

Still Waters Run Deep: The Complexities of African-American Identities and Political Attitudes

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that the conventional narrative of homogeneity in black public opinion masks variation in the attitudes individual blacks hold about their own communities, personal identities, and their sense of class-consciousness. Utilizing the 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey, our analysis shows how core American beliefs undermine racial group solidarity while experiences of racial discrimination and feelings of political marginality reinforce communal values among African Americans. We also document sharp divides among African Americans regarding preferences for national versus racial identities, individual versus communal beliefs, and social class versus racial group attachments. Our findings reveal that these divides in black opinion over the primacy of identities are conditioned by various factors, specifically the frequency of personal experiences with racial discrimination, attitudes toward racial identity, social class standing, residency in majority black neighborhoods, and financial security. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of heterogeneity in black public opinion for understanding American public opinion writ large.

Introduction

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse in its racial composition. Current census data indicates that fully one-third of the population is composed of individuals who describe themselves as non-white (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In order to accurately understand American politics, then, scholars must take stock of the political beliefs and attitudes of various racial and ethnic groups throughout the country. Black Americans in particular stand out because of their long struggle for inclusion in the American polity, sizable share of the voting public, participation in governing processes, and because of their visibility among the ranks of public elected officials (Pew Research Center Report-April 2009¹; Tate 1994; McClain and Stewart 2010; Walton and Smith 2012).² Thus scholars over the decades have devoted a great deal of attention to explaining the political opinions and behavior of this key subset of the populace.

Several empirical mainstays regarding partisan attachments, ideology, and support for racial group solidarity are part and parcel of black political life. For instance, over 85% of blacks voted for the Democratic candidate in the last four presidential elections, approximately 70% of blacks affiliate with the Democratic Party, and a majority hold liberal views on economic issues and conservative opinions on social issues (Walton 1985; Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; McClain and Stewart 2010; Walton and Smith 2012). Additionally, study after study on black public opinion has documented that a sizable number of black Americans---roughly 70%---closely see their fates linked with other blacks. From these regularities one could conclude that black political life reflects homogenous behavior. That is, most black Americans “think and act alike” when they consider issues and participate in the public sphere. But is this a realistic depiction of such a large group, a population that is diverse in terms of social class, in its beliefs about the best strategies for group progress, and

¹ Pew Research Center Report: April 30, 2009, “Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History” <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1209/racial-ethnic-voters-presidential-election>.

² The terms black and African-American are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

whose members have different experiences with success in mainstream society? We explore these questions in this analysis. It is our contention that the familiar cohesive narrative of black public opinion masks a great deal of variation in the attitudes African Americans hold about their communities, personal identities and values, as well as their sense of class consciousness.

Utilizing a rich dataset that includes measures that gauge the primacy of competing social and national identities, this analysis provides more evidence of nuance in contemporary African-American public opinion than previous studies. In contrast to the homogenous portrayal of black attitudes that appear in media discourse and academic research, our work contributes to the racial and ethnic politics literature by explaining how core American values undermine commitments to racial group solidarity while negative racial experiences—such as perceived racial discrimination and feelings of racial group marginality—reinforce support for communal values among black Americans. This study also documents sharp divides among African Americans regarding the primacy of national versus racial group identities, individualism versus communal values, and social class versus racial solidarity.

Our evidence shows that blacks' divided opinions are conditioned by personal experiences with racial discrimination, views about individual versus group strategies for black progress, social class standing, the racial makeup of neighborhoods blacks inhabit, and respondents' feelings about their own sense of financial security.³ We find that racial discrimination consistently hinders blacks from supporting the value of individualism and the primacy of American identity over racial group identity. Additionally, African Americans who do not believe there is a unique black experience are more likely to hold individualistic values and express feelings of national pride. The results also build on previous studies by showing that upper class African Americans are more likely to believe

³ This study is distinct from Chong and Kim (2006) in its focus on uncovering the determinants of traditional linked fate beliefs among blacks and explaining the primacy of national identity, American values, and perceived class solidarity over one's racial identity.

in the American creed. However, these views are tempered by blacks' awareness that social status does not completely overcome the stigma of race (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Lacy 2007). In comparison to middle class blacks, the findings reveal that poor working-class people are less likely to feel attachments to a national identity. Less affluent blacks perceive their position in the social class hierarchy as a crucial factor for determining the primary of their identity over questions of whether race or class matters in their lives. Overall, we show that social group attachments beyond race challenge or complement long-standing conceptions of the political saliency of black identities. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for understanding American public opinion.

Rethinking the Meaning of Identity in Black Public Opinion

Despite intense philosophical debates about the best strategies for racial group progress that regularly occur in black politics, research in black public opinion is dominated by the theory of linked fate, a concept that argues that blacks view their individual fortunes as tied to the well-being of blacks as a group (Miller et al. 1981; Walton 1985; Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; Allen 2001; Hutchings and Stephens 2008; McClain et al. 2009). In surveys the general question of “what happens to African Americans as a group affects my own life circumstances” has been used regularly as an instrument to gauge black solidarity. This “linked fate” perspective has been deployed as a theoretical framework to explain homogeneity in black opinion on public policy, partisanship, and voting behavior (Dawson 1994). While the framework is useful for explaining some dynamics of black opinion, the perspective overlooks important dimensions of opinion beyond questions of racial solidarity. Indeed, the so-called post-racial era that ushered in the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States provides a number of challenges for thinking about the political saliency of racial identity among African Americans.

In light of the progress made by African Americans since the 1970s, many scholars have raised questions about whether race-based concerns mirror the political interests of an entire group.⁴ One of the primary reasons for these arguments about contemporary black political behavior is the slow but steady expansion of the African-American middle and upper classes.⁵ Moreover, several studies note that many blacks frequently express frustration with the tradition of protest activism and the so-called “group-think mentality” that exemplified black political behavior in previous generations (Smith 1996; Simpson 1998; Cohen 1999; Reed 1999; Gillespie 2009). Academics, political commentators, and ordinary citizens have questioned whether a well-defined “black agenda” exists today and if the idea of a group agenda remains relevant for discussions of black issues. It is also notable that key community-based information sources--electronic and print media outlets, churches, and civic organizations that promote group solidarity (Dawson 1994; Allen 2001)--have undergone fundamental changes that reflect the growing social and economic divisions among blacks. Many of these socialization agents, including indigenous political and economic organizations, have experienced stagnating membership in recent decades.⁶

Additionally, the incorporation of black leaders into mainstream institutions that require coalition building across ideology and political parties has shifted focus away from race-specific targeted policies to universally-favored policy initiatives (Smith 1996; Tate 2010). Blacks also operate in a more tolerant social environment marked by gradual economic mobility, better housing choices, increasing educational access, and more engagement in mainstream civic life than in past decades (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan 1997; Harris, Sinclair-Chapman, and McKenzie 2006;

⁴ These gains occurred at the same time that blacks on the lower rungs of the economic ladder experienced increasing poverty and social isolation from mainstream public life (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Dawson 1994; Wilson 1980, 1987; Harris, Sinclair-Chapman, and McKenzie 2006).

