

Racial Disenfranchisement

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Abstract

Inquiries into racial disenfranchisement offer a crucial lens through which to critically assess the capacity of the US political system to sufficiently respond to the demands of an increasingly diverse society. Various social science disciplines have employed a range of theoretical frameworks and methodologies to explore the institutional, cultural, and psychological antecedents of disenfranchisement, as well as strategies to achieve racial equity. This essay reviews a small slice of the scholarly perspectives offered on racial inequity. It provides particular emphasis on theories of racial subjugation, racial attitudes, and the political behavior of racial minorities. The discussion of current and future trends in research on racial disenfranchisement explores the questions raised and insight offered by examinations of the distinct experiences of diverse racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as the potential impact of the “Obama era” on the state of race relations in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Disenfranchisement is conventionally understood as the revocation of an individual or group’s basic citizenship rights, particularly with respect to voting. But across multiple disciplines of social science, inquiries into the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups—typically racial and ethnic minorities—entail examinations of the societal forces that diminish the broader political influence of minorities. Classic and emergent work has both (i) examined the impact of this diminished political influence on the distinct experiences of minority groups and (ii) explored the means through which these minority groups can achieve greater access and equity within the system.

Much of the scholarly work on racial disenfranchisement has been framed around assessing the opportunities and constraints offered by the political, legal, and cultural landscape for racial minorities in the post-Civil Rights era. Studies arising from this framing include explorations of the evolution of citizen attitudes on race and examinations of how legal and political institutions have evolved in order to adapt to (or counteract) the political influence of

African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other racial minorities. Still other work focuses on the attitudes, ideologies, and strategies cultivated and adopted by minority group members as they have sought to capitalize on the removal of formal legal barriers to their economic and political participation. Together, these lines of work paint a picture of a constant tug of war between racial and ethnic minority groups seeking various forms of equity and restitution, and legal and political elites responding with either retrenchment or rapprochement, contingent on various factors.

This essay summarizes relevant research, identifies intriguing lines of emergent work, and discusses inquiries and methods that may guide future work and shed further insight on the distinct role of race in US politics.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

THEORIES OF RACIAL SUBJUGATION

Myrdal (1944) labeled the treatment of racial minorities in the United States—particularly African-Americans—as an “American Dilemma.” According to him, (White) Americans were torn between a genuine commitment to the ideal of liberty and justice for all, and a steadfast belief in the tenets of White Supremacy. Although Myrdal describes in painstaking detail the routine injustice of the Jim Crow south, he ultimately concluded that as more Americans learned of the plight of their fellow citizens, the American creed would overwhelm the prejudicial instincts of White America. This work was well received and its perspective on race relations became the dominant paradigm among political observers and within much of the social sciences (Steinberg, 2007). Over time, however, several scholars would offer a somewhat different point of view.

The *theory of group position*, introduced by Blumer (1958), represents an alternative assessment of race relations. In this account, racial discrimination is not simply borne out of ignorance but instead serves an instrumental function by helping to preserve the privileged status of the dominant groups in society. Moreover, intergroup strife and competition derive from historically and elite-driven judgments about where in-group members ought to be arrayed in the socio-political hierarchy relative to out-group members. Omi and Winant (1994) develop a similar framework with their *racial formation theory*. They argue that race is a socially constructed category, and the cultural and political significance that society attaches to this identity permeates virtually all domains of life. They maintain that socially constructed race categories evolve and adapt with society, and are constantly leveraged by contemporary elites to establish and reinforce unequal power relations between groups.

Following this theoretical foundation, numerous influential works examine the proliferation of either cultural norms or institutional policies that work to reinforce the political, economic, and legal subjugation minorities. For example, in *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Gilens (2000) traces Americans' fierce opposition to welfare policy to the media practice of systematically juxtaposing African-American images with negative coverage of poverty and welfare. This association has subsequently encouraged, according to Gilens, White Americans to attribute their negative stereotypes about Blacks to welfare recipients and welfare policy more generally. In addition, early *critical race theory* proponent Bell (1972) offers in *Race, Racism and American Law* an exhaustive historical analysis of the manner in which racial subjugation has been preserved and reinforced by the American rule of law, citing examples ranging from *Dred Scott v. Sandford* to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

RACIAL ATTITUDES

The central question in the racial attitudes literature is whether racial considerations influence political judgments in contemporary American politics. Virtually all scholars agree that the biological racism that was so prevalent throughout the country as late as the 1950s has almost completely disappeared in the twenty-first century. However, one group of scholars maintains that a new form of racial prejudice has emerged in the post-Civil Rights era and this modern form of bias remains a prominent feature in society. Some critics argue that this ostensibly "new" form of racism actually represents nonracial ideological conflicts in the electorate. Other critics accept the basic premise that racial considerations remain salient but dispute that this represents a "new" form of prejudice.

