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Closing the Gap: Race, Associational Involvement, and Participation in American Politics

**Bilal Sekou
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Abstract

Studies show that during the 1950s and 1960s, through the use of group-level resources—membership and activism in voluntary associations and churches—Blacks were able to participate in politics at levels comparable to that of Whites. But in this investigation, the changed, current relationship between race, organizational activism, and political participation in the post-civil rights era is examined. The bonding-bridging classification scheme developed by Robert Putnam and others is used to determine whether, in the post-civil rights era, Blacks continue to receive a greater boost to political participation than Whites from their involvement in voluntary groups. Bridging social capital organizations should have a much stronger impact on political activism than bonding social capital organizations and involvement in voluntary groups should continue to help narrow the racial gap in political participation. However, the findings demonstrate that, overall, in the post-civil rights era, both Black and White bridging group activists are more likely to be involved in politics. But, because Whites are effectively deploying their organizational resources in the post-civil rights era, joining and participating in a voluntary group may no longer be enough to narrow the racial gap in political participation. Meanwhile, frequency of church attendance and being active in the church are largely unrelated to Black political participation in the post-civil rights era, which was surprising given the historic centrality of the Black church in American politics.

Introduction

For decades, political scientists have been using a resource-based approach to explain why some people participate in politics while others do not. Some studies show that individual-level resources such as one's socioeconomic status

(e.g., race, income, education, and occupation) or one's psychological orientation towards politics (e.g., interest in politics, knowledge of politics, political efficacy, and sense of civic duty) affects the likelihood one will become involved in the political system (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Verba and Nie, 1972; Conway, 2000). Other studies show that group-level resources such as a heightened level of group consciousness, and membership and activism in voluntary associations or churches influences the decision to become politically active (Almond and Verba 1965; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003).

Generally speaking, students of politics have not devoted as much attention to group-level resources as determinants of political engagement as they have to individual-level resources. This is unfortunate because, as Theda Skocpol points out: "organizations concentrate resources, voice, and clout in democratic politics—so we should care as much about the organizational as we do the individual level of politics" (Skocpol 2004, 2).

For students of racial politics, there is one other reason why we should care as much about the group-level as we do the individual-level of politics. Racial differences in rates of involvement in voluntary associations may either generate or sustain social and economic disparities between the races (Stoll, 2001). Research using data collected during the 1950s and early 1960s found that Blacks were less active in politics than Whites because they lacked the social and economic resources possessed by Whites—Blacks had lower levels of education, income and occupational prestige (Woodward and Roper 1950; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Matthews and Prothro 1966). By the mid-1960s, however, the racial gap in political activity began to close significantly. Studies showed that through the use of group-level resources, Blacks were able to participate in politics at levels comparable to that of Whites (Verba and Nie 1972; Shingles 1981; Miller 1982; McAdam 1982; Morris 1984) and subsequently pressure decision-makers in order to secure civil rights and economic security for the group (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984).

But that was approximately 40 years ago; the nature of Black associational life has changed dramatically since then. Organizations once able to mobilize large numbers of Blacks for political activity either no longer exist—e.g., Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—or are a mere shadow of their former self—i.e., Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Moreover, with the growth of the middle class, many well-educated, high-income, Blacks have turned toward organizations less political in their orientation (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to assess the impact of changes in the organizational infrastructure of the Black community, I examine the relationship between associational involvement and Black political participation in the post-civil rights era; second, using the bonding-bridging classification scheme developed by Robert Putnam (2000) and others, I determine whether in the post-civil rights era, Blacks continue to receive a greater boost to political participation than Whites from involvement in voluntary associations. In this investigation, I am able to demonstrate that in the post-civil rights era, organizational activism continues to enhance participation by Blacks in the political system. I am also able to show that because Whites receive as much (or even more) of a boost to participation in politics from organizational involvement in the post-civil rights period, that joining and participating in voluntary groups do not appear to be enough to completely close the racial gap in participation.

Civil Society, Social Capital and Political Participation

In the United States, when it comes to the game of politics, most citizens are spectators, not players. Regardless of the type of activity—whether it is voting, working for a political campaign, attending a political rally or speech, writing a letter to a newspaper, congressman or senator, participating in a demonstration, or running for office—the public is not very engaged (Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Conway, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Why are so many people on the sidelines? Over the years, scholars have offered a plethora of

explanations. For this article, I apply a resource-based model to explain why some people participate in politics while others do not (see, e.g., Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993).

