

MOBILIZING GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS: SOME CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH
ETHNICITY HAS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

Mobilization to political participation by group membership – particularly as a function of race and ethnicity – has often been assumed in studies of mass behavior. The links from ethnicity to group consciousness, and from consciousness to political activity, however, remain empirically tenuous and theoretically underspecified. Contrary to prevailing expectations, being Asian or Latino or Black does not systematically predict either the presence of an ethnic group consciousness or the prevalence of a higher degree of political awareness and participation. Nevertheless, racial minority status has been utilized successfully by some groups to mobilize mass behavior precisely because group membership invites an intuitive appeal to action. Under what circumstances does ethnicity have political consequences? Why is ethnic mobilization successful in some situations and for some groups? My paper addresses these questions by scrutinizing the assumptions, inferential claims, and normative positions inherent in the expectation that a shared sense of identity based on racial and/or ethnic identity will have political consequences. In so doing, I suggest ways to discern a racial consciousness with political kick.

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1 Introduction

On any weekend between early spring and late fall in New York City, one can witness a celebration of identity marching up Fifth or Madison Avenues. “Kiss Me I’m Irish” buttons mark the beginning of the season of the mass display of group identification at the most venerable of parades on St. Patrick’s Day. Italians, another of the earlier immigrant groups to New York, hold two large public celebrations, the Columbus Day parade up Fifth Avenue and a stationary festival in Little Italy at the Feast of St. Anthony. Newer immigrant groups have followed suit with their own commemorations, including Puerto Rican Day – the largest of the Latino celebrations with tens of thousands of marchers and spectators – the Cuban Day parade, the Dominican Day parade, and the Celebration of Caribbean Culture. Asian immigrant groups publicly mark their ethnic identities with the Chinese New Year celebration in lower Manhattan, Philippine Independence Day Parade and Festival, Korean Day, Pakistani-American Independence Day, and the India Day Parade among them. There is no pan-Asian parade, and while a Hispanic Day Parade was held several years ago, pan-Latino celebrations have occurred sporadically since then.

While New York City is unique in many ways, similar organized displays of national, ethnic and racial identity are enacted in communities across the United States. The group compositions and labels vary, but the imperative of publicly claiming identities remains the same (as does the motivation for attendance by local politicians hoping to win votes in the next election). New patterns of international migration to the United States, overwhelmingly from sending countries in Latin America and Asia, foreshadow the development of a democratic politics organized around a new racial pluralism. Political theorists have taken up anew the question of how “identity politics” will influence the conduct of contemporary government.¹ The expectation that a demographic shift toward diversity will have political consequences has multiple origins. Perhaps most compelling is the intuitive appeal of the notion that people with shared ethnic and/or racial backgrounds will naturally join together. Public celebrations of ethnic identity and the successful collective action strategies of African Americans during the Civil Rights movement are but two examples of the palpable appeal of racial identity in inviting group mobilization. Equally compelling is a normative premise linking citizen participation with political equality; more voice, particularly among those traditionally disadvantaged, will lead to more favorable political outcomes that enhance equality.² The presence of a critical mass of racial minorities signals the possibility that disadvantaged groups can better mobilize individuals and increase their input in democratic politics. Foregrounded in this way, it seems reasonable to hope and expect that a shared sense of racial and/or ethnic identity will have political consequences and predict, among other things, higher levels of political participation among those who are so identified.

But does it? Research in sociology and political science examining African American political behavior during the 1960s and 1970s offers strong evidence of the significance of Black consciousness for political activity.³ In one of the earliest and most influential empirical studies of Black consciousness, Verba and Nie (1972) found racial identification to be so powerful as to

¹ See, e.g., Gutmann’s *Identity in Democracy* (2003), Benhabib’s *The Claims of Culture*, and Hochschild’s recent work (2002, 2003a, 2003b). To the extent that minority group status and social class are correlated, the demographic shift also hints at the possibility of a renewal of class-based politics.

² See Verba 2003; and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995.

³ Verba and Nie 1972; Olsen 1970; Danigelis 1978; Shingles 1981; Miller et. al. 1981.

overcome significant deficits in socioeconomic resources; the effects potent enough to unseat formal education, the mightiest of all explanatory variables for political activity. Now that is news. The inability to consistently replicate the finding of the importance of race-based consciousness in studies of political behavior in subsequent decades was less newsworthy. Non-findings, particularly ones that go against our normative predispositions, get less attention. In their recent analysis of group consciousness, Chong and Rogers (2002) remind us of the inconsistency between expectation and empirical evidence. They note that the link between group consciousness and increased activity among Blacks is the anomalous finding, replicated neither among African Americans today nor members of other racial and/or ethnic groups. There is only sporadic evidence that Blacks, Latinos and Asians have racial/ethnic identities with political kick.⁴ They write, “[s]everal of the authors are puzzled by this result. The assumption is that group consciousness ought to have the same positive impact on political engagement and participation among these minority groups as it had in earlier studies of African Americans.” (Chong and Rogers 2002, p. 11) Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of successful mobilizations of group consciousness to achieve political ends. Just because researchers fail to find it – particularly when looking in data from the large sample survey – does not necessarily mean the phenomenon does not exist. In addition to African Americans, organized groups of women, gays, Latinos and Asians have all successfully organized around identities. The women’s movement, gay pride, and the development of pan-Latino and Asian coalitions united in opposition to California ballot propositions provide compelling testimony for the possibility of collective action mobilized by identity and consciousness.

The mismatch in expectations and empirical findings leaves us in a curious position. Does ethnic and/or racial identity have political consequences? The answer is an equivocal “sometimes.” The recent swell of interest in new immigrant populations and their influence on U.S. politics presents an unusual opportunity to build on previous scholarship on racial group consciousness and provide a more unequivocal answer about the circumstances under which it has political kick. My purpose here is to carefully scrutinize four of the assumptions, inferential claims, and normative positions inherent in the reasonable expectation that animates much of the current research on immigrant America in political science: “a shared sense of identity based on racial and/or ethnic identity will have political consequences and predict, among other things, higher levels of political participation among those who are so identified.” By my count, there are at least four analytically distinct arguments embedded in this expectation:

1. race and ethnicity are meaningful and discernible categories
2. group membership and identity are related, and go together with consciousness
3. consciousness leads to participation
4. participation is good for people in groups categorized by race and ethnicity.

