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# What We Should Have Known About the Black Vote: A Comprehensive Analysis of Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections

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# What We Should Have Known about the Black Vote: A Comprehensive Analysis of Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections

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*A historic increase in African American voter turnout in the 2008 presidential elections has also contributed to the overall increase in voter turnout in presidential elections, which steadily declined from 1960 through 2000. Using a logistic regression analysis for presidential years 1980 through 2000, this article re-examines why voter turnout in presidential election years take place. The traditional and well-established explanations of socioeconomic status (SES), demographics, group consciousness, mobilization, psychological orientations, and economic displacement, were regressed onto voter turnout where race is deemed insignificant. However, in a closer analysis where income was used to separate the voting age population by class, race is the most significant factor. Unexpectedly, this model revealed that low-income African Americans are more likely to vote than any other group, and middle and upper-income African Americans are least likely to vote. These findings run contrary to the dominant theories on voter turnout, most notably, the SES theory.*

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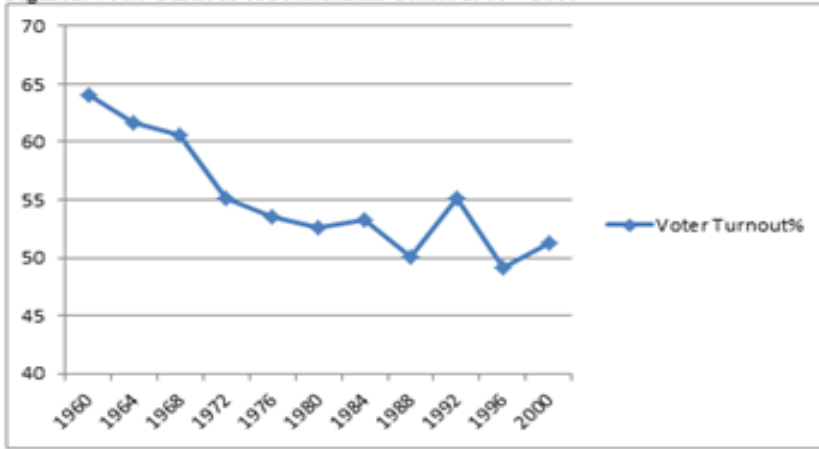
**T**he astounding election of Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States of America has produced a “mighty current for change.” For the first time in U.S. history, voter turnout for African Americans has surpassed voter turnout for Caucasian Americans in presidential elections (Bositis 2008, 13; see Table 1). This historic increase in African American voter turnout has also contributed to the overall increase in voter turnout in presidential elections, which steadily declined from 1960 through 2000 (see Figure 1). The theories for this decline seem well established; however, what seems disconcerting is that race is not drawn into the dialogue for having a direct effect on this decline. This exclusion of race can no longer be deemed legitimate since the election of Barack Obama has changed the face of the Presidency as well as the historical context for our perceptions of the effect of race on voting patterns.

**Table 1: Comparison of Voter Turnout By Race in Presidential Election Years: 1960 – 2008**

Year	African-American Vote	White Vote
1960	40%	78%
1964	58.5%	70%
1968	57.6%	68%
1972	52%	67%
1976	49%	64%
1980	51%	65%
1984	60%	64%
1988	55%	62%
1992	58%	70%
1996	51%	60%
2000	58%	61%
2004	60%	68%
<b>2008</b>	<b>66.8%</b>	<b>66.1%</b>

Very few authors attributed the decline of voter turnout in presidential elections to race. The large quantity of scholarly research that took place as a result of this decline attributed it to institutional barriers such as registration laws, a decline in partisanship, and a decrease in psychological orientations such as political interest, political trust, and political efficacy (Abramson and Aldrich 1982, 502; Piven and Cloward 2000; Powell 1986, 21; Shaffer 1981, 69). The sole place for the discussion of the relationship between race and voter turnout in the literature is comparing the likelihood of individual African American voter turnout to Caucasian turnout and the impact of group consciousness on voter turnout (Shingles 1981, 76-78). However, there is indeed a reason why it has taken so long to elect an African American man as President as well as why there are a limited number of African Americans in government roles at the national level. This past presidential election has shed light on a particular problem that continues to exist at the polls: race matters. Although African Americans are more integrated in political and economic structures than at any time in history, race is still a significant factor in understanding the nature of voting patterns in the United States.