According to a resource-based model, one's socioeconomic standing or involvement in social networks generates resources, which can be used to participate in the political system. So, how are these resources used for participation in politics? Individual-level resources are thought to increase the likelihood that one will possess the skills, time, knowledge, and attitudes needed to effectively engage in politics (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Meanwhile, group-level resources are thought to increase the likelihood that people will be active in politics by, for example, enhancing one's civic skills – such as, the ability to organize and run a meeting (Verba and Nie 1972; Shingles 1981; Miller 1982; Tate 1994). Group-level resources are particularly important because they provide the foundation societies need to build social capital (Putnam 2000).

Social Capital

Ever since the publication of Robert Putnam's landmark investigation, *Bowling Alone* (2000), foundations have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into research on civil society and social capital. Scholars, for their part, have devoted countless hours to research on these two concepts, producing a mountain of scholarly papers and books.¹

¹ Putnam's work has been highly influential, but he was not the first student of American politics to explore the richness of civic life in America. For nine months in 1831, twenty-seven year-old Alexis de Tocqueville and an associate, traveled across the United States taking notes on different aspects of the nation's political and economic systems. After returning to France, Tocqueville published his observations in two volumes. The focus of *Democracy in America* (1969) was why a republican form of government was working in the United States, when it had failed (or was failing) in many other places around the world, including France.

According to Tocqueville, a key reason for America's success was the variety and depth of the nation's civic life. In an often-quoted passage from *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand

Current research shows that America is a nation of joiners (Skocpol 2004). Our “unusual proclivity” for joining civic groups has resulted in a rich and varied civil society (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2004). What is civil society? There are numerous definitions in the social capital literature. For this study, we use the definition: “Civil society consists of those intermediate institutions, such as private voluntary organizations – sports clubs, school fraternities and sororities, religious organizations, charities, and the like – that are positioned somewhere between the family and the state, and which, remarkably, help to transform self-interested individuals into public-minded citizens” (Skocpol 2004, 450).

Proponents of a vibrant civil society make some broad generalizations about the beneficial effects of membership and activism in voluntary associations. According to Theiss-Morse and Hibbing: “Volunteering is said to instill civic values, enhance political behavior, and improve democracy and society” (Theiss-Morse 2005, 230). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady contend: “Organizational involvement intersects with political participation in complicated ways. Most fundamentally, many voluntary associations take political stands, and their attempts at influencing outcomes constitute a crucial source of input about citizen views and preferences” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 58-59). Skocpol writes: “Voluntary associations have always rivaled voting as pathways Americans follow into community and public affairs. Organized voluntary groups mediate between government and society, empower participating citizens, and embody relationships between leaders and supporters” (Skocpol 1999, 462). In short, voluntary organizations are gateways to community life and to political activism.

What, then, is social capital? In general, academics operating from within a diverse range of scholarly disciplines have used the language of *capital* (i.e.,

different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. ... Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America, Tocqueville (1969, 513-517).

Tocqueville’s observations about the inner-working of American democracy have inspired generations of scholars interested in social capital.

human capital, physical capital, cultural capital, and social capital) for years as a vehicle for understanding the mechanisms that shape individual's life chances and the well-being of communities. While most forms of capital are thought to *primarily* benefit the individual, it is argued though that society *primarily* benefits from social capital. Putnam writes, "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000, 19). According to Stolle and Rochon (1998), voluntary associations help to extend bonds of trust, cooperation, and norms of reciprocity beyond the boundaries of the group to the larger society. Putnam contends that the health of America society – i.e., its communities, its democracy, its economy – depend on the nation having a rich civil society and sufficient stocks of social capital.

How do voluntary associations transform self-interested individuals into public-minded citizens? There are at least three ways. First, voluntary groups shore up the "civic skills" of their members. People learn, for example, how to give a speech/presentation in front of a crowd, participate in a decision-making meeting, or write an effective letter. Second, members may be exposed to mobilization by political leaders and other groups. For example, a political candidate may give a speech at the group's meeting. Finally, civic groups may mobilize their own members for participation. For example, the Imam at the mosque may give a sermon about a political issue (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

Data

The study uses data from the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey (SCBS), a national probability survey undertaken by the Saguaro Seminar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The SCBS is a "landmark" survey; it is the first attempt to systematically measure social capital as well as its assumed correlates, especially within communities. The national sample (N = 3003) was conducted by telephone using random-digit-dialing

(RDD) during July-November, 2000, and contains an over-sample of Black (N = 502; weighted N = 351) respondents.