⁵ The current economic crisis (2008-present) of course, has hurt blacks and set many people back financially.

⁶ See “Advancing the Cause: Are Traditional Civil Rights Organizations Poised to Address the Problems Vexing a New Generation of African Americans?” by Vern E. Smith, *The Crisis* July/August 2005, pp. 36-41.

Lacy 2007; Tate 2010; Davis 2011). Together, these forces and other sources of social difference may combine to loosen the bonds of African American identity and produce divergent political perspectives among a growing segment of the black population.

As myriad changes in the political environment unfolded in black communities throughout the nation, analysts began to focus their attention on the internal conflicts, divides, and schisms that divide black Americans. Numerous academics and public intellectuals note, for example, that social class divisions, gender and sexuality cleavages, and ideological disagreements among black elites have produced a complex political agenda with multiple rather than monolithic interests (Wilson 1980; Cohen and Dawson 1993; Hutchinson 1998; Simpson 1998; Cohen 1999; Pattilo-McCoy 1999; Reed 1999; Brown and Shaw 2002; Lacy 2007; Davis 2011). Similarly, political attitudes may differ substantially among the black population as a result of varying experiences with racial discrimination, diverse social class standings, divergent beliefs about the uniqueness of a universal black experience, variations in the sense of financial security, and by the frequency of interactions in predominantly black settings. All of these phenomena force students of black life to expand beyond their conceptualization of *the* “African-American community.” To accurately characterize this new reality in black life it is necessary to move beyond the linked fate model in order to capture the totality of black public opinion. We do so by considering the complexities of blacks’ identities and social and political attitudes by considering the saliency of blacks’ social identities beyond race.

This examination underscores the idea that a racial identity is one of many ways in which blacks define themselves in relationship to the American polity (Lacy 2007). We build upon the concept of linked fate to better understand how African Americans form their political attitudes across various domains. In situating our research in relationship to past studies on black public opinion, we note that Dawson (1994) contends that as long as blacks feel their success is determined by the groups’ destiny, there will be homogeneity in African-American opinions. What happens,

then, to the utility of linked-fate as an explanatory model as blacks steadily adopt more multiple dimensional perspectives on interpreting political affairs? For instance, findings from the 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Study show that 47% of blacks believe that African Americans should stop thinking of themselves as a group and, instead, view themselves as individuals. In a similar vein, recent polls point out that most blacks believe that blacks and whites have grown more alike in terms of their core values while the values of affluent blacks and poor blacks have become less like.⁷ And the success of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign further signals a slowly improving racial climate where it is believed that race is no longer the primary determinant of one's opportunities for success (Pew Research Center Report, January 12, 2010).⁸ For students of racial politics how do we incorporate these changes in American life into the existing dominant narrative on the homogeneity of black political attitudes, which often assumes that one "black America" exists? Evidence from our analysis demonstrates the nuances in the political beliefs of black Americans that have been missed by assumptions of homogeneity in black public opinion.

The Political Complexities of Black Identities

A seminal argument on the complex nature of black racial identity appears in DuBois' classic text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). DuBois describes the concept of "double-consciousness" as the duality that blacks feel in reconciling being both black and American. In the presence of racial inequality, African Americans, he argues, face an identity struggle where "one ever feels his twoness---an American and a Negro." Though written over a century ago, in some ways, DuBois' ideas about duality foreshadow tensions that many blacks continue to wrestle with today as they

⁷ "Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress, Prospects a Year after Obama's Election." Pew Research Center Report, January 12, 2010.

⁸ See "Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress" report. Also, Hutchings (2009) provides an assessment of whites' racial attitudes in 2008.

defined or redefine themselves as a disadvantaged racial group and as American citizens. As many scholars have demonstrated present-day black political identities and attitudes are multifaceted in nature (Simpson 1998; Dawson 2001; Brown and Shaw 2002; Harris-Lacewell 2004). The difficulties associated with holding these varied and often times competing perspectives are at the heart of this analysis. We posit that blacks often regard themselves as having multiple, politically relevant group attachments. Our study explores this phenomenon and highlights its significance for understanding public opinion.

To be sure, the thought processes that individuals engage in when considering themselves—and their group—as part of mainstream society is highly complex (Allen 2001). Blacks have exhibited a sense of group cohesiveness that developed from their unique cultural and historical circumstances in the United States (Dawson 1994; Allen 2001; McClain et al. 2009). Although it is widely accepted that blacks care about the fate of fellow blacks, this is only part of the story of how they view the political world. Some African Americans do not see race as their primary social identity. Some see themselves primarily as being an American; others consider themselves primarily as part of a social class while many may ascribe first to an identity rooted in gender, sexuality, or religion. Without a doubt, “being black” may mean different things to different individuals. So it is important to consider how non-racial identities might impact this population’s political beliefs. We discuss several key factors that may shape African Americans’ political identities and opinions that have not been directly tested in previous research.

In developing our perspective on the multidimensionality of black identities and their impact on black opinion, we first build on Feldman’s (1988) research on political attitudes. Feldman argues that core beliefs and values structure citizens’ opinions. In particular, reigning national beliefs such as individualism, equality, freedom and liberty are deemed to influence the thoughts of most Americans (de Tocqueville 1904 [1835]; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Feldman 1988; Hochschild

1995; Myrdal 1996[1944]; Huntington 2004; Kohut and Stokes 2006). These underlying principles provide a “degree of consistency and meaningfulness” to individuals’ viewpoint on an array of issues and policies (Feldman 1988). Since these sentiments are widespread in American political culture it is not surprising many—if not most blacks---would embrace this fundamental ethos. Parker (2009) for instance, discusses African Americans’ commitment to American precepts even in the face of inequities that exist in the nation. He also contends that blacks respect core American values and want to be included in the political process. Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, African American political beliefs are, in part, molded by the nation’s reigning ideas (Hochschild 1995; Parker 2009).