⁴ See, e.g., Beltran 2001; Lien 2001, 1994; Leighley and Vedlitz 2000; Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989. Further, and with the exception of results reported in the Miller et. al. study of group consciousness from American National Election Study data from 1972 and 1976, there is little systematic data supporting the expectation that group consciousness will develop around other major social cleavages such as class and gender. The absence of class consciousness in the United States has been the subject of much speculation regarding the nation’s “exceptionalism.” Similarly, data supporting the notion that a gender or feminist consciousness among women would encourage more participation are also scarce. See e.g., Tolleson Rinehart 1992; Conover and Sapiro 1993; Sapiro and Conover 2001; Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Sapiro 1990; Conover 1984; Gurin 1984. However, see Jenkins 2003, for an analysis revealing a significant relationship between an affective dimension of feminist consciousness and electoral activity with an expanded set of consciousness measures from a 1991 NES pilot study.

Clarifying and scrutinizing these analytical starting points helps to reveal how we might develop strategies to investigate the circumstances under which racial consciousness mobilizes individual political action. I begin by highlighting the complexity of classifying by race and/or ethnicity. While there is a simple and perhaps even primordial appeal to nationality, ethnicity, and race-based classification, the reality of group membership and identity is both complex and subjective. Second, I echo the concerns of other scholars in the field who observe the tenuousness of the connection between social identity, consciousness and political behavior. Rather than assuming a relationship, new research should seek to systematically observe the situations under which social identities become political, how consciousness is forged, and when participation is mobilized. Finally, I argue that understanding the dynamics of moving from ethnic/racial group identity and consciousness to participation requires a relational analytic strategy with an explicit eye to the social structural context. For instance, modes of political participation such as voting or making a campaign contribution are implicitly acts in support of the maintenance of a political system which may not be in the best interests – instrumental or expressive – for people who benefit least from that system. In this regard, rather than assume that the same set of conditions structures the costs and incentives of political activity, interpretations of findings need to provide space for the likelihood that strategic calculations among individuals categorized by race vary systematically as a function of the location of their group in the social and political hierarchy. Suspending the assumption that groups ought to see participation in the political system as desirable provides the opportunity to train the lens away from the failings of racial mobilizing organizations or inactive citizens, and instead, focus scrutiny on the participatory institutions of democracy that may themselves inhibit the achievement of equality.⁵

2 Immigration and the significance of race for political participation

Race and ethnicity have always been important in the study of political participation, particularly the period in which the power of urban political machines and political parties were built on coalitions of ethnic voting blocs. Like immigrants today, the early 20th Century generation of newcomers spoke languages other than English, came from poor or modest economic backgrounds, often lived in urban ethnic enclaves, were younger than the average native-born American, and on average, had larger families. Questions about their ability to assimilate to American politics and culture were carefully examined.⁶ While the earlier immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe were slow to naturalize, once citizens, the strategic mobilization of these new voters by ethnic organizations and the urban political machines of their era created lasting political consequences for politics in the United States.⁷ As time passed, later generations moved out of the enclaves, married members of competing ethnic groups, and in the process, retained some culinary and holiday rituals, but lost the language and identities of their grandparents' home country. One-quarter Irish, German,

⁵ This perspective is taken from Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (1998). In brief, Tilly argues that inequalities have their roots in exploitation and opportunity hoarding embedded in the structure of social, economic and political institutions. Two additional properties of emulation and adaptation serve to maintain this structure and further exacerbate inequality.

⁶ Three classic studies in this scholarly tradition include Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (1964), A.L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity* (1978).

⁷ Kristi Andersen's analysis (1979) of Presidential voting between 1928 and 1936 identifies the political activation of immigrants as one of the chief reasons behind the New Deal realignment.

Italian, and English were eventually shortened to become simply white.⁸ This combination of social and political assimilation contributed to an altered understanding of the racial category of “white.” Slowly and grudgingly, the once-undesirable immigrants – the Irish, Italians, and Jews – were given and adopted the racial identity of whiteness.⁹ It remains to be seen whether the racial marking of new Asian and Latino immigrants will have consequences for the re-construction of whiteness or some other racial category.

As these earlier ethnic identities among voters began to fade, research on the significance of race for political participation began to turn more of its attention to the differences in political behavior between whites and African Americans. Most studies showed that while African Americans were less likely to take part in a range of political activities, their rates of participation were actually higher than what would be predicted given their relatively low socio-economic status.¹⁰ In addition to resources, mobilization through religious organizations and African American candidates for office has been particularly effective in increasing political participation among Blacks.¹¹ Participation among African Americans no longer outpaces that of whites, and their levels of political activity continue to lag behind. Systematic research on the participatory behavior of Latinos in the United States produced a companion set of findings.¹² While varying substantially by national origin, Latinos tended to participate far below the rates of activity for whites, and the analyses reveal similar patterns of the importance of social and economic resources for political participation.¹³ There is a growing, though still small amount of research on Asian political participation.¹⁴ Studies show that there is a great deal of variation in political activity among Asians based on generation of immigration, national origin, and to a lesser extent, socio-economic status. In addition to research on minority political behavior using quantitative survey data, there are also a number of studies utilizing data from in-depth interview of small populations of activists, as well as historical accounts of participatory action by groups of minority Americans.¹⁵ Some of the most interesting current research on racial and ethnic

⁸ See Alba 1990; Waters 1990.

⁹ Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999) provides an interesting account of these three groups. See also Noel Ignatiev’s analysis (1995) of the strategic significance for the Irish of racial conflict with African Americans in their struggle against nativism and quest for inclusion among whites. One fascinating reflection of the state’s struggle with (and manipulation of) categorizing by race is the evolution of the race question in the Census, where Jews were once counted as “Hebrews” and South Asians as “Hindus.” See Anderson (1988). In the 2000 Census, Americans were for the first time allowed to choose more than one racial category to represent themselves.

