felony disenfranchisement (Fellner and Mauer 1998, 8; Rapoport 2001; Mauer 2002; Simson 2002, 29; Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States 2003; Behrens, Uggen, and Manza 2003). Simson notes, "In 7 states, over 25% of black men are *permanently* disenfranchised, and in Florida and Alabama, this percentage climbs to 31%, almost 1 in 3 adult black men" (Simson 2002, 29).

There have been several recent dissertations and published papers on this subject linking the practice to various topics of political theory (Ewald 2002; Pettus 2002). The most promising empirical work is Behrens, Uggen, and Manza (2003). They identify disenfranchisement policies

as a subset of racial threat theory and estimate potential electoral effects in Uggen and Manza (2002).

### Recent Findings on Electoral Engagement for Minority Youth

Based on this general literature on turnout, we should have some expectations for the turnout levels of minority youth. They are, by definition, young, more likely to be unmarried, with fewer material resources, but more likely to be in school. In the aggregate, we should expect them to vote at lower levels than older counterparts, and plagued by persistent gaps between white and non-white.

The graphs below, drawn from Lopez (2002) show the general decline in turnout for young voters over the last 30 years.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (LZW) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Despite increases in young African American voting turnout during since the mid-1980s, by 2000 turnout had returned to 1972 levels. Young Whites and African Americans are identical in voter registration levels (largely flat since 1970s) while Hispanics lag behind. Turnout, even

among those who are registered, continued to decline for all young people, across racial groups (Lopez 2002).

The 2004 Presidential Election, however, saw a substantial increase in the number young people who voted, and early evidence from Exit Polls and the Current Population Survey from the US Census indicates that this increase was felt amongst all racial and ethnic minority groups. In particular, it appears that much of this growth was driven by increases in African American Youth turnout, with 47% of African Americans aged 18-24 voting in 2004, an 11-point increase since 2000. While turnout for midterm elections is substantially lower across races, African American youth were the only racial subgroup to show gains since 1998 (Lopez 2005).

### **Non-Electoral Activity:**

There are, of course, other forms of political participation outside of a voting booth, but they are studied far less than voting. As noted earlier, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) identify several forms of “governmental” participation distinct from electoral participation (signing a petition, attending public meetings on local or school affairs, writing or otherwise contacting a congressional or senate representative, attending political rallies or speeches, making a speech, and writing articles for newspapers and magazines). Based on survey results from the National Election Studies from 1950 to 1988, they find “... racial disparities across every form of political activity in both the electoral and governmental arenas” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 43). This is unsurprising, however, as governmental participation is driven largely by resource endowments and social position. The low levels of letter writing amongst African-Americans, for example, is often entirely rational, however: “In many cases, African-Americans are outside the primary constituencies of white politicians” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 78).

Verba et al. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) report that across all of the political acts that they analyze, there is only a slight difference between African-Americans and Anglo-Whites (232). Latinos, however, lag behind, with lower levels of political activity. Where there is a pronounced difference between racial groups, however, is on affiliation with a political organization. Whites lead African-Americans and Latinos substantially on this measure. The other important difference that emerges is between two forms of political communication directed at elites. While whites are much more likely to contact an elected official (a form of private and precise communication), African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to engage in protest activity (a public but less precise form of communication). Verba et al note:

Since the two groups are quite similar in their overall levels of activity, the quite substantial difference in these two activities probably reflects the fact that African-Americans are as politically mobilized and involved as the Anglo-White portion of the population but have not received – or do not perceive themselves to have received – full acceptance. As usual, Latinos are the least active group (Verba et al. 1993, 235).

Importantly, the higher level of protest activity among African-Americans is a result of the fact that they are more likely to protest at all. If we look at all those who engage in protest, the racial differences in the amount of protest is much smaller between whites and blacks (Verba et al. 1993).

Another explanation for the higher levels of protest rests on differences in resources (time, money, and skills) available to different groups. Latinos and African-Americans are far less likely to donate money to a campaign, but are relatively more likely to donate their time to a campaign. Protest, like a donation of time, is “an activity available to those with few resources” (Verba et al. 1993, 239).