Hypotheses

Bonding-Bridging Social Capital Building Associations

Putnam draws a distinction between two types of social capital building associations, *bonding* organizations and *bridging* organizations. Though Putnam sees positive societal value in both types of groups, he believes that bridging social capital organizations are more likely to transform private individuals into public-oriented citizens. Because they are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages (Putnam 2000, 22),” bridging organizations promote broader identities and reciprocity beyond the narrow self. Because of their outward orientations, bridging organizations are also “better for linkage of external assets and for information diffusion” (Putnam 2000, 22). Civil rights organizations and youth service groups are examples given by Putnam.

Membership in bonding social capital organizations tends to be based on kinship or one’s class-status. Because they are “inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups (Putnam 2000, 22),” bonding organizations tend to foster specific rather than broader reciprocity, and narrower in-group loyalties and strong out-group animosity. Putnam listed fraternal organizations and fashionable country clubs as examples.

H1: Drawing on Putnam’s theory, I expect bridging social capital organizations to have a stronger effect on political participation than bonding social capital organizations.

Race, Associational Involvement and Political Participation

By now, the origin of the modern Black Civil Rights Movement is familiar to most people. Galvanized by the NAACP’s legal victory against Jim Crow segregation in public education and the successful challenge to Jim Crow seating on public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, “Blacks became bolder and more aggressive and began to press for their rights with relentless vigor” (Franklin and Moss, 523). At first, Black churches (especially those associated

with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its charismatic leader, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.), and later, interracial coalitions of students and activists such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), mobilized the Black community (rich and poor) for marches and demonstrations, sit-ins, freedom rides, and voter-registration drives (Morris 1984). Verba and Nie (1972) in their landmark investigation, *Political Participation in America*, found that a reason the racial gap in political activism narrowed significantly during the 1960s was because churches and voluntary associations in the Black community had effectively mobilized Blacks for political participation.

What is the relationship between voluntary associations and Black's political behavior in the post-civil rights era? Research suggests that the effect is less pronounced than in the past. Using the 1967 data from the original Verba and Nie (1972) study and NORC-GSS data collected 20 years later, Nie and his colleagues (1988) showed that Blacks received a greater boost to political participation (voting, campaigning, and contacting activities) from involvement in voluntary groups during the 1960s than during the 1980s. But they also found that because Blacks continued to deploy their organizational resources effectively, the racial gap in political activism had continued to narrow.² The SCBS data will provide an opportunity for a much more comprehensive test

² See also McMiller (2000) and Tate (1994) for a contrary interpretation of the effect of organizational resources on Black political participation in the post-civil rights era.

Using data from the 1984-1988 National Black Election Study (NBES), Tate concludes that though organizational members were more likely to have voted during the 1984 presidential primary, organizational membership was not significantly related to turnout in the general election in either 1984 or 1988. Tate, however, appears to underestimate the impact of organizational involvement because she fails to differentiate between voluntary organizations based on their capacity to stimulate involvement in politics by their members. Specifically, she treats all organizations – political clubs, school fraternities and sororities, professional organizations, and sports clubs – as if they are equally effective in getting their members active. A number of studies show that some organizations have a greater capacity to promote their members' involvement in the political system. For a summary, see McMiller (2005).

across a wider range of political activities—electoral and non-electoral—and organizations than Nie and his colleagues data allowed them to do.

H2: All else being equal, I expect that involvement in voluntary associations to have a stronger effect on political activism by Blacks than Whites, therefore helping to narrow the racial gap in political participation.

