
GROUP-BASED RESOURCES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG BLACK AMERICANS

R. Khari Brown, Graduate Student, Joint Doctoral Program in Social Work and Sociology, University of Michigan

Introduction

For Black Americans, the fight for citizenship through the ballot was a bitter and often bloody struggle. Scholars of the modern day Civic Rights Movement acknowledge the successful employment of group-based resources as a key factor that led to the inclusion of Blacks in the political system (McAdams, 1982; Morris 1984). Politically relevant group-based resources are those that individuals receive through interacting with others, which motivates them to participate in the political process. These resources are particularly important to individuals and/or groups that lack sufficient individual social-economic resources that foster participation. Group-based resources such as hearing of political messages in church (Reese & Brown, 1995; Callhoun-Brown, 1996), being highly involved in church activities (Taylor & Thornton, 1993), being a member of Black social change organizations (Frazier, 1957; Morris, 1984; McAdam, 1982), having a sense of racial group consciousness (Reese & Brown, 1995; Callhoun-Brown, 1996; Dawson, 1994; Allen, Brown & Dawson, 1989), and being exposed to politically relevant information via the Black media (Allen, Brown & Dawson, 1990; Dawson, Brown & Allen, 1989), were key resources that stimulated political activism among Black Americans during the Civil Rights era and continue to play an essential role in this regard today (Morris, 1984; McAdam, 1982).

The value of group resources lies in the fact that they are produced within social relations that can be used to achieve individual and group interests. Individuals who are in networks with others that emphasize the importance of political activism in maintaining or improving the social position of the group and that keep one another abreast on salient policy issues, have an easier time in understanding the importance of being politically involved. Group members may be more or less informed of salient issues; these individuals can remain informed without reading the newspaper daily, watching the news, or doing additional research. Instead, individuals can rely upon each other for sharing relevant information (Coleman, 1988). Furthermore, involvement in politically relevant networks makes it easier to be informed and be active because these groups are likely to be mobilized by political candidates, issue groups, or political parties for support in the form of votes, signing petitions, financial contributions, and/or campaign assistance (Rosenstone & Hanson, 1993).

The work of Black churches, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC),

and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Commission (SNCC) during the Civil Rights Movement exemplifies this point (Morris, 1984). These organizations allowed for rapid decision making and the dissemination of information to the masses for political mobilization and activism. The SCLC's Citizenship Education Program was used to educate Black communities about the purpose of the movement and to get them voting. In general, members of the SCLC went to ministers first, who would then gain support from their congregation for movement involvement. The SNCC generally went to college and high-school students in hopes that they would gain the support of local adults, moved by honor to defend their children (Morris, 1984).

Prior studies have shown that hearing political messages in church, being highly involved in church activities, being a member of Black social change organizations, having a sense of racial group consciousness, and being exposed to politically relevant information via the Black media stimulate political activism among Black Americans (Allen, Brown & Dawson, 1990; Dawson, Brown & Allen, 1989). What is less known is if these factors are mutually exclusive in their ability to motivate individuals towards political activism. For example, there may not be anything special about attending churches where members discuss politics in motivating persons towards political activism. It may be the case that these members are more likely to be college-educated. Because educated persons are more likely to understand how the political process works, be politically efficacious, work in occupations and/or be members of organizations where they have the opportunity to build their civic skills (Rosenstone & Hanson, 1993; Verba et al., 1995), we observe an association between membership in politicized churches and political involvement. Similarly, there may not be anything special about heightened levels of racial identity, exposure to Black print media, or involvement of Blacks in social change organizations, in leading members to be politically active. Rather, it may be that these measures are simply indicators of each other, and considered together in the same model, their effects on activism are likely to be reduced to non-significance. An investigation of the aforementioned multiple indicators of group-based resources on political involvement will reveal the strength and independent impact of these resource variables on political involvement.

