

Will the Circle Be Unbroken? The Erosion and Transformation of African American Civic Life

Scholarly and popular debates about restoring America's civic health are fraught with contradictions. While social, political, and economic changes over the past decades have undoubtedly altered the meaning and nature of civil society in contemporary America, just how and to what degree these changes have affected the nation's civic life remains largely unsettled. Misconceptions and contradictions abound particularly when we consider the nature and meaning of civic life for African Americans.

Historically, political behavior in the black community has been characterized by a set of distinctive attitudes and participatory norms. Scholars have consistently shown, for example, that African Americans have higher levels of mistrust toward government institutions than are found in the mainstream

in inner-city communities may have disrupted the ties that kept black civic life intact for generations.

Social and Political Participation

In theory, confidence in governmental institutions makes for a strong democracy by encouraging citizens to participate in the workings of the polity. But for blacks, distrust in government has had a paradoxical link to civic engagement. Political scientist Richard Shingles and others have shown that black political activism is motivated primarily by feelings of black solidarity. These feelings, in turn, are stimulated by a combination of confidence in one's own political efficacy and cynicism towards government. This combination of efficacy and mistrust is particularly important in motivating blacks to participate in modes of political action that require a great deal of personal initiative. As Shingles explains, cynicism and feelings of competence create a "mentally healthier and politically more active black citizenry."

Research during the 1950s and 1960s showed that, controlling for education and other indicators of social class, blacks engaged more in social and political activities than did whites. Two main explanations were put forward at that time: blacks "over-participated" either because they needed to compensate for their exclusion from mainstream society by joining numerous groups, or because they were a part of an "ethnic community" that nurtured norms of community involvement. The compensation theorists described greater-than-white participation as "pathological," "excessive," "exaggerated," and "a mark of oppression," while the ethnic community theorists acknowledged (at least indirectly) that greater levels of black participation engendered social capital and should not be viewed as aberrant behavior.

By the 1980s, however, blacks no longer outparticipated whites in social and political activities. In fact, Sidney Verba and his colleagues show that the average numbers of political acts for blacks and whites today are nearly identical. While whites are involved more in some activities (voting, contributing money to cam-

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population, yet this has not always been a sign of civic decay. Social movements, a vital though largely overlooked component of American civil society in general, have been especially important for African Americans, most obviously, though not exclusively, during the activist 1960s.

This essay aims to assess the current state of black civic life by examining survey data on social and political activity. Using the 1960s as a benchmark, I examine both the nature and intensity of black participation at the height of the civil rights movement, and compare patterns of participation then to patterns in the contemporary period. In addition to looking at trends in various formal modes of political participation—campaigning for political candidates, contributing to political campaigns—I explore changes in group membership and participation in community-oriented activities. Finally, I consider patterns in organizational life across social class, and speculate on how poverty

paigns, contacting elected officials, affiliating with a political organization), blacks participate more than whites in others (campaigning for political candidates, protesting, and engaging in informal community activities).

These divergent patterns in participation suggest that participatory norms operate differently in the African American community. These norms embrace what Aldon D. Morris, Shirley J. Hatchett, and Ronald E. Brown describe as the "orderly and disorderly" sides of the political process. By "orderly and disorderly" they mean that blacks have been socialized into employing political tactics that lie both within and outside of normal political action. Boycotting, picketing, and joining protest marches are just as legitimate as tools of political expression as voting, campaigning for candidates, or contacting an elected official about a problem.

Oppositional Civic Culture

This participatory norm of mixing protest and system-oriented participation has been sustained historically by what I have described elsewhere as an oppositional civic culture. Black mainstream institutions—churches, social clubs, masonic orders, community organizations, schools—have traditionally nurtured norms that both legitimized the civic order and, subtly and at times overtly, served as sources of opposition to white supremacist practice and discourse. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba have shown how social institutions and system-supporting attitudes contribute to a society's civic culture, and hence to its stability. A sense of obligation to the polity, for example, is transmitted through a complex process

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that involves the "family, peer group, school, work place, as well as the political system itself." But while the culture and institutions of marginal citizens perform this civic role, they also transmit values that counter the dominant society's ideology of subordination, and they employ these values to justify and legitimize oppositional movements. As Aldon Morris explains, "the groundwork for social protest has been laid by the insurgent ideas rooted within churches, labor unions, voluntary associations, music, informal conversations, humor, and collective memories of those elders who participated in earlier struggles."