Kinder and Sears (1981; also see Kinder and Sanders 1996) contend that a new form of racial prejudice, alternatively called symbolic racism or racial resentment, arose in the aftermath of the civil unrest that plagued American cities in the late 1960s. According to these authors, these events caused Whites to feel angry rather than sympathetic toward African-Americans. Many Whites felt that minorities should be grateful for the progress achieved through the Civil Rights Movement and that any lingering racial inequities were primarily due to Blacks' reluctance to fully embrace the Protestant work ethic. For this reason, many Whites were inclined to oppose policies designed to assist African-Americans. Inherent racial inferiority, however, did not play a significant role in these attitudes.

Sniderman and Carmines (1997) advance an opposing view on White racial attitudes. They argue that White opposition to policies that would disproportionately advance minority interests are driven not by Whites'

antipathy toward racial minorities, but rather by their principled commitment to race-neutral political values, such as limited government and equality of opportunity. Moreover, they purport to show that policies framed in universal terms are far more likely to engender support than race-specific policies such as affirmative action.

Bobo and Tuan (2006) are less interested in whether racial considerations influence political judgments, but rather how this influence is manifest. In order to address this question, Bobo and Tuan focus on the issue of Native American (Chippewa) treaty rights dispute in Wisconsin. In brief, this issue involved a court decision in Wisconsin in the 1980s that enforced long-standing treaty rights for Native Americans in the state involving access to fishing. The authors examine four possible theoretical explanations for White opposition to the enforcement of Native American treaty rights: *self-interest concerns*; the ostensibly race-neutral *injustice frame*; *traditional prejudice* and *symbolic racism*; and finally the *group position theory*. Bobo and Tuan argue that the *group position theory* represents an effective synthesis of all the theories they examine. Consistent with their expectations, they report that there is considerable overlap across the four theories—consistent with the group position framework—but *not* consistent with the injustice frame or symbolic racism. Thus, Bobo and Tuan conclude that the most effective and efficient way to characterize intergroup relations in the Wisconsin treaty dispute, and more broadly, is with the group position theory.

STRATEGIES: RACIAL MINORITY INCORPORATION AND REPRESENTATION

Black Power, by Ture and Hamilton (1967), argues that the advancement of African-Americans must be preceded by the creation of an autonomous Black economic and political power base. As a result, interracial political coalitions are deemed to be of only secondary importance. This groundbreaking book has largely set the tone for subsequent works, which attempt to pinpoint the best means through which that power base can be established and sustained.

In their influential treatise on the evolution of racial politics *Protest is not Enough*, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) offer a model through which minorities attain greater political access by becoming incorporated into the local governing regime. They argue that the strategic paradigm pursued by minorities must undergo a necessary shift from *demand-protest* to *electoral-mobilization* activities. In short, the election of minorities to office should be viewed as the most effective means through which minorities can achieve their political goals. Accordingly, much of the subsequent research has explored the impact of minority office holding on the socio-economic status of minority communities.

Bobo and Gilliam (1990) examine the political consequences of *descriptive representation*, a condition met when a group shares a relevant demographic characteristic such as race or gender with their elected official. They argue that the presence of a Black mayor signals to African-American constituents that there is a greater likelihood of responsiveness from the local governing regime. As a result, Blacks are more trusting, more efficacious, more informed about local government, and more likely to participate at greater rates than Blacks who lack descriptive representation. In a similar vein, Tate (2003) finds that African-American constituents who are represented by Black members of Congress (MCs) are significantly more supportive of their legislators than comparable citizens with White representatives. She also finds, however, that Blacks are not more likely to participate in congressional elections when Black MCs represent them.