Individualism and self reliance rank high in the minds of most Americans (de Tocqueville 1904 [1835]; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Feldman 1988; Hochschild 1995; Myrdal 1996[1944]; Huntington 2004; Kohut and Stokes 2006). Citizens believe that adults bear responsibility for their own welfare, personal circumstances, and fate in society. Moreover, these beliefs hold that members of society should be able to make decisions and act in their own interests, rather than being influenced by others (McClosky and Zaller 1984; Huntington 2004; Kohut and Stokes 2006). As Americans, blacks are socialized into these same values. Living in a context where media, family and friends, and popular culture encourage individuals to pursue their own interests, work toward achieving the “American dream,” and reinforce the edict of “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” is bound to influence on the thinking of all Americans.

Given the hegemony of individualistic values in American society surprisingly few analysts have studied the influence of individualism on black political attitudes. Hochschild’s (1995) investigation of blacks’ views about the American dream is an exception. She notes that many blacks buy into lofty national ideas and are often disappointed if these principles are not fulfilled. By championing the rewards of personal initiative and individual effort, strong commitments to the

virtue of individualism may encourage African Americans to focus on themselves and their family rather than embrace long-held communal values that promote the welfare of the wider “black community.”

Experiences with racial discrimination, inequality, and marginalization should also affect blacks’ political attitudes. Although researchers commonly assume that racial discrimination conditions black political attitudes (Miller et al. 1981; Dawson 1994; Hochschild 1995), few studies actually test this assumption in practice (see Chong and Kim 2006).⁹ Regardless of the progress made in the area of race relations, intolerance and bigotry remain integral to the lives of most black Americans (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Schuman et al. 1997; Pew Research Center Racial Attitudes Study 2007). This reality is common across social class, from the working-class to the affluent sectors of the black population. Figures from national surveys indicate that over three quarters of African Americans report routinely experiencing racial prejudice. These experiences continue to raise doubts among many blacks about the fairness of American society (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Schuman et al. 1997; Pew Research Center Racial Attitudes Study 2009). We posit that these influences ought to weigh heavily in the minds of black Americans.

Perceptions of group power in American life also influence black attitudes. Individuals who believe that blacks lack sufficient influence, power, and political access in society might express greater levels of unity with group members. Miller et al. (1981) and Dawson (1994) regard negative racial experiences and perceived marginal status as key mechanisms for reinforcing group

⁹ Our work differs from prior research in several ways. Chong and Kim (2006) do not use conventional measures of black linked fate perceptions in their article. Moreover, we investigate the effects of individualism sentiments on black common fate beliefs. And our focus on explaining the determinants of American First, Individualism, and Own Class Commonality attitudes among blacks is novel in comparison to previous studies. Finally, Chong and Kim’s (2006) sample size for blacks (about 300) is much smaller than the 1,000 respondents we utilize in the present paper. We also note that another article, Gay (2004, 555) does not use perceptions of discrimination as an explanatory variable in the linked fate model. Level of perceived discrimination is a dependent variable in the author’s multivariate analysis.

cohesiveness. Thus, individuals who feel less powerful because of their color would be expected to identify with other African Americans.

Blacks' beliefs about the political world may also be rooted in their shared experiences and history. It is well-known that blacks have been regarded as a distinct group for most of American history (Dawson 1994; Roediger 2008; Tuck 2010). The dominant society's practice of distinguishing people of African ancestry by race has shaped the cultural and historical forces that connect blacks as a group. However, strong attachments to the national community—by viewing oneself as simply an “American”—may mitigate attachments to blacks' racial identity. We contend that individuals who do not judge African Americans' life situation as particularly exceptional in American life may exhibit less solidarity with other blacks.

Social class distinctions provide yet another basis for explaining black political attitudes. While analysts disagree on definitions and categories for social class, social standing is typically measured by income, education level, occupation, or subjective responses from interviewees (Jackman and Jackman 1983; McCall and Manza 2011).¹⁰ Some scholars contend that social position has little bearing on African Americans' attitudes compared to their racial identity (Dawson 1994). Still, we argue that a class structure exists and its hierarchical nature influences black public opinion. Economic divisions among groups have become increasingly useful for making sense of political behavior. Jackman and Jackman (1983) posit that individuals are aware of class distinctions, attach meanings to various categories, and these identities have social and political implications. For our purposes, we view more affluent blacks as being privileged compared to their counterparts in terms of the opportunities that are available to them. In this regard, upper class African Americans might

¹⁰ For African Americans, pinpointing the middle and upper economic strata is complicated due to the fragility of their class status, dependence on two incomes, overrepresentation in government jobs and low wealth levels (Landry 1987; Dawson 1994; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Pattilo-McCoy 1999; Lacy 2007).

display support for more individualistic values than other blacks since their economic success exemplifies the benefits of personal initiative and hard work. But, there is a counterview of this story about upper-middle class success. Although well-off blacks may be in a favorable financial position, subtle racial boundaries might, nonetheless, preclude them from feeling a deep sense of closeness to others in their social class (Frazier 1957; Landry 1987; Dawson 1994; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Pattilo-McCoy 1999; Lacy 2007). For prosperous individuals, we contend that racial inequalities might mitigate the development of a broad upper-class consciousness (Jackman and Jackman 1983). Additionally, we maintain that class bonds ought to be stronger among poorer working-class blacks. Working class African Americans are influenced by the demands of their station in life and thus may view themselves in class rather than racial terms (Wilson 1980; Jackman and Jackman 1983).