These oppositional norms have deep roots in African American politics and society. They operated during

the "racial uplift" and anti-lynching crusade of the National Association of Colored Women at the turn of the century; they sparked the boycott of segregated streetcars in southern cities after the 1896 *Plessy* decision; they stirred the demand for black citizenship rights through the Niagara Movement and the founding of the NAACP; they stimulated the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association after World War I; and they fostered A. Philip Randolph's campaign to unionize Pullman Porters as well as the 1941 March on Washington movement, which he organized but later cancelled after Franklin Roosevelt abolished racial discrimination in government jobs and contracting during World War II.

Such moments of political activism could not have taken place without a vibrant associational life in black communities. For example, it was the women's convention of the all-black National Baptist Convention that provided the early leadership and the networks for the secular-based black women's club movement. Middle-class organizations like the black college sorority Delta Sigma Theta mobilized on behalf of women's

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suffrage. Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, whose founding was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' call for "race leadership," developed citizenship schools in the urban South and with its slogan "A Voteless People is a Hopeless People" registered hundreds of blacks during the 1930s, decades before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) launched their citizenship schools in the 1960s. Working-class masonic organizations provided the organizational infrastructure for local chapters of the Garvey movement and served as a mechanism for recruiting men for the Pullman Porters' Union.

When opportunities for participation in electoral politics expanded with the northern migration of African Americans, black civil society continued to accommodate both system-oriented politics and protest in its tactical repertoire. Chicago provides perhaps the best example of an equilibrium between the two. Blacks in Chicago became an important and significant component of the Democratic party machine during and after the New Deal; they were also an important part of the city's Republican machine before the New Deal. In both cases, blacks were elected to Congress, the state legislature, and city council. But

black electoral success and political representation did not preclude the employment of "disorderly" tactics. In their landmark study of black Chicago, St. Clair Drake and Horace A. Cayton documented the various forms that the "organization of discontent" assumed in Chicago's black belt during the 1920s and 1930s. These included picketing and boycotting department stores and trade unions that refused to hire blacks, filing lawsuits against realtors who practiced discrimination through racially restrictive covenants, and organizing tenant strikes against high rents.

Forms of Participation in the 1960s

The unique participatory norm that combines system-oriented participation with protest strategies is evident when we consider patterns in black participation during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although this era is an atypical period in black political history, it nonetheless provides a benchmark for exploring changes in black participation since the passage of the Voting Rights Act and other measures that promoted black inclusion in American politics and society.

Figure 1, taken from the 1966 Harris-Newsweek Survey on Race Relations, shows the frequency of participation in eleven modes of political action. These modes include system-oriented activities like asking others to register and vote, working for a political candidate, contributing money to a political candidate, or con-

tacting a public official. They also include protest activities like boycotting a store, marching in a demonstration, picketing an establishment, or taking part in a sit-in.

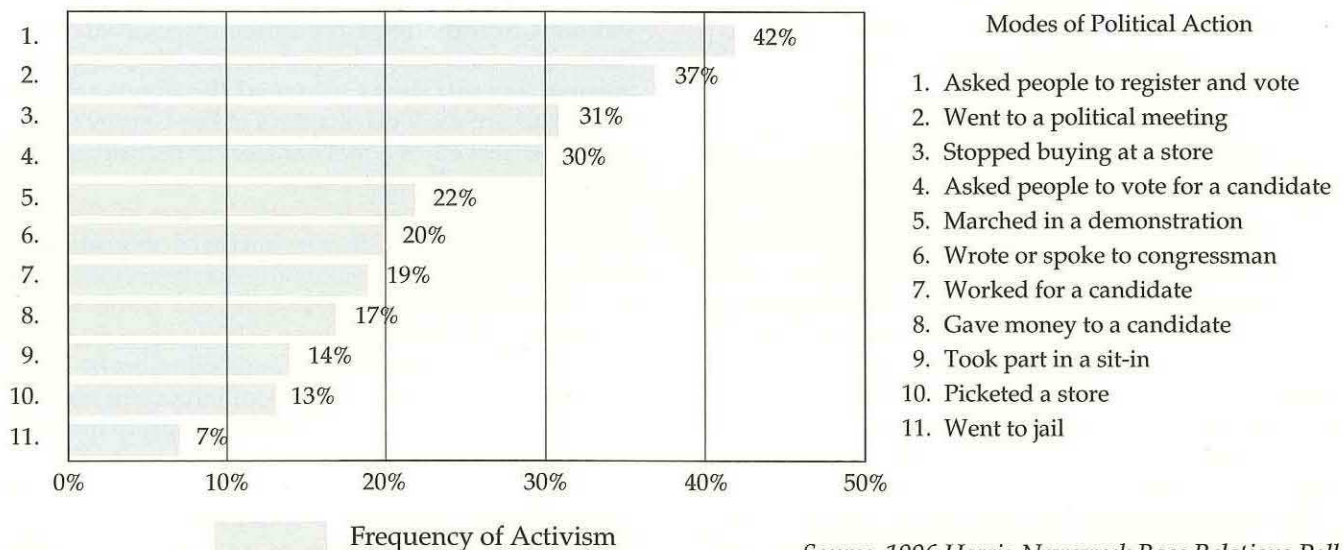
Political scientists who study participation usually consider system-oriented and protest activities as separate participatory spheres. But to explain the relative frequency of activities in this sample of blacks in the mid-1960s, we must attend not to the distinction