Analysis

Involvement in Voluntary Associations

Empirical investigations of racial differences in patterns of membership and activism have produced mixed results. Early studies using data collected during the 1950s and early 1960s reported that Whites tended to have higher levels of participation than Blacks (Wright and Hyman 1958; Hyman and Wright 1971). Studies using data collected during the late 1960s and early 1970s found that once controls for socioeconomic status were taken into account, Blacks tended to join and participate in voluntary associations at higher rates than Whites (Olsen 1970; Verba and Nie 1972; Williams, Babchuk and Johnson 1973; McPherson 1977).³

For the 2000 SCBS, each respondent was questioned about their involvement in twelve different types of voluntary associations.⁴ Table 1 compares each group based on the percentage of respondents who report being active. These data reveal few significant racial differences in organizational activism. Not surprisingly, Whites (4 percent) were substantially less likely to report involvement in an ethnic, nationality or civil rights organization than were Blacks (17 percent; $\chi^2=95.62$, $p=.00$). Probably because of their superior

³ Of all the theories, perhaps the best one offered to account for the exaggerated rates of organizational involvement by Blacks during this period was the Ethnic Community Theory. The theory interpreted high rates of organizational involvement by Blacks as “a function of high levels of racial and group consciousness and group norms that require participation in social activities,” Putnam (2000, 84). See also Olsen (1970), Williams, Babchuk and Johnson (1973), and McPherson (1977).

⁴ The SCBS organization measure is participation in twelve types of groups, ranging from political clubs to school fraternities and sororities. A value of “0” indicates that the respondent participated, and a value of “1” indicates that the respondent did not participate.

socioeconomic status, Whites were much more likely to report involvement in a professional, trade, farm, or business group (27 percent) than were Blacks (18 percent; $\chi^2 = 13.20, p = .00$). Last, Blacks (21 percent) were more likely than Whites (16 percent) to participate in a self help program ($\chi^2 = 7.03, p = .01$).

In sum, the data presented in Table 1 shows that the racial gap in associational membership and activism has, for the most part, disappeared. Blacks and Whites have similar rates of participation in voluntary groups. In the next section of this article, I use binary regression to examine the extent to which involvement in voluntary associations helps to close the racial gap in political participation.

Race, Associational Involvement and Political Participation

For this study, associational activism is measured in terms of multiple active group affiliations. Research shows that multiple active group affiliations may be a key to closing the racial gap in political participation. Verba and Nie (1972) found that the racial gap in political participation was narrowed significantly by multiple active affiliations with voluntary groups. But they also showed because there tended to be a greater number of White organizational activists than Black organizational activists, Whites generally received a greater boost to political participation from involvement in voluntary associations. However, their findings are based on data collected over 40 years ago.

To test Verba and Nie's findings using more recent data, I construct two measures of multiple-group involvement in voluntary associations based on the bonding-bridging social capital organizational typology (see, also, Hill and Matsubayashi 2005) given by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000 22-24).⁵ As

⁵ Putnam makes it clear that this distinction should not be viewed too rigidly; many organizations "bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others" (2000, 23). He cites the Knights of Columbus as an example of a group that was started to bridge across ethnic lines and bond along religious and gender lines. He also contends that internet chat groups bring together people who share similar levels of education and ideology but who are dissimilar in terms of geography, gender, age, and religion. Consequently, Putnam concludes that "bonding and bridging are not 'either-or' categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but 'more or less'

Figure 1 shows, bonding groups are categorized as: labor unions; professional, trade, farm or business groups; neighborhood associations; self-help programs; senior's groups and; service or fraternal organizations. Bridging groups are categorized as: charity or social welfare organizations; ethnic, nationality or civil rights organizations; literary, art, or musical groups; political groups; veteran's groups and; youth organizations.

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare participation in bonding and bridging organizations; none of the mean difference between Blacks and Whites is large enough to be statistically significant. Hence, contrary to Verba and Nie's findings, as Table 2 shows, there was little difference in rates of multiple organizational affiliations between Blacks and Whites, regardless of the type of group being considered.

Various forms of political participation – electoral and non-electoral behavior – are explored using the SCBS.⁶ The results presented in Table 3 show that the White-Black gap in political participation remains quite wide in some instances, but has narrowed dramatically in other instances. Regarding electoral political behavior, even though more Whites say they voted in 1996 than Blacks

dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital" (Putnam 2000, 23).

⁶ Coding for variables related to electoral or nonelectoral behavior using the SCBS is as follows:

Vote in 1996: A value of "0" indicates that the respondent did not vote in 1996 presidential election, and a value of "1" indicates that the respondent did vote.

Rally: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent did not attend a political meeting or rally in the past 12 months, and a value of "1" indicates that the respondent did attend a political meeting or rally.

Petition: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent did not sign a petition in the past 12 months, and a value of "1" indicates that the respondent did sign a petition.