The places in which blacks reside should also condition their social and political attitudes. Prior research on neighborhood influences identifies several ways in which residential location has a bearing on black political attitudes. First, living in close proximity to other African Americans heightens blacks' racial identity as these blacks come to acknowledge cultural similarities and shared experiences (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Tate 1994; Gay 2004). Certainly, majority black communities vary in social and economic characteristics. For instance, black middle class neighborhoods in Atlanta, Chicago, and the Washington, D.C. area have a sizable black population, which has the effect of validating black success and accomplishments (Pattilo-McCoy 1999; Lacy 2007). Additionally, frequent exposure to the race-oriented predispositions of high status blacks increases the salience of race for African Americans (Gay 2004). Less prosperous black areas ought to promote group awareness in a different manner, as residents become conscious of their disadvantaged economic circumstances (Wilson 1987; Cohen and Dawson 1993; Massey and Denton 1993). Here, individual perceptions may matter more in gauging the impact of

neighborhood racial composition on political attitudes than examining the contextual effects from objective data. A consistent theme from past studies is that black neighborhoods connect individuals to the larger group. These insights are incorporated into our analysis.

In addition to our distinct theoretical focus on exploring heterogeneity in African-American political opinions, this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we employ unique survey data that was gathered during the historic 2008 presidential election season when an African American ran for president and received the nomination of the Democratic Party. We analyze the 2008 Center on African-American Politics and Society/ABC News Black Politics Survey, which include measures that allow us to explore the primacy of various social identities on black political attitudes. The survey contains a large sample of African-Americans and includes some innovative questions about black political identities and attitudes, along with traditional political and demographic measures. Moreover, our work examines several new sources of variation in blacks' perceptions of group unity that have received little empirical or theoretical attention in previous studies.

The approach we take provides a more nuanced understanding of the influence of race and class on black political attitudes. In contrast to the accepted view that race is more salient than class for structuring black public opinion (Dawson 1994), we maintain that the political effects of social class are more complex than has been presented in previous studies on black public opinion. As we demonstrate in this study, variation in perceived social standing among blacks influences whether they feel a greater common bond along racial or class lines. While the unfulfilled expectations of upper-class standing may result in well-off blacks highlighting racial group concerns (Dawson 1994; Hochschild 1995; Gay 2004), chronic economic hardship raises questions about whether class consciousness is more likely to be associated with less-affluent blacks than other blacks (Wilson 1980, 1987; Jackman and Jackman 1983). We now turn to what our expectations are for

considering additional factors that shape black linked-fate and for the impact of individualism, social class, and national identity on black political attitudes.

Explaining Heterogeneity in Black Public Opinions

Our assumptions about heterogeneity in black public opinion are built from several premises. First, there is meaningful variation in blacks' opinions about group identities and political attitudes. Second, individual blacks differ in their commitment to core American beliefs and their level of class-consciousness. Third, prevailing values in American life regarding individualism detract support from group-oriented politics that are anchored in social identities. And finally, experiences with discrimination, perceptions about the uniqueness of one's social group, and individuals' position in the economic social order can shape citizens' public opinions. Based on the arguments above, we formulate the following propositions regarding expectations about linked fate:

Hypothesis 1: Strong adherence to core American beliefs about individualism limits support for linked fate.

Hypothesis 2: Blacks who perceive higher levels of discrimination and political marginality exhibit greater support for linked fate.

We also make several specific claims about African Americans' social identities and political attitudes:

Hypothesis 3: Frequent experiences with racial discrimination lead to less support for American national identity and individualism and less preference for class identity over racial identity.

Hypothesis 4: Blacks who do not regard blacks as a unique group in American life are more likely to express strong support for mainstream American beliefs and principles.

Hypothesis 5: Upper-class blacks support mainstream American beliefs but understand the personal limitations of their race, a reality that makes them more likely to identify by their race rather than to feel a bond with upper class Americans or any race.

Hypothesis 6: Members of the working class are likely to express a preference for primarily identifying with their own economic stratum than with blacks.

Data and Measures

The 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey is a telephone survey that primarily focuses on the political opinions and behavior of African Americans. ICR/International Communications Research conducted the survey from September 11–14, 2008 among a nationally representative sample of 1,941 adults age 18 or older, including an oversample of African Americans, for a total of 1,032 black respondents, and an oversample of Hispanics, for a total of 315 Hispanic respondents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/- 2% at the 95% confidence level. We utilize the 1,032 black respondents for our analysis of African-American political attitudes. This large black sample is comparable in size to the 1984-88 NBES, the 1993-94 NBPS, and the 1996 NBES. Moreover, the 2008 CAAPS/ABC News data includes almost twice as many African-American respondents as the 2008 ANES. A detailed description of these data appears in Appendix A.

The instrument is especially well-suited for our examination because it contains a traditional group cohesion item and several innovative questions regarding African Americans' political identities and attitudes. These data also includes items about respondents' experiences with racial discrimination, assessments of how much influence different racial and ethnic groups have in society, their class standing, socioeconomic status, and demographic information.

Our study utilizes three measures to estimate the primacy of social identities in black opinion.¹¹ The first item asks "In your own personal identity do you think of yourself as black first, as an American first, or what?" Respondents who reported "American first" are coded one, others are labeled zero. Our measure to gauge the primacy of individualism over the group solidarity is based on whether black respondents agreed with the following statement, "Blacks should stop thinking of themselves as a group and think more of themselves as individuals." Respondents who

¹¹ Ideally, we would prefer to have multiple survey items that gauge each of these constructs. Unfortunately, the data do not permit this type of analysis.

agree with the statement are coded one; all other responses are coded as zero. Our measure on the primacy of social class over race is derived from the following question, “Do you feel you have more in common with other ([RESPONDENT’S CLASS] people, no matter what their race), or more in common with other blacks, no matter what their social class?” Respondents who expressed feeling closer to their self-described social class are coded one while other responses are coded zero. And we estimate feelings of linked-fate using the standard measure in the literature (Dawson 1994): “Do you think what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” African Americans who agree with this statement are coded one; the remaining responses are coded zero.

To unpack the political significance of class we must recognize that citizens often express opinions and behave in accordance with how they see themselves (Jackman and Jackman 1983). In addition to objective income and education measures, we utilize self-described assessments of social class position. The respondents were asked the following, “Thinking about your income, education and lifestyle, would you describe yourself as working class, middle class, or more in the upper range?” Our data show that 41% of blacks describe themselves as working class, 49% identify as middle class, and (7%) place themselves in the “upper range” category.¹²

Additionally, a full description of the independent variables in our models is provided in Appendix B. We now carefully examine the data in light of our contentions about black political attitudes.