¹⁰ Verba and Nie (1972) were the first to demonstrate this finding with survey data from the U.S. population. See also Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993; Danigelis 1978, 1982; Dawson 1995; Dawson, Brown, and Allen 1990; Ellison and Gay 1989; Guterbock and London 1983; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Nelson 1979; Shingles 1981.

¹¹ See, for example, Tate 1993; Harris 1994; Bobo and Gilliam 1990.

¹² The Latino National Political Survey (LNPA) was conducted by Rodolfo de la Garza, Louis DeSipio, F. Chris Garcia, John Garcia, and Angelo Falcon, and the study is detailed in their 1992 book, *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on American Politics*.

¹³ See, e.g., de la Garza 1995; F.C. Garcia 1988, 1997; DeSipio 1996; de la Garza and DeSipio 1999; Montoya 1996; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie, 1993; Leighley and Vedlitz 2000; Junn 1999.

¹⁴ See Lien 1994, 1997, 2002; Lien et. al. 2002; Wong 2000; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2000; Tam 1995; Lee 1998; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989.

¹⁵ Michael Jones-Correa’s study of New York (1998) and Carol Hardy-Fanta’s work in Boston are two examples of work on Latinos. On Asian Americans, see Espiritu (1992) and Wei (1993).

minorities in the U.S. is occurring in research on patterns of assimilation, which have clear implications for participatory behavior.¹⁶

Three conclusions are readily drawn from the body of research on the significance of race for political participation. First, minority Americans are worse off from a participatory standpoint, and Blacks, Latinos, and Asians are far less likely to take part in politics than are whites. To the extent that citizen participation has an impact on government policies that influence the daily fortunes of people, one could reason that minority Americans get less from government because they do not raise their collective voices as often and as loud as whites. Second, social and economic resources at the individual level – particularly education and income – play the biggest role in encouraging political activity. The standard socioeconomic status (SES) model, with some exceptions, is both ubiquitous and useful for explaining minority political behavior. The most frequently cited exception to this rule is the anomalous finding of relatively low levels of participation among Asians despite high educational achievement. Alternatively, the use of racial and/or ethnic consciousness as a resource for political mobilization has been found to limit efficacy in motivating minority Americans to take part in democratic government. Finally, categories of race and/or ethnicity are of greater concern than national origin, with the big four groups of white, African American, Latino, and Asian dominating the designation of analysis categories. Taken together, these three conclusions raise the imperative for mobilization around racial and pan-ethnic identifications; successful activation of political consciousness could raise engagement levels among minorities, reduce participatory inequality, and consequently, produce more progressive governmental policies favoring disadvantaged groups. In the section below, I argue that the big four grouping masks both the complex heterogeneity of the population and leaves insufficient room for individual choice in identification.

2.1 Classifying amidst complex heterogeneity

One of the first considerations in the study of the significance of race for political participation is deciding how to categorize people into groups. Over the last few decades, this has most often been accomplished by using the simple binary of black or white, and now that there are a sufficient number of Latinos and Asians, including two additional categories. This simple and convenient division will become harder to justify as the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse. Nearly one-third of the population considers itself something other than white, and less than half of those are identified as black. Similar to the complex reconstruction of the category of whiteness in the early 20th century, the category of “blackness” is undergoing its own shifts as a result of international migration to the U.S. from the Caribbean, the African continent, and to a lesser degree, South America. In 1996, more than 15% of the foreign-born residents in the United States came from a sending country in the Caribbean or Africa. Most Africans identify themselves as black, but Cubans and Dominicans of African and mixed descent might, for example, feel equally comfortable with the classification of Hispanic.¹⁷

Reflecting the reality that categories of race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive, the U.S. Bureau of the Census recently began allowing people to select more than one category of race to describe themselves. In the long form for the Census 2000 enumeration, respondents were

¹⁶ See Mollenkopf 2002; Cain et. al. 2002; Portes 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Waters 1999; Foner 1987; Gans 1992; and the June/July 1999 issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist*.

¹⁷ See e.g., Rogers 2001; Waters 1999; Kasinitz 1992.

given these alternatives: “White; Black, African American or Negro; American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian; Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Pacific Islander; or Some other race.” The question preceding the race item asks if the person is “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino,” with the following categories: “Mexican, Mexican American or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” A few questions later, respondents are asked for a verbatim response to their “ancestry or ethnic origin,” which includes examples such as “Italian; Jamaican; African American; Cambodian; Cape Verdean; Norwegian; Dominican; French Canadian; Haitian; Korean; Lebanese; Polish; Nigerian; Mexican; Taiwanese; Ukrainian.”

The political consequences of this new data collection strategy for an updated classification system reflecting the nation’s complex racial heterogeneity are still unclear.¹⁸ The analytical choices for social scientists of categorization, however, are now in front of us. How should we deal with the rapidly growing group of Americans, whose parents come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds? Popular news magazines such as *Newsweek*, are asking these questions and showing the faces of native-born Americans with such racial and ethnic backgrounds such as: “Trinidadian-Sicilian; German Jewish-Korean; African American-German-Native American; Polish-African American-Puerto Rican; and Lebanese-Dominican-Haitian-Spanish.”¹⁹ The steadily increasing rate of intermarriage (particularly among Latinos and whites and Asians and whites) foreshadows more growth in the set of hyphenated racial and ethnic categories.²⁰ While currently in the single digits, this population of multi-racial, multi-ethnic people, combined with those who classify themselves as some “other” race will be difficult to place into one of the big four categories. The stakes will only get bigger over time, since the children of the multi-racial and other-racial Americans will have perhaps even more complex racial designations.²¹

2.2 Bananas and eggs: ascribed versus acquired identities

The intricacies of racial and ethnic classification extend still further, and encompass resistance to categorization into wider racial groups when subjective identities are in conflict with more objective racial categories. For instance, some minority Americans may refuse an ethnic or racial label, preferring a white honorific instead.²² When a research subject describes herself as a “banana” – yellow on the outside and white on the inside – what is the analyst to do with her classification?²³ Alternatively, the social phenomenon of the “egg” forces one to ponder the power of acquired identification with minority groups to which one’s phenotypic features do not match.