The remainder of this paper will discuss relevant research pertaining to group-based resources and political activism among Black Americans. Data from the 1992-93 National Black Politics Study is used to empirically test the effects of group-based resources on indicators of political activism. This paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings.

Black Church and Political Participation

The Black church plays a key role in the socialization and political education of its

members. Information is easily disseminated over the pulpit and compliance and involvement can be fostered by the pastor emphasizing the importance of participating in certain activities. Research reveals that Blacks are more likely to engage in electoral and protest political behavior if they are members of churches where there are opportunities to talk about politics with fellow members (Matthews & Prothro, 1966; Morris, 1984; Brown & Wolford, 1994; Calhoun-Brown, 1996). Churches that provide a public space for the discussion of political matters are often middle class churches with college-trained clergy who have been exposed to a liberation theology that places great emphasis on social activism and collective obligation (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Tate, 1993).

Membership in an activist church can potentially lead members to believe that they have an individual as well as group obligation to participate in the civic affairs of the community. Individuals who attend activist churches are more likely to be involved in the electoral process than their counterparts because these churches are prime targets for parties, candidates and/or interests groups to solicit support in the form of financial contributions, time devoted to campaign/issue activities, and/or voting (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

The political mobilization of Black pastors is an efficient mobilization tool because these pastors are often able to induce the support of their members. Studies indicate that persons who attend churches where members discuss politics, where the pastor encourages members to become involved in politics, or where a local or national leader has spoken at a religious service are more likely to contact public officials, work on political campaigns, and vote than their counterparts (Reese & Brown, 1995; Brown & Wolford, 1995; Tate, 1993).

In addition to exposure to civic information, being active in church clubs and activities that focus on helping others may also lead to political activism (Taylor & Thornton, 1993). Within such settings, democratic skills are developed that can be used to influence the behavior of elected and non-elected public officials (Verba et al., 1995). Being a member of a church decision-making body, organizing and/or participating in church meetings, writing reports, and being involved in the appointment of local and/or national church officials are all resources that serve to enhance civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, Lehman & Brady, 1995).

The opportunity for civic skill development within churches is important for motivating individuals toward political participation. Unlike the workforce and various types of voluntary activity where civic skills are developed, churches are not stratified by education and income and apportion opportunities for skill development relatively equally among members. Consequently, church activity, among lower skilled persons can potentially compensate for the lack of opportunities for civic skill develop-

ment in lower tier jobs.

Secular Institutions and Political Participation

Blacks who are involved in secular organizations often use similar rituals and behaviors as the Black church in mobilizing members around relevant issues (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Black church culture not only impacts the behavior of members, but it is largely a world view exhibited inside and outside of the church building. This is made evident by studies suggesting that Blacks who are not church members are less likely to be deeply involved in community-based organizations and are less fully integrated into the Black community (Patillo-McCoy, 1998; Frazier, 1964; DuBois, 1986; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Myrdal, 1944). Historically, many of the Black social change organizations grew out of the Black church and continue to maintain close ties with the church (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). It is largely the case that many Blacks who are involved in Black secular organizations, such as the NAACP, Urban League, and fraternal societies, are also active in local churches. Similar to activist churches, these social organizations also lead group members to activism because they are largely targeted by public officials, party organizations, and interest groups to support particular issues or candidates by voting, donating money, or participating in a campaign drive (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Racial Identity and Political Participation

Members of groups who are denied the recognition of persons worthy of citizenship and are subsequently denied access to mainstream modes of social mobility are likely to develop a sense of solidarity based upon their status of non-recognition (Camaroff, 1987; Berlin, 1958; Miller et al., 1983; Shingles, 1983). Participation in this sub-culture is likely to provide a formal structure of acceptance that acknowledges and respects members by providing them with valued roles and the opportunity for advancement within the confines of the community (Frazier, 1957; Berlin, 1958). The recognition that this sub-culture affords group members often serves to link the individual fate of group members to the collective interests of the group as a whole. Moreover, for marginalized groups, political action is often seen as a mode for making known group interests and/or improving the status of the collective.