Analysis

¹² By comparison, the 2008 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement provide occupational category data for blacks. These figures show that 22.4% are in construction, maintenance, materials moving jobs, 25.8% work in sales or office administration, another 24.8% are in service occupations, and 27% are employed in management and professional fields.

Let us first consider how African Americans generally see their fate with other blacks. For the most part, blacks do seemingly see themselves through a collective prism. The data reveals that two-thirds of all blacks (66%) view their personal life chances as connected with other blacks. These results comport with previous findings on the question of linked-fate in black public opinion (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; McClain and Stewart 2010). They support the conventional wisdom about the strength of racial solidarity among blacks. However, looking beyond linked-fate explanations of black opinion, the story of black political attitudes becomes more complicated.

Figure 1 displays summary statistics for three of our key attitudinal measures. As we see these measures uncover division rather than consensus on several items measuring the primacy of racial identity among blacks. African Americans are evenly split in their viewpoints about the primacy of national versus racial identity. Half the respondents express a deep sense of nationalism and American pride, declaring that they consider themselves, first and foremost, to be Americans. The other half of respondents reports thinking of themselves primarily as black. This partitioning reflects the varied ways in which blacks relate to the nation and their race.

The other measures similarly demonstrate division in black opinion. In terms of core values such as individualism, a large number of respondents (47%) agreed that blacks should stop thinking of themselves as a group but as individuals. Clearly, this division demonstrates that nearly half of the black population places greater weight on individualism than communal values. We see similar divisions when considering the primacy of social class solidarity over racial identity.

A majority of African Americans (56%) feel they have more in common with members of their social class than with other blacks. As economic inequality hardens and economic mobility increases for many blacks, it appears that class differences are beginning to play a more prominent role in the political views of black Americans.

It is important to note that the data we examine were collected in fall 2008, a month or so before the general election contest featuring Barack Obama and John McCain. One would expect in this election (the possibility of electing the nation's first black president) would be marked by heightened levels of racial solidarity, displacing other potentially political salient identities. Instead, African Americans reported support for a mix of group alliances. The measures, overall, show the multiple attitudes that African Americans hold on perceptions about racial group solidarity and potentially competing identities beyond race that may offer explanations about black political attitudes. These opinions, in part, may reflect the diversity of personal identities, social experiences, political beliefs, and class identities found within black communities.

[Figure one about here]

We more rigorously estimate a revised model of linked fate and assess the primacy of values and social identities utilizing a series of multivariate regression models in the next section (Tables 1 and 3).¹³ The results that appear below highlight the key independent variables that are important to the questions we are pursuing in this analysis. These figures are complemented with predicted probability values (Tables 2 and 4a-c) to provide the reader with a sense of the magnitude and substantive influence of each predictor on black opinions.¹⁴

Again, one of the primary objectives of this analysis is to re-evaluate the concept of linked fate in African-American communities to consider the impact of perceived racial discrimination and the import of strong individualistic beliefs. Because group solidarity has received considerable attention in previous work on black public opinion (Miller et al. 1981; Walton 1985; Dawson 1994; Tate 1994), we consider other measures that may inhibit or facilitate solidarity among blacks. Recall

¹³ We conducted several diagnostic tests which show that multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity are not major problems for the analysis.

¹⁴ Typical characteristics for these simulations are the mean values for continuous variables and the modal category for dichotomous and ordinal measures. Each value had to be present in the data.

that our linked fate dependent variable is binary. We therefore estimate a probit model for this analysis.¹⁵ Table 1 demonstrates that individualism—as measured by an expressed view that blacks should think of themselves as individuals rather than as a group—is associated with less support for racial linked fate, controlling for other factors in the model. To put our findings in more concrete terms, Table 2 illustrates that a typical individualist is less likely (by a probability value of 0.07) to report that blacks share a common fate. Unlike previous studies that emphasize the cohesiveness of racial minorities, our model suggest that the conventional narrative of group homogeneity in the political behavior of blacks appears to be undermined by strong adherence to mainstream beliefs about the virtue of individualism. The high prevalence of individualistic attitudes among African Americans—at 47%— points to the need for research on black public opinion that considers the impact of individualist views on racial group identity.

[Tables one and two about here]

Another correlate of linked fate in our model is the frequency within which individual blacks encounter racial discrimination. Although this factor is often neglected in empirical models of black opinions (for an exception see Chong and Kim 2006), the literature suggests that its impact should be considerable when analyzing linked fate (Dawson 1994). Our results confirm that blacks that frequently suffer incidences of discrimination report feeling a close connection with other blacks. Consider, for example, that a person who says she never faces discrimination has a substantially lower probability (0.48) of identifying with blacks than her counterpart who often encounters racial injustices (probability value 0.77). It appears that facing unequal treatment reinforces blacks' commitment to racial group solidarity. In those instances, blacks feel they are being judged as members of a minority group rather than as individuals. Similarly, blacks who believe that blacks as a group have too little influence over government affairs are much more likely to believe in the

¹⁵ We also analyzed several models using an ideology item and contextual measures for the racial and income composition of respondents' immediate neighborhood surroundings. None of these variables are significant.

communal values of racial solidarity (probability of 0.69) than those who believe that blacks have too much influence (probability 0.46). This result is not surprising since feelings of political marginalization often produce strong group identities among disadvantaged people (Miller et al. 1981; Walton 1985).

African-American opinions, of course, extend beyond group solidarity to other aspects of public life. Table 3 displays the results that estimate the primacy of a strictly American identity, individualism, and class solidarity over racial identity. We use each of these dichotomous measures as dependent variables in the next set of probit models.¹⁶ For the sake of clarity, we discuss the findings from each model separately. Later, we comprehensively summarize the general patterns that we detect from the analysis.

[Tables three and four a-c about here]

In explaining blacks' devotion to American identities and values, several factors are noteworthy. Blacks that report experience with racial discrimination are less likely to express a preference for being American first than blacks that experience less racial discrimination in their personal lives. Routinely encountering discrimination, we believe, contributes to political alienation, leading to feelings of detachment to the nation. An individual who says he is frequently the target of injustice has a reduced likelihood (by 0.16) of indentifying first as an American, compared to another black that never encounters racial discrimination. However, those blacks believing that blacks collectively do not represent a distinct group in the United States readily report they are Americans, first and foremost. This higher propensity amounts to a boosts of 0.09 in probability terms. Individuals who do not think of themselves as belonging to a stigmatized group would naturally subscribe to a more generalized American identity. Shifting to class influences, we note that poor working class blacks are less likely to classify themselves (by a probability value of 0.07) as

¹⁶ We also conducted this analysis with controls for income and ideology. Both variables are insignificant.