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between protest and system-oriented activities, but rather to the distinction between activities that require high levels of individual initiative and resources, and those that do not.

System-oriented activities, such as asking people to register to vote (42%) or asking others to vote for one candidate over another (30%), required just as much energy as participation in consumer boycotts (31%)—and, in this historical context, less personal risk as well. Similarly, activities that required more energy (and in some cases more risk) included both system-oriented and protest activities; about an equal number of blacks reported marching in demonstrations (22%), writing or

Figure 1
Frequency of Black Political Activism
During the Civil Rights Movement



Source: 1966 Harris-Newsweek Race Relations Poll

speaking to their congressional representative (20%), working in a political campaign (19%), and contributing money to a political candidate or party (17%). Other activities represented more aggressive modes of action and were exclusively protest-oriented. They entailed even greater personal costs to actors, as indicated by the small proportion who engaged in sit-ins (14%) or pickets (13%), or who had gone to jail as part of their activism (7%).

Changes and Continuities in Black Civic Life

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and, especially, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, it appeared for a time that system-oriented activities would predominate in African American civic life, partly as a response to black electoral success. By 1984, levels of protest among African Americans had declined significantly—about 15 percent of respondents to the National Black Election Study reported participation in protest meetings and demonstrations that year, compared to 22 percent in the Harris-Newsweek sample in 1966. Only 8 percent of respondents in 1984 had picketed or taken part in a sit-in, representing a decline of almost 6 percent. And the number of those who participated in boycotts of business or government agencies was 23 percent lower than in the mid-1960s.

More recent findings, however, have found both higher levels of participation and a new focus for black

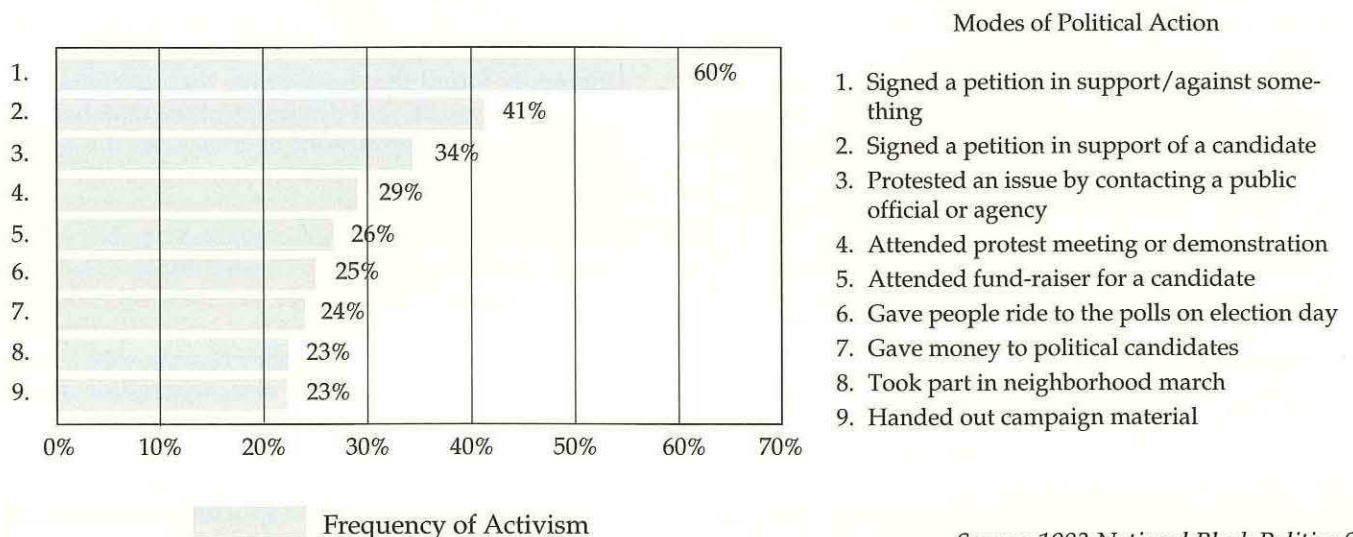
activism (see Figure 2). The 1993 National Black Politics Survey (NBPS) asked whether respondents had acted on such issues as neighborhood crime, drug trafficking, or school reform. In connection with these “quality of life” issues, about a third of the 1993 sample reported attending a protest meeting or demonstration—a 14 percent increase in protest from 1984 and a 7 to 15 percent increase from 1966. If we compare the 1966 Harris-Newsweek question on marching for “Negro