While one might be able to write off the eggs as outliers, the degree of variation and heterogeneity should provide fertile ground from which a robust set of politically relevant

¹⁸ See the collection of essays in Perlmann and Waters 2002, particularly Prewitt, Hochschild, Skerry, and Glazer.

¹⁹ *Newsweek* “Special Report: Redefining Race in America,” September 18, 2000.

²⁰ See the essay by Edmonston et. al. in Perlmann and Waters 2002.

²¹ Interestingly, however, Harrison (2002) reports that only half of children of interracial couples actually report being more than one race.

²² Andrew Hacker uses this memorable phrase to describe the location of Asian Americans in the American educational system in his 1992 book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*.

²³ In a similar vein, there are a number of examples, particularly of ethnic Chinese who are native to former African slave colonies such as Jamaica, whose subjective identification is black Caribbean. See Rogers 2000. A terrific account of this ethnicity-bending experience can be found Powell’s fictional account, *The Pagoda*.

classifications for race and ethnicity can be developed. What the diversity of categories indicates is the extent to which such groupings are social constructions, created and maintained by individuals alone, as well as together in society.²⁴ From the perspective of studying the significance of race for political participation, political scientists need to construct categories for analysis that are both relevant to the people themselves, and signify the group's location within the political structure. In other words, a racial and ethnic classification that is salient to political action is one that must be contingent upon both acquired identification, as well as the categorical boundaries imposed and maintained by the social order. A.L. Epstein describes the latter as negative identity, and uses the example of the social category of *mischling*,²⁵ where "...elements of negative identity are nearly always present where ethnic groups occupy a position of inferior or marginality within a dominance hierarchy. Abundant evidence is to be found in colonial situations, but it is no less characteristic, though in varying degree, or minority groups in modern states: it has contributed importantly to the identity of American Blacks..." (Epstein, p. 102)

Categories of racial and ethnic identity are therefore most fruitfully understood as the interplay of both internal (positive identity) and external forces (negative identity). Using evidence from his fieldwork in the United States and New Guinea, Epstein argues that this framework is explicitly defined in structural terms. "...[E]thnicity quickly becomes intimately interwoven with questions of hierarchy, stratification, and the pursuit of political interests. In these circumstances, the categories quickly become 'social facts' in the Durkheimian sense, increasingly taking on a life of their own, from which it may be extremely difficult for the individual to escape. Identity, as I have suggested, always involves a measure of choice, but here it operates within severe constraints, though these may vary in their intensity as between different groups." (Epstein, p. 109) Nevertheless, these categories need not be durable to be useful; rather, their definition and composition should accurately reflect the social circumstances of the time of the analysis. By way of example, the reason behind the virtual disappearance in contemporary scholarship on the Irish vote (with the exception of the occasional article by Andrew Greely), is the same reason why Irish identity in the U.S. today is most often recognized on what has become a celebratory holiday in March. Being Irish no longer signals one's place at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy, nor does the subjective identification carry with it as substantial a political meaning. Thus, classifications of race and ethnicity that are relevant to political participation should be ones that reflect the social structural forces at play. Potent examples of the interplay of this negotiation of internal sources of racial identity and external labels can be found in studies of racial hierarchies in Brazil, and the contemporary struggle over the racialization of categories of identity for "coloureds" in South Africa.²⁶

For better or worse, anyone writing about race and politics after the Census 2000 must now fumble with the confused and somewhat cumbersome term "race and/or ethnicity." The popular use of the and/or term is perhaps indicative of our uncertainty about how to proceed. Complicated as it may be, when analyzing any category and its relationship to some political dependent variable, parsimony calls, and the analyst is faced with the question of which is more important? When can we use the seemingly simple term race, and under what circumstances must categories be qualified by ethnicity or national origin? While it is tempting indeed to go

²⁴ Omi and Winant (1994), provide a useful discussion of how racial groups were created and changed in the U.S.

²⁵ Epstein defines *mischling* as "... the offspring of marriages between Jew and Gentile who have usually been brought up on neither a Jewish nor a Christian tradition, and where the home environment has laid little emphasis on ethnic origins." (1978, p. 102)

²⁶ See, Courtney Jung's *Then I Was Black* (2000); Nobels 2000; and Marx 1998.

with one of the big four and lump nationalities together into a pan-ethnic category, it is quite possible that grouping Cubans, newly-arrived Mexican immigrants, along with third-generation Chicanos, for example, will introduce a different set of inferential difficulties. The same can be said for classification decisions for the multi-racial. Resolving the issue of how to classify depends to a certain extent on defining the contours of identity, consciousness, and participation.

3 The tenuous relationship between identity and participation

An increasingly complex world forged out of inter-racial marriages producing multi-racial people, combined with acquired identities of many flavors, makes taking racial categories for granted problematic indeed. At the same time, however, the political and analytical motivations for pan-ethnicity combined with the normative goal of increasing participation among traditionally disadvantaged minorities, begs a relationship between racial and/or ethnic identity and political engagement. In getting from here to there, there are a number of difficulties, both conceptual and empirical, along the way.