March: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent has not participated in demonstrations, boycotts, and marches, and a value of "1" indicates that that the respondent has participated in demonstrations, boycotts, and marches.

Community Project: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent did not work on a community project in the past 12 months, and a value of "1" indicates that the respondent did work on a community project.

(68.2 and 74.4 respectively), the percentage of Whites and Blacks who claim they attended a political meeting or rally is roughly the same. When it comes to non-electoral behavior, though, more Blacks claim that they participated in a march. Whites were substantially more likely to report signing a petition or working on a community project.

Direct logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of a number of factors on the likelihood that respondents would report that they engaged in each type of political activity. Each model contained 10 independent variables: gender, age, education, region, political interest, length of time spent in community, bonding group membership, bridging group membership, activism in the church⁷, and frequency of church attendance.⁸ As the χ^2 coefficients and

⁷ Churches, like voluntary associations, are a potent force in American politics. Putnam contends that churches and other religious institutions play a very special role in American civil society, providing “an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests, and civic recruitment” and accounting for nearly half the stock of social capital, Putnam (2000, 66). Church members, it is argued, are more likely to be involved in secular organizations, vote and engage in politics in other ways, and have more intimate social connections, Putnam (2000); see also Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005). In two studies, Verba and his colleagues (1993; 1995) found that religion is not only a powerful predictor of political activism, but also helps to close the racial gap in participation by enabling some people of color to overcome resource deficits (resulting from their lower socioeconomic statuses) that would, otherwise, prevent them from becoming active in politics.

The historic centrality of the Black church is well documented in the literature. One of the leading scholars on the Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Sociologist Aldon Morris contends:

[T]he black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. ... Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger White society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle, Morris (1982, 17).

The church continues to be a potent force in Black electoral politics. Tate (1994) using data from the 1984-1988 National Black Election Study showed that Blacks who attended politically active churches were more likely to vote for president, to vote regularly, and to participate in campaign activities in 1984, see also Harris (1994; 1995). Putnam, using data from the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey, found frequency of church attendance was a significant predictor of whether one voted in 1996.

significance levels presented in Table 4 show, the models were statistically significant, indicating that each model was able to distinguish between respondents who reported and did not report participating in each type of political activity.

Consistent with the literature (for a summary, see, Conway 2000), variables such as education and political interest make unique statistically significant contributions across the models. At the same time, these data make it clear that involvement in a voluntary association was one of the most important predictors of participation in the political system. With a few exceptions, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, the results of the logistic regression provide strong

⁸ Coding for variables related to electoral and non-electoral behavior relative to socioeconomic and demographic factors is as follows:

Gender: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent is a male, and a value of "1" indicates a female respondent.

Age: age of respondent at time of interview.

Education: a value of "1" indicates a response of "less than high school," a value of "2" indicates a response of "high school diploma/GED," a value of "3" indicates a response of "some college," a value of "4" indicates a response of "bachelor's degree, or more."

Length of time spent in community: a value of "1" indicates a response of "less than one year," a value of "2" indicates a response of "one to five years," a value of "3" indicates a response of "six to ten years," a value of "4" indicates a response of "eleven to twenty years," a value of "5" indicates a response of "more than twenty years," and a value of "6" indicates a response of "all my life."

Region: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent is not from the South, a value of "1" indicates that the respondent is from the South.

Political Interest: a value of "1" indicates a response of "not at all interested," a value of "2" indicates a response of "only slightly interested," a value of "3" indicates a response of "somewhat interested," a value of "4" indicates a response of "very interested."

Active in Church: a value of "0" indicates that the respondent does not participate in church activities besides services, and a value of "1" indicates that the respondent does participate.

Frequency of Attendance: a value of "0" indicates a response of less than yearly, a value of "1" indicates a response of few times per year, a value of "2" indicates a response of 1-2 times per month, a value of "3" indicates a response of almost weekly, and a value of "4" indicates a response of weekly or more often.

evidence that bridging social capital was a more important tool for boosting involvement in the political process.

On the one hand, Whites active in bonding social capital organizations were more likely to have voted than Whites active in bridging social capital organizations. On the other hand, Whites – though not Blacks – who were active members of bridging groups were more likely to have signed a petition than Whites who were active members of bonding groups. Meanwhile, Black and White bridging association activists were more likely than bonding association activists to have attended a political meeting or rally, participated in a march, and worked on a community project.