Race critics, such as Ralph Ellison (1964), argue that Black Americans have a collective political identity because of the memory of slavery and the continued pain inflicted due to the color of their skin. The belief that their economic mobility is constrained by racial glass ceilings, that their lives are at risk by violent police officers, and that Whites do not want to see them get ahead in life, contributes to the perception among Blacks that they are at risk (Hochschild, 1995; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). This feeling of collective threat serves to strengthen group members ties to one an-

other and to individuals viewing political action as an act that betters the interests and the social positioning of the group.

Knowledge of historical and contemporary occurrences of racial oppression is largely kept alive through Black institutions, particularly the Black church, which continues to promote the notion that race is the defining interest in the lives of all Black Americans (Dawson, 1994). These institutions urge members to accept that individual and group well-being of Black Americans can only be maintained through political activism that benefits Blacks as a whole (Dawson, 1994). Although identity politics can lead to shielding group heterogeneity, racial identity can and does serve as a force that links a common fate, real or perceived, to all group members that lead Blacks to activism.

Print Media and Political Participation

The media has historically been linked to political activism in American politics. Pamphlets, such as *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, are said to have encouraged and motivated British subjects to revolt against Great Britain during the revolutionary period. Moreover, after the American Revolution, both the Federalists and Anti-Federalists had their own party newspapers that were both used to promote political loyalty and to keep their followers abreast of political news. It was thus no accident that during the antebellum period that David Walkers Appeal, a pamphlet written and printed by a radical Black activist promoting Black insurgency, was banned by all Southern states. The idea that print media would be linked to social change in the Black community was certainly recognized by W.E.B. Dubois who, as editor of *Crisis Magazine* during the 1920s and 1930s, urged Blacks to fight against racial segregation and second class citizenship. Black newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender*, *The Amsterdam News*, and *The Michigan Chronicle*, provided Blacks with national coverage of breaking civil rights news during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Currently, periodicals like *Emerge Magazine* and *Black Enterprise* provide its readers with news items focusing on racial matters. Essentially, Black print media is an advocacy institution whose major function is to provide its readers with an interpretation of breaking news events that are salient to the Black community. During electoral campaigns, Black newspapers often run political commercials and or statements that encourage readers to select candidates that best represent Black interests (Dawson, Brown & Allen, 1990; Allen, Dawson & Brown, 1989).

Those who are exposed to Black print media sources may have a higher propensity to participate in electoral politics. These individuals are in communication networks that tend to have more information about how the political system can be used to promote group interests (Dawson, Brown & Allen, 1990). Allen, Dawson and Brown (1989) found that Blacks who are exposed to Black print outlets spend more time and

energy deciding for which candidate to work and for whom they ought to contact about public concerns.

Social Positioning and Political Participation

While it is posited that exposure to group-based resources serves to mobilize Blacks, it is also recognized that the production of civic skills is largely driven at the individual level by social class factors. Empirical research reveals that having a college education makes one more likely to participate in the political process (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Verba & Nie, 1972; Tate, 1993). Moreover, college-trained Blacks are more likely than non-college-trained Blacks to feel that they can have an impact on the political process (Tate, 1993). Coincidentally, it is the case that the drive for social change during the Civil Rights era was largely mounted by Black students and activists who had higher levels of education than non-activists (Gurin & Epps, 1975). College-trained Blacks are likely to be members of professional organizations and involved in social networks that encourage political participation (Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1997; Verba & Nie, 1972; Tate, 1993).