3.1 Identifying identity: from social to political identity

The sheer ubiquity of the use of the term in the study of politics should clue one in to the significance and concomitant slipperiness of the word identity.²⁷ The study of its political antecedents and consequences is prevalent in many sub-fields of political science and it is perhaps simultaneously worrisome and comforting to know that political theorists, comparativists, Americanists, and international relations scholars have all converged on the study of identity. For example, James Fearon, a rational choice theorist of international relations at Stanford, has a recent paper entitled, “What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” A team of multi-sub-field political scientists at Harvard has created a dynamic working group to define and measure identity.²⁸

While the study of identity long ago left the province of social and political psychology, many of the assumptions of social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization remain intact. Current work on identity traces roots back to the work of Tajfel and Turner in particular, and (to a lesser extent in the study of U.S. politics), Erikson. While powerful, the social psychological framework and its research present a number of problems if one is interested in the political consequences of identity. Leonie Huddy’s piece in the March 2001 issue of *Political Psychology* addresses the difficulties of making the jump from social to political identity. According to Huddy, much attention has been paid to how social identities develop and what helps to reinforce them, but correspondingly little has been done to see what the consequences of those identifications are. She points to three critical problems in identifying when a social identity turns political: the ability to choose identities, the subjectivity of identities, and gradations in strength of identification. In identifying identities relevant to politics, we need to develop data collection strategies and analytic techniques that can help tell us something about how a social identity encouraging parade-revelers turns into an identity forging political activists.

²⁷ Citrin, Wong, and Duff use this memorable descriptor in one of the opening sections of their 2001 study of American identity.

²⁸ See Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and McDermott 2003.

3.2 From identity and consciousness to participation

Many studies of race and political participation simply assume group membership implies identity and political consciousness. The elusiveness of findings linking consciousness to political participation, then, often still comes as something of a surprise. It shouldn't. Perhaps the most widely cited piece of research in political science demonstrating the relationship between racial consciousness and political engagement is one that set forth an explicitly structural theory of the effect of consciousness on participation, along with a fairly stringent definition of consciousness. The 1981 Miller and Gurin et. al. article clearly articulated a distinction between social identity and group consciousness. It argued that while social identity signified awareness of group identification, consciousness had the added feature of incorporating the ideology of the group. Consciousness would lead to participation only if the identified individual recognizes that his or her interests are linked to other members of the group, sees his group is in a subordinate position, and believes the system is to blame for this positionality. "[G]roup identification should be related with participation only after it has been politicized by feelings of power deprivation, attribution of blame for the group's position on structural determinants, and a belief that collective actions are the preferred means for solving social problems." (Miller et. al. 1981, p. 498). It is as satisfying and comprehensive a framework more than twenty years later as it was at the time it was published. The problem with it is not in its theory; rather, it is with the difficulty analysts have found in replicating the findings, particularly with multivariate techniques utilized to estimate models controlling for a myriad of other explanatory factors. The effects of consciousness on participation are either not there to begin with, or wash out after including other potent predictors of political activity. Thus, the persistence of non-findings for the relationship between group identity, consciousness and participation – either at the bivariate or multivariate levels – rendered the relationship either assumed (for Blacks), or merely puzzling in its absence.²⁹

3.3 The “political economy” of group membership

The Miller and Gurin model specifying a group membership with political consequences is useful in many regards. However, a more generalizable theoretical approach to the question of how and why racial and/or ethnic group identities form can be found in general theoretical analyses of the “political economy” of group membership. Unlike many of the social psychological perspectives that posit non-rational motives for joining groups, the standpoint from the interest group and rational choice literatures treats group membership decisions as choices made on the basis of calculations of the incentives and costs of joining. In this regard, a “political economy” approach to group membership reminds us that social and political group identification is not automatic and reflexive. Much of the literature in this field has built up in response to the classic statement of the collective action problem by Mancur Olson (1965). Olson argued that group membership provided both collective and selective benefits, but that the

²⁹ The reasons for this are not readily apparent, but are likely related to a number of factors including the desire for the existence of group consciousness among disadvantaged populations, and the enormous influence of the theoretical construction and portrayal by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes in the *American Voter* of the influence of party identification on voting (1960). Identification with a political party – in theory, another group not unlike one based on racial and/or ethnic political interests – was almost reflexive, longstanding, and closely bound up with electoral participation.

former would be received whether not one is a member, which would mean that there are insufficient inducements to take part in group activity. On the other hand, selective benefits are necessary because they provide incentives for cooperation, and only those who cooperate (and join) can get selective benefits. Olsen argued further that people who share interests with a large group join less readily than those who share interests with others in a small group, and that those who join large groups act in the collective interest primarily because they seeking benefits unrelated to the group's political purpose. The collective activity is instead an unintended consequence of this non-collective motivation. While Olsen thought of these benefits as monetary in nature, Wilson and others have suggested that there are also "solidarity benefits – rewards created by the act of associating" (such as friendship and laughs), and "expressive benefits including rewards that are derived from a sense of satisfaction at having contributed to the attainment of a worthwhile cause" (Wilson 1973, p. 34). High on the list of strategic motivations for individuals to join organizations – in this case, to decide to affiliate and identify with a racial and/or ethnic group – is to act in response to disturbances in their social environments (see Truman 1971, pp. 28-38). Hansen (1985) builds on the identification of underanalyzed assumptions in the Wilson's incentives model, and argues that threatening times create greater incentives for group membership. Incorporating elements of a rational perspective to augment the social psychological approach to understanding the dynamics of group membership will aid in discerning when that membership has political consequences.

4 Elements of an explanation of minority political behavior

I am interested in political identity and consciousness because it may help to explain minority political behavior in the United States. Creative strategies for analyzing existing data, and the potential of recent data collections from better samples of racial and/or ethnic groups can go a long way in revealing more precisely the contours of the relationship between consciousness and political engagement. Having said that, additional strategies to measure key concepts, along with further theoretical guidance for interpreting inferential findings about participation among Blacks, Latinos, and Asians will also be fruitful. New data and analytic strategies should help us to describe and map racial and ethnic identities with political kick. They should also provide insight into the permanence or malleability of these identities and enumerate the circumstances under which identities come under pressure and change. At the same time, these new data and strategies should provide opportunities for description of differences in the development of identity and consciousness along politically relevant cleavages such as gender and class. And finally, elements of an explanation of minority political behavior should inform our thinking about participatory and political equality.