“American first” than middle class blacks. Similarly, blacks that report residing in mostly black locales are also less likely to hold an American identity over a black identity. It is likely that blacks that identify as working class face economic and social hardships that erode their loyalty to a strictly American identity. And blacks that reside in the same location with other African Americans are less likely to refer to themselves as primarily Americans. It is probable that their residential surroundings heighten their sense of racial identity. Finally, those who are prospering economically view themselves as Americans first, showing a preference for national identity over racial identity.

Now we look at how various factors determining blacks’ preference for individualism over the collectivism of racial group solidarity. From the individualism model we observe that upper-class African Americans are more likely (probability value 0.12) to express individualistic views than their middle class counterparts.

Since this affluent sector has achieved economic success, they are more likely to believe that economic success is possible by personal efforts rather than by collective endeavors. Indeed, previous research supports this view. Hochschild (1995) reports that high status blacks say they feel a degree of control over their lives than other blacks. We ought to keep in mind, however, that the results also indicate that racial discrimination dampens support for the view that blacks should think of themselves as individuals (probability value 0.21). So while blacks that enjoy upper-class standing believe in the virtues of individualism, this phenomenon is tempered by the reality that the frequency of encounters with discrimination generally negates blacks’ acceptance of individualism (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Lacy 2007). Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that those who do not believe blacks compose a distinct group report greater levels of adherence to individualism (probability value 0.17). This finding is not surprising since those blacks that do not highlight racial differences among Americans would be likely to accept more universal tenets of American political beliefs about individualism.

Our third model considers the determinants of blacks' connectedness to individuals of comparable economic means. The data indicates that working-class blacks are more likely (by a probability value of 0.13) to believe they share similarities with other working-class Americans, regardless of their racial background. This finding fits with prior studies of African-American attitudes (Jackman and Jackman 1983). The class commonality recognition we document here complements the idea that lower socioeconomic status is viewed as part of a general lower standing in society. Yet blacks' views about class commonality vary across the sample as well. Upper-class African Americans think about their social status differently than other affluent Americans. Even with their material success, it appears that the most affluent blacks are less likely (by a probability value of 0.13) to believe they share the same benefits of class standing as their counterparts in American society (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995). Antidotes from the experiences of well-off African Americans about daily dealings with prejudice confirm these findings (Cose 1993). Finally, we note that individuals who perceive high levels of discrimination less often (by a probability value of 0.10) are less likely to report a preference for having a connection with someone of their social class than those in their racial group. Overall, the multivariate analyses provide compelling support for our arguments about influences on African-American political opinions.

Discussion and Conclusions

Students of American politics frequently think of blacks as articulating like opinions about the political world. Yet, these commonplace ideas have not kept pace with the evolving social and economic landscape or changes in the way African Americans perceive themselves in society. We offer an alternative to the familiar one-dimensional portrait of black political attitudes that appears in popular discourse and academic writings. Our work argues that the current focus on consensus

opinions ignores a crucial issue: black viewpoints are split on a number of important perspectives. Despite the conventional wisdom about similarities among blacks, a closer examination of African-American attitudes reveals substantial variation in individuals' political beliefs. In fact, the idea that homogenous sentiments exist across multiple domains is, in some sense, a myth. There is a colloquial phrase "still waters run deep" that conveys the essence of our argument. Although the public expression of black public opinion appears uniform on the surface, this visible serenity tells us little about the diverse undercurrents of opinion beneath the façade at lower depths.

At present, differences in black political attitudes reflect a confluence of core American values, diverse class status origins, and social experiences. Even though a majority of African Americans may express an outward connection with their group, beyond this basic cohesiveness, individuals are sharply divided on their views about national versus racial identity, attachments to their social class, and commitment to core American values. What is more, even the illusion of black solidarity is challenged by the fact that blacks who hold individualistic beliefs place less importance on the well-being of the group as a whole. This new source of disparity deserves greater attention as we re-orient our understanding of black politics in the present era. Our findings suggest that a unified "black America" may be slowly eroding as this population progresses socially, economically, and politically. In particular, other social identities besides race may increasingly determine how blacks view themselves politically in the near future.

The results also speak to the race versus class debate in the study of American political behavior. To be sure, our research shows that perceived discrimination and feelings of marginality influence blacks' preference of some identities over others. But this simplistic account is incomplete in some respects. Individuals who do not view the African-American experience as unique are more likely to see themselves as Americans first and subscribe to general national values. So, racial group-perspectives are not the only factor at work in the opinion formation process. At the same time, we

find evidence for what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the “fracturing” of black identity along class lines.¹⁷ As anticipated, class-based differences among blacks undergird political attitudes in two distinct ways. Upper-class blacks show signs of holding individualistic values while the working-class report they have more in common with members of their economic stratum. Together, these insights suggest that solidarity alone may not be the key mechanism for understanding minority politics.

These findings have several implications for research in American and racial group politics. First, analysts may need to develop more nuanced survey questions (or adapt other methodologies) that measure black group cohesion. It seems that a lot of the variation in black political attitudes lies beyond the reach of standard items about group identification. One of the strengths of this study is that it provides examples of questions that may elicit a more disparate range of African-American opinions about politics. In addition, academic thinking about the post-civil rights era for black communities ought to be amended to reflect opinion differences that abound in today’s society. These adjustments would provide a more accurate interpretation of black public opinion.

We should point out that the presence of competing identities among blacks is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, DuBois (1903) long ago foreshadowed some of the enduring concerns associated with multiple states of consciousness among African Americans. Ultimately, he believed the paradox of America’s adherence to principles of equality, while concomitantly sanctioning racial stratification, was partly responsible for the “split personalities” that blacks exhibit. Given this reality, he posits that blacks desire that neither of their “selves” be lost in the course of functioning in the larger society. Instead, individuals seek to merge their double self into one truer and better self. DuBois further notes that ideally people would like to consider themselves to be both black and American without being treated negatively by society. This strikes us as an important

¹⁷ Gates made this statement in a PBS documentary entitled “America Beyond the Color Line” (2003).

conundrum that blacks continue to face today in what has been called a “post-racial” political climate. Thus, the process by which African Americans and other minorities reconcile their racial/ethnic identity with other group attachments remains a vital topic for scholarly inquiry.