The political knowledge and the social network gap existing between the Black middle class and the Black poor may help explain findings by Cohen and Dawson (1993), suggesting that poor Blacks in Detroit were substantially less likely than their non-poor counterparts to belong to any type of community-based organization or to be political activists. Additional research indicates that the poor are less likely than the affluent to be involved in the electoral process because they are less socially integrated in organizations that are targeted for political mobilization (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). One explanation for the lack of involvement of the poor is that they are less likely to be targeted for mobilization because they are members of resource poor organizations that are unlikely to participate in the electoral process. To the extent that the poor are members of organizations, it is likely that they are largely members of organizations that do not and cannot afford to make financial contributions, are led and manned by persons who have a less sophisticated understanding of the electoral process, and, relatively speaking, are less politically efficacious. Because lower class Blacks are less likely to be members of organizations, churches, or other informal social networks that are targeted for mobilization, the amount of political information they receive and their opportunity to participate in governmental politics (e.g., interacting with a public official, attending a candidate fundraiser, helping in a voter registration drive, making a financial contribution to a candidate, handing out material for a candidate, signing a petition in support of a candidate) is hindered.

Hypotheses

Because exposure to group-based resources continues to play an important social-politicization role for Black Americans of all class levels, it is predicted that being exposed to the group resources of church political discourse, being a member of a Black social change organization, having high levels of common fate, being involved in church activities, and being exposed to Black media sources will motivate these individuals to be more politically active than those who are not exposed to these group-based resources.

Methodology

Sample

The data for this analyses were drawn from the 1993-94 National Black Politics Study (NBPS), a multiple frame telephone survey of 1,206 African Americans 18 years of age or older, conducted between December 4, 1993 and February 14, 1994. The first frame used GENESYS system to locate a national Random Digit Dial (RDD) sample using an equal probability of selection methodology. The second frame selected a random sample of households located in census blocks with 50% or more African American households. The overall response rate was 65%. The sample is 35.2% male and the mean age is 42.85 years. There are 364 college graduates and 840 non-college graduates in the sample.

Measures

Independent Variables (Group-Based Resource Variables). Five group-based resource variables serve as independent variables in this study (Table 1). *Church Political Discourse* was measured on a factor scale of four items. The scale included the following items: heard of political discussions in church, talked to people about political matters in church, a member of clergy talked about need for people to become involved in politics, and a local or national leader spoke at a religious service. A high score on this scale represented attendance in a church with high levels of political discourse. *Black Organizational Membership* was a dummy variable that asked if the respondent is a member of a Black social change organization. Non-membership served as the reference variable. *Black Print Media* was measured on a factor scale of four items. The scale included the following items: read a Black magazine, read a novel by a Black author, and read a Black newspaper. A high score on this scale represented high exposure to Black print media sources. *Church Involvement* was measured by a dummy variable that asked if the respondent is on a church committee, gives time to a special project, or helps to organize a meeting. Non-involvement served as the reference variable. *Common Fate* was measured on a factor scale of three items. The

scale included the following items: life is affected by what happens to Black women, life is affected by what happens to Black men, and life is affected by what happens to Blacks. A high score on this scale represented high levels of common fate with other Black Americans.

Demographic variables. *Education* was measured as a dummy variable with non-college graduate as the reference variable. *Age* was measured as a continuous vari-

Table 1
Factor Analysis

Political Participation	Factor Loadings
Contacted a public agency	0.674
Contacted a Black public official	0.661
Contacted a White public official	0.635
Attended fundraiser for a candidate	0.647
Helped in a voter registration drive	0.608
Made financial contributions to a candidate	0.619
Handed out material for a candidate	0.575
Signed a petition in support of a candidate	0.546
 Church Political Discourse	
Heard of political discussions in church	0.883
Talked to people about political matters in church	0.722
Member of clergy talked about need for people to become involved in politics	0.770
Local or national leader spoke at a religious service	0.709
 Common fate	
Life affected by what happens to Black women	0.741
Life affected by what happens to Black men	0.761
Life affected by what happens to Blacks	0.667
 Black Print Media	
Read a Black magazine	0.693
Read a novel by a Black author	0.619
Read a Black newspaper	0.630

able. *Gender* was a dummy variable with female as the reference variable.