4.1 Measuring racial and/or ethnic identity and consciousness

It is far easier to propose a set of measurement parameters for a phenomenon, than it is to develop and test the instrumentation and of course to collect the data. Having said that, what follows next is a brief description of some general recommendations for a research design to measure racial and ethnic identity and consciousness with political consequences. First, the complexity, multiplicity and subjectivity of identities provide support for the imperative of having research subjects classify themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, and nationality, and asking them to explain the origins and justification of their self-classification. It would be useful

to begin with open-ended verbatim questions on social identity, political identity, and racial consciousness. In addition, collecting data by replicating the Census race/ethnicity questions would be helpful, along with closed-ended items querying respondents about priorities and rankings of multiple identities, the applicability of particular identities under different circumstances, and changes in affiliations over time. While asking research subjects to simply report their identities is straightforward and desirable, a strategy of self-reported data is not necessarily the optimal design. Alternatively, a second recommendation is to utilize experimental methods to systematically test the importance of contextual frames in eliciting particular racial and/or ethnic identities, and variations in the strength of political consciousness that results from that affiliation. For example, different frames representing trade-offs among multiple identities may have observable consequences for how minority Americans calculate the costs and potential benefits of political engagement. The presence and strength of identities may depend on how subjects understand the society to perceive their group (negative identity). A third recommendation regards the selection of cases for study. Representative samples have many advantages, but samples stratified to include a disproportionate number of subjects of interest would also be desirable. Questions of the relationship of racial/ethnic consciousness and participation are particularly relevant for multi-racial and multi-ethnic Americans who are entering citizenship through adulthood, and whose political consciousness and participatory behaviors are rapidly developing. A final suggestion is to include measures of a meaningful set of contextual explanatory variables, as well as a range of dependent variables representing acts of political participation that run the gamut from system-directed activities in support of current institutions to those on the other end of the spectrum that forge a more contentious politics aimed at questioning and reforming democratic practices. Creative measures of contextual circumstances and perceptions will provide significant explanatory power for assessing the extent to which systematic differences exist in the structure of costs and incentives to participate for people classified by racial and ethnic groups.

4.2 Race as agency versus social structural constraint

New data collections and analyses will hopefully go a long way toward progress in understanding the elements of an explanation of minority political behavior. In this section, I argue that one particularly durable theoretical perspective impedes our ability to make sense of the empirical findings about race and participation.

Scholarship in political science and complimentary disciplines provides ample evidence of the racial biases in American political institutions, jurisprudence, and public policies such as welfare.³⁰ While there is disagreement among scholars as to the scope of the bias, and the intention of the policymakers who created the policies and institutions that continue to structure government in American today, there is nevertheless wide acceptance of the notion that race, broadly speaking, has played a major role in American political development, and that minority citizens have usually been on the short end of the stick. While much research on citizen participation in the political behavior tradition is mindful of this legacy, the emphasis on individual-level survey data and the practice of estimating inferential statistical models predicting political participation, often leads analysts to see individuals in greater social isolation than is warranted. The complaint here is less one of model specification – that is, for including

³⁰ See, for example, Lieberman 1998; Skocpol 1995; Smith 1997.

some independent variables that help to reflect the structural context of individual citizens – and directed more at the interpretation of these findings.

Even if we are successful in developing politically relevant categories of race and then specifying important aspects of the structural context, the 500-pound gorilla representing the logic of the SES model still remains. SES is the gorilla because it always eats up (or sits on, depending on your version of the analogy) the biggest chunk of variance in models predicting participatory behavior. In this regard, no one – not even those who identify and analyze the importance of identity-based mobilization, or structures of local government – can avoid the gorilla in their empirical results. The fact that the gorilla is always there is uncontroversial, rather, what is at issue is the interpretation the relevance of his omnipresence. The consistency of the findings about the significance of SES has contributed to a more reflexive rather than purpose response, and in the process, has helped turn what should be an explicit assumption about individual agency into more of an implicit one. The interpretation that has most often prevailed is an assumption about the equality of individual agency that is best exemplified in model specifications including separate controls for race and class. A companion assumption is one about representation; that more participatory input from citizens means that there will be more responsiveness from political representatives. These are reasonable assumptions, neither of which I am in disagreement with in principle. At the same time, however, they are precisely that; assumptions about which individual-level data on political behavior data provide little certainty. The more significant problem, however, arises when these two assumptions are bundled with a particularly popular normative perspective about democracy that advocates more political activity. This combination encourages conclusions from the findings about the significance of race for political participation that may be contradictory at best, and at worst, counter to the interests of minority populations.

The equality of individual agency assumption makes a lot of sense in that it is something we want to believe; one more year of education will garner the same increase in political engagement for whites as for blacks. But if there is evidence that there is an interaction between antecedents to political activity – a set of structural constraints that present unequal contexts for opportunity among individuals classified by race – then the assumption becomes much more problematic. The same is true for the representation assumption. If it is the case, both objectively and subjectively, that a black man's letter to his Congressman receives the same attention and action as the white man's, then this assumption is justifiable. But if there is something systematic in the political process that makes the campaign contribution from the Asian American worth less than the same dollar amount from a white American, we can be less sure about this assumption, and we need to find ways to account for the interaction between race and representative responsiveness.

Finally, I think it is worth reconsidering, within the context of what we know about the significance of race for political participation, one of the more enduring normative positions that more participation is good. More political participation is usually considered to be a good thing, particularly during a period in history in which democracy has few ideological rivals.³¹ Indeed

³¹ This has not always been the case. Important traditions of thought, frequently characterized as “elitist” theories of democracy take the opposite position regarding the desirability of greater popular sovereignty. Arguments against more citizen participation reflect concerns about the political, moral, and cognitive capability of the mass public, regime stability, and decision-making gridlock. See, e.g., Schumpeter 1942, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lipset 1960; Michels 1962; Huntington 1968; and Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975. While silent about the desirability of more citizen participation, perspectives from rational choice suggest that we should simply not expect more activity from individuals.