Finally, challenging the work of Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984), Smith (1996) makes the provocative claim that the methods of incorporation sought by Blacks have led to unfavorable results, as litigation has been met with symbolism, the ascension of Blacks to elite positions has resulted in their cooptation, and forceful demands for responsiveness from Blacks have been ignored. Indeed, as the debate over the best strategies for attainment of political equity rage on, they largely remain guided by the framework established by Ture and Hamilton (1967).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

RACIAL DIVERSITY

Much of the foundational work shaping the scholarly understanding of racial disenfranchisement has been limited in focus to the Black–White paradigm. One of the most promising recent directions of race work has been the proliferation of work on the attitudes, ideologies, and behavior of non-Black racial and ethnic groups. For instance, scholars have explored the political consequences of Hispanics' adherence to their respective national-origin identities as opposed to a pan-ethnic "Hispanic" or "Latino" racial identity, as well as the conditions under which a pan-ethnic Hispanic identity becomes more salient (Barrera, 2008; Barreto, Manzano, Ramirez, & Rim, 2009; Beltran, 2010; Hajnal and Lee, 2011; Lee, 2008). Further, a number of scholars conducted a unique survey of Arab Americans in the Detroit area to examine the tenuous relationship between ethnicity and citizenship in the post-9/11 era (see Baker *et al.*, 2009).

APPLYING PSYCHOLOGY TO RACIAL ATTITUDE STUDIES

Social psychologists and political scientists have recently ventured into new and controversial territory as they have sought to understand contemporary racial attitudes. For example, a provocative piece by Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, and Jackson (2008) addresses two basic research questions. First, they examine whether people continue to associate African-Americans with apes. And, second, assuming this association still exists they wonder if this influences individual judgments about criminal suspects, particularly when the alleged perpetrator is Black. In order to answer these questions, Goff and his colleagues rely on five different experimental studies. In spite of the fact that overt associations between African-Americans and apes have long since become unacceptable in mainstream culture, the authors find that their experimental subjects *are* more likely to implicitly associate Blacks with apes. They also report that by subliminally priming subjects to think about apes, but not big cats, their subjects were more likely to condone police brutality directed against a Black suspect, but not a White suspect. Schreiber and Iaconi (2011) wade deep into the waters of neuroscience, by exploring how brain-imaging technology can illuminate long-standing political questions. By identifying which areas of the brain are activated by exposure to stereotypic and counter-stereotypic images, the authors seek to determine whether individuals' aversion to negative depictions of racial minorities is driven by the minorities' race or simply by the norm violation being depicted. Finally, Perez (2010) finds evidence from survey experiments that individuals' subconscious attitudes about immigrants—measured through implicit association tests (IAT)—are nontrivial predictors of their conscious political judgments.

ASSESSING POLICY IMPACTS OF STRATEGIES FOR MINORITY ADVANCEMENT

Finally, emergent work has made use of sophisticated methodological techniques to examine the policy outputs associated with differing strategies employed by minorities to achieve racial equality. For instance, Hopkins and McCabe (working paper 2011) employ a regression discontinuity design to examine how and where the expenditures of Black mayors differ from those of White mayors. In his forthcoming book, Daniel Gillion (2013) builds and tests a model of political protest and finds evidence that over the past several decades, the three branches of government have demonstrated varying forms of responsiveness to African-American protest activity. Finally, Phoenix, Piston, and Hutchings (working paper 2013) utilize a unique multi-racial and multi-ethnic national survey and find that under particular contexts, Black citizens participate *less* under African-American mayors than Blacks living under White mayors. Current and future research

will continue to challenge conventional wisdom on the opportunities and constraints facing minority groups seeking an end to continued patterns of disenfranchisement.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

FUTURE TRENDS IN RESEARCH

As scholarly inquiries into the disenfranchisement and empowerment of racial minorities continue to evolve and adapt to new opportunities and constraints in relevant fields of research, a number of trends will likely be prevalent. One of those is continued and growing reliance on innovative *experimental designs*. Expect to see the influence of experiments rises sharply as sources of novel information on race-relevant attitudes, policy preferences, and participation strategies. This change is due, in part, to the growth of Internet survey firms that have made the acquisition of experimental data—on minority and nonminority populations—more feasible.