Dependent variable. *Political Participation* was measured on a factor scale of eight items. The scale included the following items: contacting a public agency, contacting a Black public official, contacting a White public official, attending a fundraiser for a candidate, helping in a voter registration drive, making a financial contribution to a candidate, handing out material for a candidate, and signing a petition in support of a candidate. A high score on this scale represented high levels of political activism.

Results

The purpose of the present analyses is to investigate if attending churches with high levels of political discourse, activism in church outreach activities, membership in Black social change organizations, exposure to Black print media sources, and maintaining relatively high levels of common fate with other Black Americans predicts electoral involvement among Black Americans.

Table 2 presents the results of ordinary least squares analyses that examine electoral political participation regressed on the demographic and group-based resource variables for the full, college graduate, and non-college graduate model. For the full model, the demographic and group-based resource variables were significantly and positively associated with electoral participation. Blacks who were college graduates, attended churches with high levels of political discourse, were members of Black social change organizations, were active in their churches, were heavily exposed to Black print media sources, and possessed heightened feelings of common fate with other Black Americans were more likely to participate in electoral politics than their counterparts.

These findings also show that for both college and non-college-trained Blacks, almost all of the group-based resource variables were significantly and positively associated with electoral participation. College and non-college-trained Blacks who attended churches with high levels of political discourse, were members of Black social change organizations, were active in their churches, and were exposed to Black print media sources were more likely to participate in electoral politics than college and non-college-trained Blacks who were not exposed to these group-based resources. Unlike the other resource variables, feelings of common fate with other Blacks increased levels of political activity among the non-college-trained, but not among the college-trained.

Discussion

Results of this investigation indicate that exposure to the group-based resources iden-

Table 2
Ordinary Least Squares¹

Political Participation

	Full Model		College Graduate		Non-College Graduate	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	-0.364***	0.105	-0.454**	0.215	-.446***	0.086
Church Poli. Discourse	0.194***	0.024	0.165**	0.051	0.207***	0.028
Black Org. Involvement	0.635***	0.055	0.793***	0.098	0.544***	0.067
Church Invol.	0.168**	0.056	0.255*	0.113	0.137*	0.064
Print Media Common	0.229***	0.025	0.192***	0.055	0.236***	0.028
Fate	0.078***	0.024	0.052	0.052	0.088***	0.027
Age	0.008***	0.001	0.004	0.004	0.006***	0.002
Male	0.192***	0.049	0.098	0.098	0.181***	0.056
College Graduate	0.204***	0.025				
R-square	0.373		0.359		0.330	
p<0.001***	p<0.01**		p<0.05*			

¹ All of the group-based resource variables were performed on a one-tailed hypotheses test. Gender and Age were performed on a two-tailed hypotheses test. College graduate was performed on a one-tailed hypotheses test.

tified in this study led to electoral activism among Black Americans generally, and among college and non-college-trained Blacks specifically. Other studies have shown that these individual group resource variables lead to activism (Allen, Brown & Dawson, 1990; Dawson, Brown & Allen, 1990; Reese & Brown, 1995; Callhoun-Brown, 1996; Taylor & Thornton, 1993). However, this study is different in that it shows the independent strength of all of the investigated group resources in predicting electoral activism. By these resource variables not canceling each other out, these findings suggest that these individual resource variables are not confounding, but are in fact independently important factors that contribute to activism among Black Americans. This study suggests that the argument that there is little special about attending activist churches, being a member of a social change organization, being exposed to Black print mediums, or maintaining a high level of racial consciousness leading to

activism because these are largely middle class activities is of little merit. That the significance between the aforementioned group resources and activism remained significant when education, as well other demographic and resource variables, were held constant, suggests the independent strength of the relationship between group resources and activism. In short, attending activist churches, being a member of a social change organization, being exposed to Black print mediums, and maintaining high levels of racial consciousness are in and of themselves important for moving Blacks, college and non-college-trained alike, toward political activism.