more political activity – that is, more liberal democracy in the form of expanded expression of voice and deliberation among citizens – has been advocated as a procedural and substantive solution for distributional inequities in social and political goods. Increasing political activity among those traditionally disadvantaged and politically underrepresented can help create public policies that take their interests into account as well as empower those previously disenfranchised to take political stands in order to develop and forward their interests. Because minorities tend to participate in politics at comparatively lower rates, people in these groups have become the target for calls for political activity through naturalization and voter registration drives. Such well-intentioned campaigns seek greater equality in political outcomes by making the electorate more descriptively representative of the population at large. The inference is that policies beneficial to those previously disenfranchised are most likely to be adopted when the face of the electorate mirrors the face of the polity. Conversely, undesirable political outcomes are reasoned to be the result of the lack of political activity among those whose interests are at stake. Under circumstances of relatively modest rates of political activity among minorities, what falls under scrutiny for change are the individuals who supposedly influence the institutions and process of democratic government, rather than the institutions and practices themselves. In this regard, the analytic emphasis on the individual-level subject has trained the focus for change on the non-participant citizen while at the expense of a critical examination of the structure and institutions of democracy in which agency is acted out.

But if we relax the assumption that the political process – the democratic culture, practice, and institutions of democracy – provides equality of agency for all regardless of race or some other politically-relevant category, then the comparatively low rates of participatory activity among minority Americans can be interpreted in another way, as an indicator of the structural inequalities present. The analytic strategy of holding the assumption to greater scrutiny does not necessarily imply a structurally functionalist argument. Rather, it asks us to consider the location of the significance of race for political participation on the dichotomy between structure and agency that make up the ends of the continuum from the debilitating determinism of a system continually reenacting domination, to the unwarranted optimism of unencumbered agency. To the question of “Were they pushed or did they jump?”³² (perhaps more appropriately for participation, were they held back or did they sit out), studies of citizen participation have too often answered from the agency pole.

Thus, thinking of racial and ethnic group identification as a constraint as well as an incentive is instructive. There are a number of illustrations of how racial group membership continues to restrict the opportunities to participate, leaving suspect the claim that structural barriers based on race no longer exist in the U.S. political system. The 2000 Presidential election revealed not only widespread incompetence in voting administration in the states, but more deliberate – even if by omission only – structural obstacles for Blacks, particularly in poor districts and southern states. Nearly 4 million people (2% of the population) are legally disenfranchised by statutes disqualifying convicted felons. Thirty-six percent (1.4 million) of all disenfranchised felons are black males, which is 14% of all black males.³³ Race acts as both an

³² This phrase is from the title of Diego Gambetta 1987 book on decision making in education.

³³ Verba 2003, p. X.

agent of resources as well as serving as a marker for positionality, but for racial minorities, it is more often a structural constraint.³⁴

4.3 Reconsidering education: locating structure and agency

Education is one of the most powerful institutions in U.S. society, and is of particular interest to scholars of political behavior because of the strong and positive relationship between educational attainment and political participation at the individual level. An examination of how structure and agency play out in this ostensibly democratic institution can help clarify the importance of a relational analysis that explicitly considers social and political structures as location for both agency and constraint. If there is a consistent refrain in the vast literature concerning education in America, it is that it is good – good for democracy, for employment, for social mobility, for building strong communities, and for democratic values. Education is most often viewed as a resource that, when fairly distributed, can provide equal opportunities for individuals in society to succeed. Scholars can easily be drawn into the claim that more education is better, not only for its normative appeal, but also because of the sheer quantity of evidence that supports the notion that education contributes in a positive sense to many important individual-level outcomes.

This conception of education, however, is at odds with a seemingly divergent conclusion that places education among the most powerful stratifiers in modern post-industrial society. The very same data that pinpoint the critical importance of education to social, political, and economic outcomes and inform the position that more education is good, also simultaneously identify education as the main mechanism driving the maintenance of inequality and hierarchy where the outcomes are scarce. In these instances, rather than adding aggregate value to society and economy, more education may have either no positive effect on enhancing equality or instead, a negative effect. More education in American society over the last quarter century has not produced a commensurate rise in many social, economic, and political outcomes. For example, citizen political participation in various forms of voluntary activity has remained steady, and voting has declined precipitously; the nation's stock of social capital is by some accounts dangerously low; and real income has remained stagnant despite the aggregate increases in education. Disparities by race in participatory equality remain.

These inconsistencies in expectation and outcome provide another way to look at education as an individual-level resource. While formal education may indeed encourage the development of cognitive ability and individual resources, it may also be the case that these skills are far less relevant to securing one's place in the social hierarchy of American life. Instead, the important of education to stratification may be the role it plays as a powerful socialization device, teaching students who are successful and who progress through educational institutions to also become initiated into the hierarchical norms of commerce, politics, and social life.³⁵ In short, education may be a particularly effective means of reproducing cultural, political, and economic practices. As one of the primary mechanisms behind social stratification, education can also be conceived as exactly the opposite from an equalizing force. Instead, at the macro-societal level, education may reproduce and legitimate structural inequalities that in turn drive

³⁴ The work of Jim Sidanius and his colleagues demonstrates convincingly the persistence of racial discrimination in many settings. See also the provocative discussion regarding skin color in a recent paper (2003) by Jennifer Hochschild.

³⁵ See, for example, Bourdieu 1987, 1989, 1990.

vast disparities in wealth, and nurture the persistence of the dominance of the in-group to the systematic disadvantage of out-groups.³⁶ How can education be understood simultaneously as both an equalizing force and a stratification mechanism? Education both enables and restricts; it is a location for the development of both individual agency and structural constraint.