These data provide mixed results for hypothesis 2 that Blacks would get a greater boost to participation from their group affiliations than would Whites. The data demonstrate that bridging social capital boosted White, but not Black voter turnout. And, although Blacks active in bridging groups were slightly more likely to have attended a political meeting or rally and participated in a march than Whites active in bridging groups, Whites who signed a petition and worked on a community project received a slightly greater boost to participation from bridging affiliations. On the other hand, Black bonding activists were more likely to have voted and signed a petition than White bonding activists. However, White bonding members were more likely than black bonding members to have attended a meeting or rally, participated in a March, and worked on a community project. In short, because Whites got as much (or more) of a boost to participation from their group affiliations across a broad range of political activities, there is no clear evidence that organizational activism continues to help close the political participation gap between Blacks and Whites in the post-civil rights era.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I expected to find that bridging social capital organizations would have a much stronger impact on political activism than bonding social capital organizations and that involvement in voluntary associations would help

Blacks narrow the racial gap in political participation. The findings from this investigation provide mixed support for these hypotheses. On the one hand, among Blacks, with only one exception (i.e., whether one signed a petition), bridging group members received a greater boost to political participation than bonding group members. Among Whites, except when it came to voting, bridging affiliations were much more likely to enhance political activism than bonding affiliations.

On the other hand, Whites received as much of a boost to political participation from being active in a voluntary association as did Blacks. Hence, whereas during the civil rights era Blacks received a greater boost to political participation from their affiliations in voluntary associations, in the post-civil rights era, it appears that the organizational resources of the White community are being deployed as effectively as the organizational resources of the Black community for politics, helping to maintain the racial gap in political participation.

There are several reasons why Blacks may no longer receive *a greater boost* to political participation from group-level resources than Whites. First, early studies that established a strong link between group-level resources and political activity were based on data collected during the late-1960s, which was a period of unusual political activism and mobilization of the Black community. Passions have cooled, significantly, since then, in large part, because many of the fundamental concerns that energized activists and organizers during the Civil Rights Movement (i.e., voting rights, equal access to public accommodations, and access to decent and affordable housing) were largely resolved by the passage of federal laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Second, with the growth of the “new” Black middle class, different types of organizations (especially professional, occupational and educational groups) have emerged in the Black community. Unlike their predecessors from the 1950s and 1960s, these new voluntary

organizations are not as oriented toward politics or political activism (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

A very intriguing finding of this investigation is that frequency of church attendance and being active in the church are largely unrelated to Black political participation in the post-civil rights era. The church has been an important group-level resource because it is one of the *oldest* and most *resilient* institutions in the Black community. And because the church is traditionally an institution owned and ran by Black people, it has had a measure of independence which has allowed it to play an important and quite unique role in Black politics.

Most observers of American politics agree that any candidate—Democratic or Republican—running for local, state, or national office, who wants the support of the Black community must don their “Sunday’s best,” and go to church. It is because, as Political Scientist, Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, aptly puts it, the “Black churches are a site of organized, committed, well-networked, partisan faithful who can be influenced and mobilized by adept candidates” (Harris-Lacewell 2007, 180). But, according to these data, beyond voting, faith communities do not play as important a role in Black politics as they did during the Civil Rights Movement. There are several potential explanations for why this is so.

There are a number of recent organizational trends that have undermined the effectiveness of Black churches to motivate their congregation for participation in politics. First of all, and consistent with broader trends in American society, fewer Blacks are members or attend church on a regular basis. Unfortunately, for those who do not attend church, the costs of political participation may be too high, especially for the resource poor. “Those who do not attend politicized Black churches must bear the cost of deciphering and navigating the political world without this subsidy,” observes one scholar, “which means that they must gather all the information and opportunities on their own without having it provided through the church” (Harris-Lacewell, 1987, 182).

A second reason to question the continued importance of the Black church to contemporary politics is that a growing proportion of Blacks are attending nondenominational megachurches rather than the mainline Black denominations that were the backbone of the Black Civil Rights Movement. Some scholars question “whether Black megachurches have effectively maintained the African American church’s traditional commitment to an active engagement with broad Black community issues” (Smith and Tucker-Wongs 2000; as quoted in Harris-Lacewell 2007, 187). A particular worry being voiced more and more often is about the so-called “gospel of bling” – as it is derisively called – being preached from the pulpit at some (not all) large and fast-growing megachurches by prominent, influential, attractive preachers. Theologian Robert M. Franklin claims that prosperity preaching “provides sacred sanction for personal greed, obsessive materialism, and unchecked narcissism” (Franklin 2007, 18).