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rights” with the 1993 NBPS question on participation in neighborhood marches, the frequencies are nearly identical. It appears, then, that some of the participatory energies that were once devoted to smashing Jim Crow during the 1960s have now been deployed to address quality-of-life issues in black communities.

Admittedly, protest activism in the 1990s does not involve the sort of high-risk, nationally coordinated campaigns that were mounted in the 1960s. What these patterns do confirm, nonetheless, is the endurance of the participatory norm that has characterized black civic life for over a century. In the National Black

Figure 2
Frequency of Black Political Activism
in the Post-Civil Rights Era



Source: 1993 National Black Politics Survey

Politics Survey, respondents were just as likely to attend a fund-raiser for a candidate (26%), give rides on election day (25%), or donate money to candidates (24%) as they were to attend a protest demonstration (29%) or join a neighborhood march (23%).

Yet the apparent stability of this participatory norm may mask other trends in African American civic life. This becomes clear when we examine changes in group membership among blacks in four educational

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categories—grammar school, some high school, high school, and more than high school. With the exception of blacks in the high school category, participation in organizations declined overall between 1967 and 1987. Unexpectedly, the *greatest* decline occurred among blacks in the highest educational category, from an average of about 2.5 memberships to about 1.6 memberships. This decline occurred with respect to both “expressive” organizations (sports clubs, social clubs, fraternal groups, and veterans groups) and “instrumental” groups (political groups, work-related/professional groups, unions, school groups, nationality groups, and service organizations). Still, it remains true for African Americans, as for other groups, that levels of associational membership are higher among better-educated people than among the less educated. Blacks in the two lowest education categories (grammar school education or less; some high school) are substantially less engaged than the black population at large.

Patterns in participation across social class grow more complicated when we examine community-oriented activities—working with others on local problems, contacting a local official about a problem, and helping form groups to solve a local problem. These participatory acts entail neighborly activities, the type of participation that promotes and sustains social connectedness, trust, and networks. Findings by Nie and his colleagues suggest that little had changed for blacks or whites between 1967 and 1987. In fact, in the general population there was an *increase* in community-oriented activities. More Americans reported working with others on local problems (4% increase), contacting a local official (10% increase), and helping to form groups (3% increase) in the later survey than in 1967. For blacks, the patterns show increases or only insignificant declines.

But a look at black community-oriented participation by social class tells a different story. Although

group membership among blacks in the highest educational category has declined, the rate of participation among this group in community-enhancing activities has remained the same. But for each category below the highest educational group, there has been significant erosion in community participation. The two lowest educational categories witnessed the greatest declines. Their scores hovered near half a standard deviation below the average for all blacks in 1967; by 1987 their score plummeted toward two standard deviations below the population mean. These findings suggest that the increasing economic inequalities within the black population are also reflected in civic life. They partly confirm sociologist William Julius Wilson’s claim about the increasing social isolation of poor blacks, and they raise serious questions about the transmission of participatory norms that have characterized black civic life for generations.

The contradictory trends I have described were best symbolized in the 1995 Million Man March on Washington. The march focused on the same values that civil society crusaders want to strengthen—personal responsibility, self-help efforts, social trust (specifically among blacks themselves), and participation in civic groups. Yet many of the participants were

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already firmly engaged in civic life. The gathering on the Mall represented a solid core of black civil society—(male) family members, fraternity brothers, masonic orders, church groups, black nationalist organizations, Boy Scout troops, black student unions, neighborhood groups, and even black gay organizations, among many others. Moreover, a survey by Howard University found that on average the marchers were considerably more active in political life than both the black and white populations at large. Out of a sample of more than 1,000 participants, nearly all (87%) reported that in the past year they had signed a petition for some cause; half had contacted a public official by phone or by writing (55%); slightly less than half had either contributed money to a political campaign (46%), volunteered or served in a political campaign (45%), or attended a public policy hearing (44%); and a significant number reported visiting a public official (38%) or attending a state or national convention (22%).