The value of the resources conveyed upon individuals by educational attainment must be considered in relation to what level of resources are held by others in the society. The value of education to social outcomes like income earnings and political participation must be assessed in relative terms to how much everyone else has. More education in the aggregate does not necessarily improve conditions at either the macro-societal level or the individual level. Instead, more education simply shifts the baseline upward. If the pace of gains by disadvantaged groups does not keep up with the growth in education by advantaged groups, the former fall further behind even as they are making progress in level of educational attainment in an absolute sense. Far from a simple theoretical exercise, this situation reflects the current reality of more rapid gains in education by the advantaged over African-Americans and Latinos, who continue to operate at a distinct educational disadvantage.³⁷ The gap in educational attainment between whites and Asians on the one hand, and African-Americans and Latinos on the other, remains, and since the 1980s, is once again increasing. In addition, there are significant differences in wages by race, even among those with the same level of education.³⁸ These conclusions about the collective outcomes of education are sobering for minorities and the poor, who have more to lose from the educational progress of advantaged groups. The role of education as a social stratifier has debilitating and negative effects for those who occupy the lower positions in the social, economic, and political hierarchy.³⁹

Disadvantaged groups stay that way not only by virtue of their relatively low placement in the educational hierarchy, but also because the legitimacy of this unequal structure is propagated in part by American educational institutions themselves. Rather than sitting outside of the political, economic, and social structures that reinforce inequality and domination, education is a part of it. Education plays two important roles in the maintenance of an ideology of meritocracy in the United States. In its sorting function, formal education confers certification, degrees and other scarce outcomes that places those with what are defined as the best credentials at the top of the hierarchy, and those with lesser near the bottom. In its role as a powerful socializer, education teaches the ideology of meritocracy, by grading on normal curves and assuring those who finish on the right tail that they will succeed because they deserve to. The second role is critical, for it is necessary to have some mechanism which reliably reproduces the ideology that maintains the positions of power for those at the top who benefit from the system as it already exists.⁴⁰ When outcomes are positional or scarce – when not everyone can be rich, and not everyone can be granted admission into a top school – the liberal democratic ideology

³⁶ This "revisionist" perspective identifies education as critical to the maintenance of capitalism. See Bowles and Gintis 1976. But also see Willis 1977 for his analysis of the "Hammertown lads" subjectively reproduce labor power through resistance to and rebellion from middle-class educational imperatives.

³⁷ See e.g., Miller 1998; Murphy 1990.

³⁸ See e.g., Jencks and Phillips 1999; Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce 1989.

³⁹ MacLeod's original 1984 study and follow-up of black and white teenagers and their educational aspirations and occupational opportunities in "Clarendon Heights" provide a poignant account of how the objective and subjective realms intersect. Of similar lower class position as the "Hallway Hangers," the "Brothers" face the double disadvantage of being black and poorly educated.

⁴⁰ In Tilly's terms, these are the processes of "emulation" and "adaptation."

must have an answer to its production of unequal outcomes. Merit can be used as a justification for inequality of outcomes in a system where the rules are supposed to be fair.

This discussion of education as a location for the development of both individual agency as well as and structural constraints is intended as a gentle if unpleasant reminder that policies that seek to redress the consequences of political inequality cannot assume that providing more resources for competition in an unequal system will eliminate the inequality. To the extent that education contributes to the maintenance of social stratification, sorting those with high attainment and credentials to the top and those with less toward the bottom, while at the same time reproducing an ideology of meritocracy, we cannot expect that mechanism in its same form to also dismantle the hierarchy.

6 Conclusion

Under what circumstances does a racial and/or ethnic group consciousness have political consequences? In order to satisfactorily address the question, I have argued that we need to more carefully examine the assumptions implicit in the expectation that a shared sense of identity will foster more participation in politics among minority Americans. Classifying by race is complex and contested due to the heterogeneity and subjectivity of racial and ethnic identities. As a result, similarly multidimensional measurement strategies should be employed to ascertain the descriptors and contours of identities. Further, the jump from racial and/or ethnic identity to political activity is not universal; rather, the development of a political consciousness based on race is contingent on the relationship between the individual's group and the governing forces that allocate benefits. Most clearly explicated by Miller and Gurin (1981), a consciousness with political kick is characterized by deprivation, blame attribution, and collective action. Combining social psychological theories of social identity along with political economy perspectives highlighting the importance of rational strategic calculations will provide a more robust set of theoretical perspectives from which we can discern the significance of racial consciousness for participation. With the aid of methodological strategies designed to observe differences in identity and strategic behavior as a result of a systematically altered context, we can move away from assuming or hoping for a relationship, and toward identifying the circumstances under which social identities organized around race and ethnicity become political. I am interested in racial group consciousness in the end because it is an independent variable of interest that has bearing on political participation. But racial group consciousness is more than an independent variable in the conventional sense. Rather, the extent to which racial consciousness makes a difference for individual behavior also tells us something about the structural conditions that produce social constraint and individual agency.

While I would predict that there are numerous opportunities for identities to be influenced and turned more political, I would also hazard a guess that the next step in the link from consciousness to the behavior of collection action will require stimuli with much stronger links to external validity than what can be created in experimental conditions in the laboratory. When, in the real world, should consciousness have political kick? My answer is perhaps best summed up by a response by Political Scientist Rodolfo de la Garza to a student's question. When asked about the conditions for a powerful pan-Latino political movement, de la Garza replied that it would occur when and if the government says Latinos are all stupid and we're

going to shoot you.⁴¹ While it may not be quite as simple to discern kick from threat, it may very well be a necessary condition for collective political action. Despite my arguments about the hazards of categorizing by the big four race amidst the present complexity, it is typically ascription to group membership by race and not ethnicity or national origin that animates discriminatory actions.⁴² As Perlmann and Waters state, “Races are usually discussed, in demographic terms, as a special subset of ethnicity, in that race relates to classifications of ancestral origins for groups treated in especially distinct ways in the American past. Typically, when we use the term ‘race’ we mean to denote a group that is still treated in some specially distinct way” (pp. 2-3). To the extent that this distinctiveness manifests itself as systematic oppression, or group-based entitlements, the big four race categories will have greater influence. Race is clearly a simple heuristic, but in the United States, it remains among the most powerful in differentiating individuals in the social, economic, and political hierarchy.

⁴¹ Comments made at the Saint Peter’s College Conference on Immigration and American Politics, April 3, 2002.

⁴² There are clearly many exceptions, most obviously the U.S. government actions to imprison Japanese Americans during World War II.

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