Additionally, findings from this study indicate that even among middle class Blacks, who are likely disproportionately exposed to networks and resources that contribute to activism, exposure to politically relevant group-based resources leads to higher levels of activism relative to middle class Blacks who are not exposed to such resources. These findings suggest that political activism is largely a collective endeavor and not simply an individual, self-interested, calculated act among educated Black Americans. It is arguable that middle class Blacks still largely rely upon social networks within Black churches and social organizations for information about salient social-political issues that contribute to activism. Additionally, middle class Blacks continue to develop relevant civic skills within their churches through their involvement in church-related outreach activities. They also continue to rely upon the Black print media for information about relevant social-political issues.

Because non-college-educated Blacks largely lack the political resources that an education affords, they are largely reliant upon these group-based resources for their political education. To the extent that they are unexposed to these resources is indicative of their relatively low rates of civic involvement. However, when they are involved in churches that discuss politics, are active in church organizations, are involved in Black social change organizations, and are exposed to Black print mediums, they receive similar political benefits as educated Blacks who are also exposed to these resources. In fact, while common fate has no impact on the political involvement of college-educated Blacks, non-college-educated Blacks with high levels of common fate are motivated to be politically active. This finding suggests that among the non-college-educated, a sense of their common fate with their racial group serves as a motivational force to activism. This finding also suggests that because middle class Blacks possess political resources that a college education affords, they are likely to be politically active regardless of their level of racial consciousness. In sum, for less educated Blacks, their elevated levels of activism are likely due to their involvement in social networks with resource-rich individuals that share relevant issue information with them and provide a mode to act upon these issues.

This study, as others have, shows that people of higher social economic standing are more likely to be politically active than those of lower social standing (Verba et al.,

1995; Verba et al., 1997; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Tate, 1993). Prior work suggests that persons of higher income and education are more likely to understand how the political process works and are more likely to be internally and externally efficacious (Verba et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1997; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Tate, 1993). Furthermore, these persons are more likely than their counterparts to be integrated in social networks that encourage political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1997; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). These networks encourage participation through the provision of relevant information, in providing a space for the development of civic skills, and are often targeted for mobilization by parties, interest groups, or candidates (Verba et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1997; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). That middle class persons are more likely than the poor to be exposed to such networks is indicative of their heightened levels of activism. While this study shows that regardless of educational background, exposure to politically relevant group resources leads to electoral activism, other work suggests that poor Blacks are less likely than middle class Blacks to be exposed to group-based resources that lead to activism to begin with (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1997; Tate, 1991; Tate, 1993). The disparity between educated and less-educated Blacks in their exposure to these resources has implications for who participates in the political process and who does not as well as whose interests are represented and whose are not. This is important because the views of Black activists, who tend to be of higher economic standing, are strikingly more conservative in regards to economic-based issues than of Blacks in general (Verba et al., 1995). The political distortion that exists between activist and non-activist is important because it has implications on what policymakers hear and interpret as important issues that concern the group.

Again, the strength of this study is in pointing out the independent strength of the identified resource variables on political activism. Accordingly, this work suggests that there are a number of mechanisms by which group resources can lead to political activism among Black Americans. Attending churches with high levels of political discourse, involvement in church outreach activities, membership in a Black social change organization, maintaining heightened levels of racial identity with other Blacks, and being exposed to Black print mediums are all important factors that independently encourage political activism among Black Americans.

Future Research

The independent strength of these relationships may lead to future inquiries concerning the role of the identified group resources in shaping political attitudes among Black Americans. More specifically, future research should investigate: 1) if membership in politicized churches, Black social change organizations, and exposure to Black print mediums has an impact on Blacks' social-political ideology, feelings of Afrocentricity, or of cynicism towards political and economic institutions, and; 2) if

exposure leads to similar or different political attitudes between the college and non-college-trained, between men and women, and between older and younger cohorts of Black Americans. Finally, it should be investigated if the length of exposure to these cultural institutions produce stronger political attitudes that lead to heightened levels of activism in not only political, but in civic activities (i.e., neighborhood block associations, Parent Teacher Associations, and other volunteer organizations) as well.

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