Lastly, intra-group distinctions among minorities are but one source of variation for citizens’ political beliefs. Interestingly, recent sociological studies suggest that diverse social and political views even exist within different types of black middle class communities (Lacy 2007). So it is entirely possible that within-class distinctions may add another layer to the already intricate account of diverse black opinions that we present in this paper. To date, few researchers have examined the potential political implications of this complex state of affairs. It would be interesting to see if these emerging, racial and class distinctions further complicate our understanding of American politics. Undoubtedly, we have only scratched the surface of this topic. A more multidimensional perspective on black attitudes promises to yield additional insight as more individuals remain economically stuck at the bottom or slip into the ranks of the working poor while others join the ranks of the middle and upper classes.

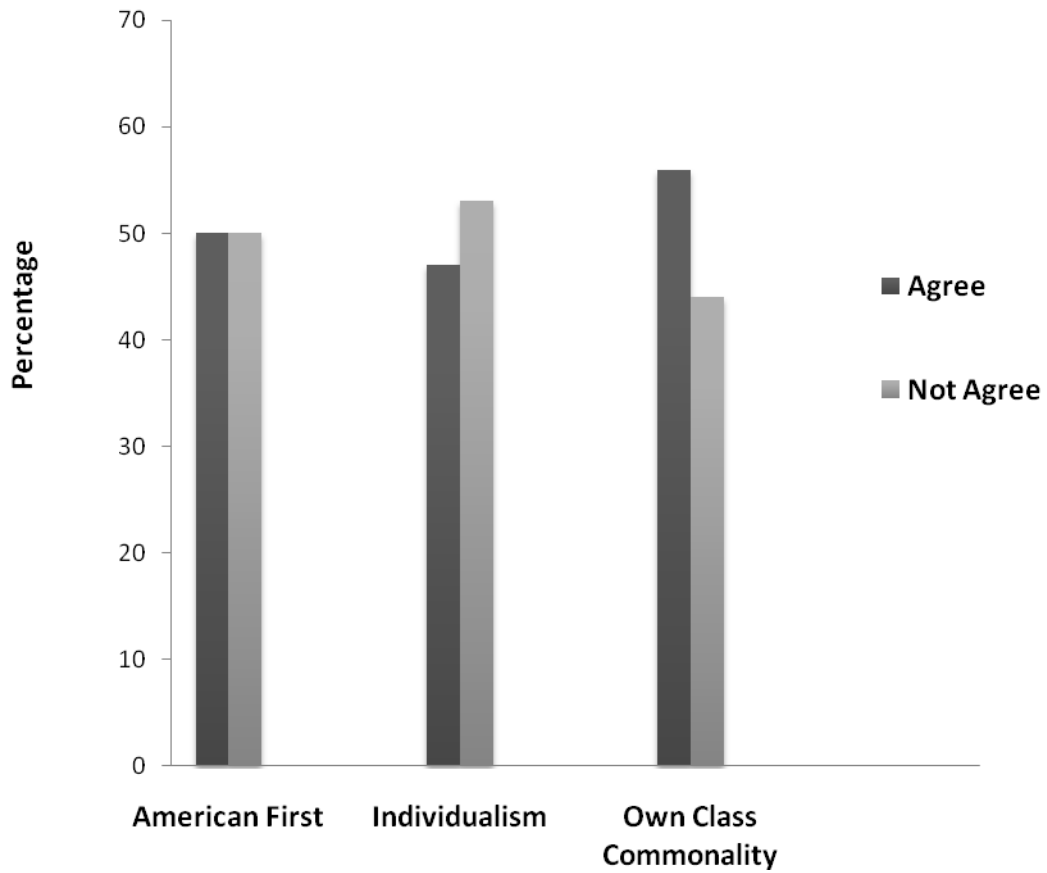
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Figure 1. Divides in African-American Opinions



Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey

Table 1. Probit Model-Influences on African Americans Linked Fate Belief

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
American First	-0.04	0.09
Individualism	-0.17**	0.09
Experienced Discrimination	0.27***	0.04
Blacks-Little Influence	0.15***	0.04
Own Class Commonality	-0.02	0.09
Unemployed	0.46**	0.19
Education	0.11***	0.04
Family Income	-0.03	0.02
Church Attendee	0.04	0.03
Urbanicity	-0.00	0.03
South	-0.15	0.09
Age	0.00	0.00
Female	-0.15	0.09
Perceive Black Interviewer	0.20**	0.09
Constant	-0.93***	0.32
N=	1,000	
Wald chi2(14)	108.13	
Prob>chi2	0.00	

Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey. Note: Entries are probit coefficients and robust standard errors. **p < 0.05, ***p < .01

Table 2. Predicted Probabilities of Linked Fate Belief among African Americans

Independent Variables	Low Value	High Value	Difference
Individualism	0.69	0.62	0.07
Experienced Discrimination	0.48	0.77	0.29
Blacks Have Little Influence	0.46	0.69	0.23

Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey. Notes: Based on multivariate Probit Model-Influences on African Americans Linked Fate Belief. See Table 1.