Focusing in particular on youth participation, the CDC/CIRCLE Youth Politics Survey uses a 19-point engagement index split into three types of indicators: 1) civic , 2) electoral, and 3) political voice.<sup>5</sup> The generational cohort of those 15-25 (referred to as the DotNet generation), are characterized as the most disengaged:

While the country has succeeded in transmitting the value of civic engagement to successive generations, there is strong evidence that it has failed in keeping the chain of political engagement unbroken. Over half of those ages 15-to-25 are disengaged; 15 percent are involved in electoral politics only (compared to 20% overall); 17 percent limit their activities to the civic world. Just one in-ten (11%) qualify as dual activists. (Keeter et al. 2002, 2).

While youth are less engaged electorally than older generations, they “hold their own” in terms of civic engagement compared to their older counterparts. In terms of political voice, while youth are least likely to contact officials and have the lowest exposure to traditional (newspaper, TV, radio) news media, they lead older cohorts protests, demonstrations, and marches (Keeter et al. 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The key problem, of course, is that the resources that are identified are precisely those that correspond to “traditional” political behavior. Corresponding to a narrow conception of politics is a narrow conception of what might count as a resource. It is important to expand not only what we measure as “political activity” but also the measures of what might be considered a “political resource.” This is not to say that traditional measures of political participation are not

---

<sup>5</sup> **Civic indicators:** Community problem solving; Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization; Active membership in a group or association; Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride; Other fund raising for charity. **Electoral indicators:** Regular voting, Persuading others; Displaying buttons, signs, stickers; Campaign contributions; Volunteering for candidate or political organizations. **Indicators of political voice:** Contacting officials; Contacting the print media; Contacting the broadcast media; Protesting; E-mail petitions; Written petitions; Boycotting; Buycotting; Canvassing (Keeter et al. 2002).

important. On the contrary, what are needed are additional resource/experience measures that might be related to traditional political activity. For example, if we reconsider involvement with the criminal justice system as a political resource, an experience from which political engagement and knowledge might stem, it may well have an important effect not only on non-traditional organizing and activity, but on mainstream/traditional participation as well.

An additional problem is that most of the preceding work obviously does not breakdown results by age, and very little of it deals with those under the age of 18. The obvious problems with the preceding literature on political participation are 1) that “political” is rather narrowly defined and 2) the framing historical events that dominate the literature on African American political participation occurred 40 years ago. This is not to say that the classic instruments and framings used to study political participation are not worth repeating, but rather that we should broaden our scope of political activity. Particular to the setting of minority youth are numerous and nearly pervasive interactions with the state outside of voting booths.

Works Cited:

- Behrens, A, C Uggan, and J Manza. 2003. Ballot Manipulation and the "Menace of Negro Domination": Racial Threat and Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 1850-2002. *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (3):559-605.
- Berelson, Bernard. 1954. *Voting: a study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bobo, Larry, and Gilliam. 1990. Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment. *APSR* 84:377-93.
- Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. Beyond Ses: A Resource Model of Political Participation. *American Political Science Review* 89 (2):271-294.
- Bunch, Ralph J. 1928. The Negro in Chicago Politics. *National Municipal Review* 18 (May):261-254.
- . 1941. The Negro in the Political Life of the United States. *Journal of Negro Education* 10 (July):567-84.
- Calhoun-Brown, Allison. 1996. African American Churches and Political Mobilization: The Psychological Impact of Organizational Resources. *Journal of Politics* 58 (4):935-953.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. 1976. *The American voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chambers, Audrey. 2001. Votes of Felons, Ex-Felons Would Have Changed Election Outcomes. *Institute for Policy Research News* 22:1-2.
- Cohen, Cathy J., and Michael C. Dawson. 1993. Neighborhood Poverty and African American Politics. *American Political Science Review* 87 (2):286-302.
- D'Apollito, Rosemary. 2000. The Activist Role of the Black Church: A Theoretical Analysis and an Empirical Investigation of One Contemporary Activist Black Church. *Journal of Black Studies* 31 (1):96-123.
- Dahl, Robert Alan. 1961. *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city, Yale studies in political science*. 4. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dawson, Michael C. 1994. *Behind the mule: race and class in African-American politics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Ellison, Christopher. 2003. Generations, Regional Cohorts, and Political Participation Among African American Adults. *African American Research Perspectives* 9 (1):91-116.
- Ewald, Alec C. 2002. "Civil Death": the ideological paradox of criminal disenfranchisement law in the United States. *Wisconsin Law Review* 2002 (5):1045-1138.
- Fellner, Jamie, and Marc Mauer. 1998. Losing the vote: The impact of felony disenfranchisement laws in the United States. Washington, D.C., New York: The Sentencing Project, Human Rights Watch.
- Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States. 2003. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project.
- Flanigan, William H. 1968. *Political behavior of the American electorate*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Green, Donald P., Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan hearts and minds: political parties and the social identities of voters, Yale ISPS series*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gurin, Patricia, Arthur H. Miller, and Gerald Gurin. 1980. Stratum Identification and Consciousness. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43 (1):30-47.