Finally, some scholars question the continued ability of the church to influence debates and/or shape public policy directly affecting the Black community in the post-civil rights era. The writers of *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in the Post-Civil Rights America* – the second of a two-volume study conducted by the faculty of Morehouse College designed to “examine the relation of African American churches to American political life in the late twentieth century (p. ix)” – conclude that Black churches have played a spotty role, at best, in regards to those public policies in the post-civil rights era particularly relevant to the Black community, such as affirmative action, anti-apartheid activism, crime, health care, reproductive rights, urban school reform, and welfare reform policy (Smith 2004).

This study focused only on social and political participation by Blacks and Whites. Future research might explore the question of what impact do group-based resources have on political activism by other racialized people such as Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans? It is not altogether clear which types of organizations will boost their involvement in the political system, nor is it altogether clear if the factors that increase participation by one group will

enhance participation in politics by the others. It should be noted, however, that racialized people are not monolithic. That is, their social and political behaviors do not follow one pattern all over the country. Therefore, a second direction for future research should be to construct models to examine the impact of group-based resources on political participation by “racialized” people at the local level. This shift in emphasis—from the national to the local level—is potentially important because factors that appear to have little or no impact (using data from surveys collected at the national level) may have a strong and significant effect due to unique conditions at the local level. Importantly, this emphasis will allow scholars to make comparisons across different types of communities. For example, group-based resources may facilitate political engagement more directly and significantly in a majority-minority city than in a majority-white city. Neither direction has been a focus of the literature on race, ethnicity, and American politics.

In conclusion, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, churches and other indigenous organizations helped Blacks become active in politics, narrowing the racial gap in political participation between Blacks and Whites. However, by the late 1970s, the “Movement” had collapsed from pressures both within and external to it. For this investigation, I have focused on the role that voluntary organizations play in mobilizing Blacks for participation in politics in the post-civil rights era. The findings from this study are significant in at least three ways. First, in spite of a less politically charged climate, this research demonstrates that in the post-civil rights era, organizational mobilization continues to be an important tool for activating Blacks for political participation. Second, this study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the literature on race, ethnicity and political participation.

Thus I am able to show the importance of differentiating between organizations on the basis of their capacity to stimulate political participation by their members. By using the bonding-bridging classification scheme, I show that in the post-civil rights era, Black organizational activists, especially bridging

activists, are more likely to be involved in politics. Finally, these findings help to explain why Blacks have not been able to completely close the racial gap in political activism in spite of significant gains in social and economic standing since the 1960s. These data indicate that because Whites are effectively deploying their organizational resources in the post-civil rights era, joining and participating in a voluntary group alone will not close the racial gap in political activity.

Table 1

Associational Involvement by Whites and Blacks

	% Involved		
	White	Black	Difference
Charity or social welfare organization	33.6	29.6	+4.0
Ethnic, nationality or civil rights organization	4.1	17.3	-13.2
Labor Union	11.5	13.4	-1.9
Literary, art, or musical group	16.6	21.0	-4.4
Political group	9.7	6.7	+3.0
Professional, trade, farm or business group	27.1	17.9	+9.2
Neighborhood association	20.5	24.6	-4.1
Self-help program	15.8	21.4	-5.6
Seniors group	15.1	16.2	-1.1
Service or fraternal organization	15.5	12.6	+2.9
Youth	22.6	25.1	-2.5
Veterans group	9.9	7.2	+2.7

Figure 1 - Types of Voluntary Association

- Bonding associations
 - Labor Union
 - Professional, trade, farm or business group
 - Neighborhood association
 - Self-help program
 - Seniors group
 - Service or fraternal organization
- Bridging associations
 - Charity or social welfare organization
 - Ethnic, nationality or civil rights organization
 - Literary, art, or musical group
 - Political group
 - Veterans group
 - Youth organization