Table 3. Probit Models-Influences on African-American Identities and Political Attitudes

Variable	American First	Individualism	Own Class Commonality
Discrimination	-0.13 *** (0.04)	-0.18*** (0.04)	-0.08** (0.04)
No Black Experience	0.22** (0.11)	0.46*** (0.11)	0.19 (0.11)
Upper Class	-0.25 (0.17)	0.32** (0.16)	-0.34** (0.17)
Working Class	-0.18** (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)	0.33*** (0.09)
Community Mostly Black	-0.20** (0.09)	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.12 (0.09)
Financial Security	0.12** (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Education	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)
South	0.11 (0.08)	0.24*** (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Female	-0.31*** (0.08)	0.04 (0.08)	0.04 (0.08)
Perceive Black Interviewer	-0.21** (0.08)	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.15 (0.08)
Constant	-0.26	0.31	-0.20
N=	1,002	1,002	1,002
Wald chi2(11)	83.92	92.44	38.79
Prob>chi2	0.00	0.00	0.00

Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey. Note: Entries are probit coefficients and robust standard errors. **p < 0.05, ***p < .01

Table 4a. Predicted Probabilities of American First Belief among African Americans

Independent Variables	Low Value	High Value	Difference
Experienced Discrimination	0.65	0.49	0.16
No Black Experience	0.54	0.63	0.09
Working Class	0.54	0.47	0.07
Community Mostly Black	0.54	0.47	0.07

Table 4b. Predicted Probabilities of Individualism among African Americans

Independent Variables	Low Value	High Value	Difference
Experienced Discrimination	0.66	0.45	0.21
No Black Experience	0.52	0.69	0.17
Upper Class	0.52	0.64	0.12

Table 4c. Predicted Probabilities of Own Class Commonality among African Americans

Independent Variables	Low Value	High Value	Difference
Experienced Discrimination	0.62	0.52	0.10
Upper Class	0.55	0.42	0.13
Working Class	0.55	0.68	0.13

Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey. Notes: Based on multivariate Probit Models-Influences on African-American Identities and Political Attitudes. See Table 3.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for all Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Linked Fate	1032	0.66	0.47	0	1
American First	1032	0.50	0.50	0	1
Individualism	1032	0.47	0.50	0	1
Own Class Commonality	1032	0.56	0.50	0	1
Experienced Discrimination	1032	1.68	1.04	0	3
Blacks-Little Influence	1025	4.22	1.04	1	5
No Black Experience	1032	0.18	0.38	0	1
Upper Class	1032	0.07	0.25	0	1
Working Class	1032	0.41	0.49	0	1
Community Mostly Black	1032	0.29	0.45	0	1
Financial Security	1016	1.63	0.91	0	3
Education Level	1024	3.93	1.26	1	6
Family Income	1032	3.87	2.56	1	10
Unemployed	1032	0.06	0.23	0	1
Church Attendee	1018	2.65	1.36	0	4
South	1032	0.56	0.50	0	1
Age	1016	52.56	15.87	18	90
Female	1032	0.55	0.50	0	1
Urbanicity	1032	3.74	1.54	1	5
Perceive Black Interviewer	1032	0.50	0.50	0	1

Source: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey

Appendix A: Details of the 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey

This survey is a joint project between Columbia University's Center on African-American Politics and Society (CAAPS) and the ABC News Surveying Unit. It is conducted in association with USA Today. All interviews were conducted using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The CATI system ensured that questions followed logical skip patterns and that the listed attributes automatically rotated, eliminating "question position" bias. A random-digit dial (RDD) sample was used in this study to achieve a nationally representative cross-section of respondents. This sample was first dialed during the day to remove as many non-residence numbers as possible.

In order to interview more African American and Hispanic respondents, prescreened sample was drawn from ICR's national omnibus survey, *EXCEL*. As well, a subset of numbers that had been previously dialed in *EXCEL* and were found to reach households that only spoke Spanish were dialed back to ensure some Spanish-speaking Hispanics in the sample. Finally, for comparative purposes, a two-frame disproportionate RDD frame was developed. The "high" strata included telephone exchanges in which the incidence of reaching an African American household was at least 30 percent and was 52 percent on average. The "low" strata included telephone exchanges in which the incidence of reaching an African American household was less than 30 percent and on average 7.6 percent. Though 38.6 percent of African Americans reside in the high strata, 62 percent of the interviews were gathered there to save survey costs. The design effect of this disproportionality is 1.28.

The data was first pre-weighted within the African American strata to account for the disproportionality of the sampling design. Then, African Americans were separated from the rest of the sample and weighted to 2008 CPS population counts on education, gender, age, and region. A similar procedure was then done for Hispanics and the remaining sample. The three files were then put together proportionate to their overall populations.

The response rate for the general population portion of this study was calculated to be 10.3% using AAPOR's RR3 formula. The response rate for the AA prescreened was 28.3%, for the Hispanic prescreened 18.3%, for the AA High strata 23.4%, for the AA Low strata 12.5%, and for the total it was calculated to be 17.1%.

Appendix B: 2008 CAAPS/ABC News Black Politics Survey-Questions and Response Categories

Discrimination: “Have you personally ever felt that you were being discriminated against because of your race?” Answers are coded on a four point ordinal scale from 0(no, never happened) to 3(yes, often).

Blacks Little Influence Over Policy: “Compared with other groups in this country, do you think blacks at this time have too (little) influence over government policies, too (much) influence or about the right amount? Answers are coded on a five point ordinal scale ranging from 1(too much, big concern), 3(about the right amount), through 5(too little, big concern).

No Black Experience Measure: “Do you think there is such a thing as a black experience in America, or do you think the experiences of blacks are individual enough that there’s no general black experience? “No general black experience” responses are coded one, others are coded zero.

Subjective Social Class Measure: “Thinking about your income, education and lifestyle, would you describe yourself as working class, middle class, or more in the upper range?” Two separate dummy variables were created for upper class and working class individuals. Middle class respondents are the comparison group.

Personal Financial Security: How financially secure do you feel? Responses are coded on a four point ordinal scale from 0(very insecure) to 3 (very secure).

Socioeconomic and Demographic Variables: Education level is coded in ordinal categories from 1(8th grade or less) to 6 (post-graduate work). The household income item is a ten point ordinal variable ranging from 1(under \$20K) to 10(\$250K). Individuals who are laid off or unemployed are coded one, others are coded zero. The racial composition of one’s community comes from personal reports that ask, “Would you describe the community where you live as mostly black, mostly white, mostly Hispanic, mostly Asian, or mixed? Most black areas are labeled one, others are coded zero. Southerners are coded one and non-southerners are labeled with zeros. Age is coded in years from 18 to 97. Women are coded one, men are coded zero. The church attendance measure, “Aside from weddings and funerals, how often if ever do you attend religious services?” is coded from 0 (never) to 4 (at least once a week). The urbanicity of the respondent’s residence is coded on a five point ordinal scale from 1(rural-non-metro area) to 5 (urban-center city metro area).

Race of Interviewer Control: Respondents who believe that the telephone interviewer was black or African-American are coded one, other responses are coded zero.