- Harris, Fredrick C. 1994. Something Within: Religion as a Mobilizer of African-American Political Activism. *The Journal of Politics* 56 (1):42-68.
- Jarvis, Sharon E., Lisa Montoya, and Emily Mulvoy. 2005a. The Political Participation of College Students, Working Students and Working Youth: Working Paper 37. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- . 2005b. The Political Participation of Working Youth and College Students: Working Paper 36. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- Kalogeris, Steven. 2003. Legislative Changes on Felony Disenfranchisement, 1996-2003. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project.
- Keeter, Scott, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins. 2002. The Civic And Political Health Of The Nation: A Generational Portrait: CIRCLE.
- Key, V. O. 1949. *Southern politics in state and nation*. 1st ed. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The people's choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York: Duell Sloan and Pearce.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political man: the social bases of politics*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Lopez, Mark Hugo. 2002. Civic Engagement Among Minority Youth. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- . 2005. Electoral Engagement Among Minority Youth. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- Mauer, Marc. 2002. Disenfranchisement of Felons: The Modern-Day Voting Rights Challenge. *Civil Rights Journal* Winter 2002:40-43.
- Mauer, Marc, and Sentencing Project (U.S.). 1999. *Race to incarcerate*. New York: New Press.
- McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political process and the development of Black insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McClain, Paula D., and John A. Garcia. 1993. Expanding Disciplinary Boundaries: Black, Latino, and Racial Minority Group Politics in Political Science. In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, edited by A. W. Finifter. Washington D.C.: The American Political Science Association.
- Michelson, Melissa R. 2003. Mobilizing the Latino Youth Vote: CIRCLE Working Paper 10. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- Milbrath, Lester W. 1965. *Political participation; how and why do people get involved in politics?* Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Miller, Warren E., and J. Merrill Shanks. 1996. *The new American voter*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Morris, Aldon D. 1984. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. 1962. *An American dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy*. 20th anniversary ed. New York: Harper & Row.
- Pettus, Katherine Irene. 2002. Felony Disenfranchisement in the Contemporary United States: An Ancient Practice in a Modern Polity. PhD Dissertation, Department of Political Science, Columbia University, New York.
- Rapoport, Miles S. 2001. Restoring the Vote. *The American Prospect*.
- Riker, William H., and Peter C. Ordeshook. 1968. A Theory of the Calculus of Voting. *The American Political Science Review* 62 (1):25-42.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America, Longman Classics in Political Science*. New York: Longman.

- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. Participation's Not a Paradox: The View from American Activists. *British Journal of Political Science* 25 (1):1-36.
- Shingles, Richard D. 1981. Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link. *The American Political Science Review* 75 (1):76-91.
- Simson, Elizabeth. 2002. Justice Denied: How Felony Disenfranchisement Laws Undermine American Democracy. Washington, D.C.: Americans For Democratic Action Education Fund.
- Taifa, Nkechi. 2002. Re-Enfranchisement! A guide for individual restoration of voting rights in states that permanently disenfranchise former felons. Washington, D.C.: Advancement Project.
- Tate, Katherine. 1991. Black Political Participation in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Elections. *The American Political Science Review* 85 (4):1159-1176.
- . 1994. *From protest to politics: the new Black voters in American elections*. Enl. ed. New York Cambridge, Mass.: Russell Sage Foundation; Harvard University Press.
- Uggen, Christopher, and Jeff Manza. 2002. Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States. *American Sociological Review* 67:777-803.
- Verba, Sidney, and Norman H. Nie. 1972. *Participation in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and equality: civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman H. Nie. 1993. Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States. *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (4):453-497.
- Wolfinger, Raymond E., and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Youth Labor Market and Education Indicators for the State of Illinois. 2003. Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.