Table 2

Multiple Memberships in Voluntary Associations by Race

Bonding Social Capital		% Involved	
Number of Associations	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>
None	40.0		44.9
One	29.8		26.8
Two	19.6		14.3
Three	6.7		7.8
Four or more	4.2		6.2
Sample Size			
Weighted <i>N</i>	2138		349
Overall mean	1.203		1.290
Bridging Social Capital		% Involved	
Number of Associations	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>
None	44.9		45.8
One	28.2		25.9
Two	16.1		13.9
Three	7.6		7.8
Four or more	3.2		6.6
Sample Size			
Weighted <i>N</i>	2147		350
Overall mean	.966		1.068

Table 3
White and Black Political Participation

	<u>% Participating Whites</u>	<u>Blacks</u>
Electoral		
Voted in 1996	74.4	68.2
Attend Political Meeting or Rally	16.2	16.5
Non-Electoral		
Sign a Petition	39.5	21.1
Participate in March	6.6	9.0
Work on Community Project	40.6	32.8
Sample Size		
Weighted N	2158	351

Table 4
Logistic Regression for White and Black Political Participation, Weighted

	Voted in 1996			
	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff	Std. Error
Gender (male)	-.333**	.128	-.098	.323
Age	.047***	.005	.053***	.013
Education	.718***	.069	.541***	.170
Region (South)	-.305*	.133	-.578	.339
Political Interest	.760***	.071	.743***	.167
Time in Community	.171***	.128	.320**	.111
Bonding Group	.238***	.072	.079	.172
Bridging Group	.155*	.073	-.045	.160
Active in Church	-.276	.170	-.057	.401
Church Attendance	.199*	.050	.285*	.138
Intercept	-5.956*	.073	-6.065***	.931
N	1693		301	
Model X ²	676.443***		118.755***	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 4 (continued)

Attend Political Meeting or Rally				
	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff	Std. Error
Gender (male)	.005	.135	.592	.396
Age	-.013**	.005	-.002	.015
Education	.009	.073	.475*	.198
Region (South)	.253	.138	-.521	.384
Political Interest	.848***	.096	.852***	.234
Time in Community	.072	.050	.123	.148
Bonding Group	.180**	.061	.236	.174
Bridging Group	.564***	.061	.680***	.165
Active in Church	-.181	.175	.468	.501
Church Attendance	.030	.054	.125	.174
Intercept	-5.061***	.410	-7.315***	.792
N	1768		330	
Model X ²	343.272***		97.377***	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Sign a Petition				
	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff	Std. Error
Gender (male)	-.171	.099	.212	.328
Age	-.014	.003	-.012	.013
Education	.247***	.053	.581***	.174
Region (South)	-.337***	.105	-.833**	.325
Political Interest	.499***	.059	.542**	.178
Time in Community	.006	.036	-.108	.122
Bonding Group	.080	.049	.300*	.150
Bridging Group	.355***	.051	.272*	.133
Active in Church	-.054	.130	.796	.422
Church Attendance	.020	.040	-.134	.146
Intercept	-2.256***	.266	-4.056***	.850
N	2072		330	
Model X ²	316.348***		85.483***	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 4 (continued)

	Participate in March			
	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff	Std. Error
Gender (male)	.248	.197	-.037	.450
Age	-.057***	.008	-.017	.017
Education	.047	.109	.113	.228
Region (South)	-.221	.207	-.812	.436
Political Interest	.901***	.140	.582*	.253
Time in Community	-.043	.071	.093	.164
Bonding Group	.220**	.085	.313	.192
Bridging Group	.306***	.081	.354*	.165
Active in Church	.130	.257	-.218	.584
Church Attendance	-.055	.081	-.061	.198
Intercept	-3.830***	.575	-4.298***	1.179
N	2082		331	
Model X ²	183.622***		37.474***	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

	Work on Community Project			
	<u>Whites</u>		<u>Blacks</u>	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff	Std. Error
Gender (male)	-.207	.108	.270	.288
Age	-.020***	.004	.003	.011
Education	.176**	.058	.321*	.145
Region (South)	.041	.113	.282	.296
Political Interest	.356***	.063	-.039	.145
Time in Community	.113**	.040	-.012	.103
Bonding Group	.402***	.056	.330**	.141
Bridging Group	.699***	.058	.691***	.137
Active in Church	.366**	.138	-.139	.365
Church Attendance	.119**	.044	.162	.126
Intercept	-2.909***	.296	-3.107***	.709
N	2077		332	
Model X ²	661.898***		93.963	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

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