The primary virtue of well-designed experiments is that they allow the researcher to isolate the precise causal mechanism responsible for some politically relevant outcome. There are, of course, limitations to this strategy as well with perhaps the chief drawback being the artificial nature of many experiments, particularly lab experiments. Some recent work has successfully avoided this limitation but introducing randomized experiments into the field. An excellent example of this method is found in the work of Butler and Broockman (2011). These researchers randomly assigned state legislators across the nation to receive different versions of an e-mail request for information on how to register to vote. One version of the request was attributed to “Jake Mueller,” while another version was attributed to “DeShawn Jackson.” The expectation was that legislators would perceive Mueller as White and Jackson as African-American and the research question was whether “race” would influence legislative responsiveness. Butler and Broockman uncover strong evidence that White state legislators—both Democrats and Republicans—were significantly less responsive to the request of an African-American constituent compared to the identical request from a White constituent. Interestingly, minority legislators were systematically biased *in favor* of the Black constituent.

Another trend expected to proliferate in future studies is continued exploration of the neurological underpinnings of racial attitudes. Many scholars have demonstrated that the more racially tolerant political environment of the last half-century has not necessarily been accompanied by similarly broad shifts in support among Whites for policies designed to achieve racial equality. Given this apparent puzzle, scholars of racial attitudes have been forced

to rely on increasing subtle and unobtrusive methods to explain public opinion on matters of race. Studies exploring the manner in which racial attitudes are related to existing predispositions and personality types constitute a promising vein of inquiry. Further, rigorous examinations of which areas of the brain are activated by race-relevant stimuli can lend great insight to the individual origins of racial attitudes.

Finally, a trend expected to characterize the future of research of racial disenfranchisement is the continued departure from the binary Black–White paradigm and an increased examination of multiple racial and ethnic minority groups. Scholars will likely continue to glean novel information about the ideologies and behavior of distinct racial and ethnic group populations concentrated in particular geographic regions, through either ethnographic studies or fielding of small-scale surveys. The 2003 Detroit Arab American Study serves as a prototype for such data collective endeavors. In addition, the 2004 National Politics Study is a rare example of a nationally representative survey data set that is a rich source of information on oversamples Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Caribbean respondents. Moving forward scholars can utilize such data—and find creative means of collecting their own—that allow them to not only make inferences about distinct minority groups but also compare ideologies and behaviors between groups. Such work will provide much needed new paradigms for understanding minority disenfranchisement.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES MOVING FORWARD

The Obama era potentially represents a new chapter of minority mobilization and incorporation into mainstream politics, one fraught with unique new challenges and opportunities. This era will both test established paradigms of understanding minority disenfranchisement and provide valuable testing ground for new paradigms.

Emergent work has already arisen to challenge the notion that the election of the first president of African descent signals that race is no longer a significant inhibiting factor in the lives of racial minorities. Hutchings (2009) finds a wealth of evidence that even at the outset of the Obama era, the attitudinal divide between Blacks and Whites remains as stark as ever. And further, the divide remains about as large among younger age cohorts. Piston (2010) finds evidence that adherence to racial stereotypes played a significantly larger role in voters' decision not to vote for Obama than it has for previous Democratic presidential candidates, suggesting that Obama lost some White support due simply to his race.

Future work will inevitably grapple with the impact that Obama's tenure has had on the political orientations, judgments, and outcomes of racial and ethnic minorities. Does descriptive representation at this

level breed increased activism or complacency? How does the presence of an African-American in office affect the political strategies undertaken by minorities to articulate and aggregate their demands? Will counter-insurgent tactics such as protests be embraced or shunned? And going forward, does the presence of a Black president significantly alter the broader strategic paradigm of minority incorporation? Will minority leaders coalesce around a strategy of mobilizing citizen action, or pursue with more vigor a strategy of recruiting and grooming minorities for attainment of elite positions? Finally, to what extent will minority incorporation at this level engender retrenchment from the old guard?

Another key question concerns how the rapidly changing demographics of the American electorate—particularly the rise of the Latino American population as a “sleeping giant”—will influence race relations at the citizen and elite levels. Immigrant groups have the potential to dramatically alter the electoral landscape, leading scholars to ask how immigrants cultivate political identities and what strategies they will pursue for incorporation. To what extent will the processes of political identity formation and political behavioral orientation for Latino and Asian immigrants be similar to or deviate from the process for African-Americans? Going forward, what are the prospects for coalition or competition between groups for economic and political resources? What strategies will be adopted by political elites to recruit these immigrant groups into their folds?

For scholars to gain the most leverage on these questions, they must be willing to revise and at times even upset the extant modes of thinking about minority ideologies and behavior. Forging new ground in our empirical understanding of racial disenfranchisement requires continued forward thinking, undergirded by the theoretical foundations laid by previous work, while not bound to the paradigms established by such work.

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