But if the march attracted a considerable number of political activists from the nation’s diverse black communities, it also indicated the widening class divisions in African American civic life. Most participants at the



A gospel choir performs at a fund-raising dinner for Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a coalition of churches that has campaigned for expanded low-income housing, scholarships for African American students, and payment of a "living wage" to service workers in industries that benefit from city contracts or subsidies.

Photograph by Joseph Kohl

Million Man March were not from the poor or even from the marginal working-class segments of black society. As the Howard University research team reported, they came "primarily from the middle and upper social and economic strata of the Black community." Nearly half had grown up in two-parent homes, about 40 percent made over \$50,000 a year, and nearly 60 percent had some college or had graduated from college. Like the earlier findings, this suggests that class may be structuring participation in black society and politics more than it did a generation ago.

Civic Culture and Neighborhood Poverty

Recent work by political scientists Cathy Cohen and Michael Dawson has documented the devastating effects of neighborhood poverty on black political and civic life in Detroit. Survey respondents who lived in Census tracts with more than 30 percent of residents living in poverty were less likely to engage in civic and social activities than blacks who lived in communities with less poverty. Residents in severely poor neighborhoods were less likely to belong to a church or social group, talk about problems with family and friends,

attend a meeting about a community problem or issue, or (not surprisingly) contribute money to a political candidate. The effects of living in "deadly neighborhoods" hold up even after taking into account individual levels of poverty and personal attributes like education and income.

Cohen and Dawson's findings, along with evidence on educational variations in group membership and community-enhancing activities, point to the disappearance, in many inner-city communities, of those institutions that Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte have called "free spaces"—environments in which "people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue." They also suggest that the institutions of civil society among the poor can no longer sustain an oppositional civic culture, leaving open the possibility that the "organization of discontent" might lead to "uncivil," disruptive alternatives. Without the institutions to instill the twin virtues of civic engagement *and* organized opposition against forces that perpetuate racial and economic inequalities, prospects for civic renewal for those at the margins of American society seem dim.

Rebuilding and strengthening civic life in inner-city communities will take an enormous commitment and effort. Voluntarism and role-modeling can only touch the surface of the vast problems they face. Institutions that have historically transmitted a civic culture of opposition are crumbling or no longer exist, and feelings of group solidarity may be weakening throughout the black population as other identities and interests begin to take shape. There is no longer a "black community" whose political interests are defined by the experience of racism alone.

Recent trends in black political attitudes are telling. Although nearly three quarters of blacks in the 1993 National Black Politics Survey agreed that "American society is unfair to black people," nearly 40 percent also agreed that "economic divisions in the black community have grown so much that black people as a group no longer share common interests." Class, gender, religion, nationality, and increasingly sexuality are also influencing the character of black society and politics—a phenomenon that is occurring in American society at large. On the other hand, race still remains the great social divide in American society and politics. Greater racial polarization in American society may actually reinforce feelings of black solidarity, even though greater differentiation within the black population is taking place.

So what is to be done? Just as a combination of participatory norms has historically characterized black civic life, multiple strategies must be deployed to rebuild and transform civic life in poor and working-class urban neighborhoods. This means helping citizens to transform their own communities by nurturing leadership *within* those communities. It means reviving and sustaining what Charles Payne calls the "organizing tradition," in which residents themselves—rather than charismatic figures or well-meaning volunteers with little knowledge of inner-city communities—teach and recruit other residents to organize. It means fostering associations and institutions—rather than personalities—that can nurture and sustain social capital.

The organizing tradition of group-centered leadership and the participatory norms that characterize black civic life will have to be deployed to attack the problems affecting poor neighborhoods. Those efforts, for instance, should encourage residents to demand that police and elected officials deliver equitable services and keep streets safe; to challenge financial institutions that redline poor communities as well as corporations that refuse to reinvest in those communities. It will require cultivating entrepreneurship, making all elected officials accountable for their (in)actions, and establishing "free spaces" (YMCA's, Boys Clubs, after-school programs in schools and churches) where residents can cultivate community-enhancing activities. It will mean creating incentives for multi-class,

highly structured institutions like masonic groups that can coordinate youth and community programs. Only with the aid of indigenous leadership and free spaces can civic life in poor communities begin to take root.

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