The literature on *who votes* also seems well established. However, in exploring the traditional explanation of class or one's socioeconomic status (SES), this past election established that lower class African American individuals had a very high probability of turning out. This account contrasts socioeconomic status (SES) as the primary reason for why individuals vote. Thus, to use race mostly as an explanation for who is a part of the lower socioeconomic order; for those who are least likely to vote (Nelson 1979, 1025); and/or how they can make up for this low socioeconomic status with respect to voting via their psychological orientation (Mangum 2003, 42-45) and/or group identity (Shingles 1981, 76), is flawed. This essay will examine these phenomena and clarify the reasons for decline in some voter populations as well as the increase in other populations under specific historical conditions. In particular, this article seeks to explain why voter turnouts in African American voter populations in presidential election years take place.

**Figure 1. Voter Turnout of Presidential Years: 1960 – 2000**

This research is important because we are now at a juncture in history where African Americans are and will continue to be serious contenders for the Presidency. Thus, African American politicians, political campaign consultants, church and community leaders need the most accurate information when targeting specific populations during presidential and non-presidential election years. Past mistakes of not massaging different segments of the electorate need not be repeated. Considering that the African American vote has the influence to raise the general turnout in presidential elections, it is likely that these forces can have a major impact in non-presidential election years where African American candidates are also likely to aggressively compete for these offices. Hence, it is important that state and local government races which generally have low rates of voter turnout not miss their mark in terms of generating a greater voter turnout. An exploration of the scholarship that suggests the rationale for low voter turnout will be helpful in understanding the role that race has and continues to play.

### Comparative Theories of Voting

Many studies confirm that individuals of a higher SES are more likely to vote than individuals of a lower SES (Campbell et al. 1960; Conway 2000; Dalton 1996; Milbrath 1965; Piven and Cloward 2000; Powell 1986, 17; Putnam 2000; Teixeira 1987; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). These studies contend that a lack of education as well as a dearth of resources and information on registration requirements and electoral campaigns impact on the cost associated with voting and hence voter turnout (Powell 1986, 18). Individuals who are formally educated and at a higher socioeconomic level gather information about absentee registration, evening and Saturday registration, and registration deadlines (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), thereby decreasing the costs associated with voting (Downs 1957, 36–50).<sup>1</sup>

Other scholars challenge the effects and potency of an individual's socioeconomic status and their decision to vote. For example, Abramson and Aldrich (1982) and Teixeira (1992) point out that institutional barriers have been relaxed<sup>2</sup>, and educational levels have increased within the population overall (there is an increase in the number of college graduates and more and more minorities are attending college), yet, voter turnout is still

declining.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Nagler (1991) suggests that registration laws do not dissuade lower educated individuals any more than they dissuade individuals with higher education.<sup>4</sup> Shingles (1981, 82–84) lends weight to this argument by indicating that the standard SES model for African American voting patterns seems mistrustful and deemed insufficient since this group is said to turn out, not on the basis of their socioeconomic status but more so on the basis of racial and ethnic pride which is often referred to as group consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Critic Avey (1989, 2) also argues that SES merely serves to enhance voter turnout, thereby acting more as an exogenous force rather than a direct influence. The standard explanation of lower voter turnout is, therefore, not supported across different segments of the population. Rather the research illustrates that voter turnout is guided by a complex set of historical factors including SES, race and group partisanship.

Abramson and Aldrich (1982, 507) found that there has been a decline in party loyalties, also known as party de-alignment, which has contributed to the decline in turnout by twenty-five to thirty-five percentage points. Carmines and Stimson (1980, 82) cite the rise of civil rights and race relations, urban unrest, the Vietnam War during the 1960s as factors that captured the attention of different groups and either caused individuals to vote “differently” or to become independents without a specific party attachment. Group voting patterns shifted in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, Caucasian Southern males who were once strong Democrats voted as Republican and people became less partisan and more neutral in their feelings towards the political parties (cf. Niemi and Weisberg 2001).

For African Americans, the church, labor unions, social networks and organizations seemed to be better mobilizers (Allen, Dawson and Brown 1989, 421; Reese and Brown 1995, 33) as opposed to political parties and electoral candidates. The church, in its major role of promoting civic duty and engagement for African Americans and low-income individuals, contributed to the rise of African American voter turnout during the Civil Rights era and in Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign, both of which occurred during the four decades of voter turnout decline (Harris 1994, 45–46). “Religion assists African Americans with becoming a part of the political process...Afro-Christianity stimulates African American political activism. Political activities of African American ministers and churches are routine features of African American political life” (Harris 1999, 4). According to Tate (1991, 1168), religious institutions serve as an important organizational resource for disseminating information about elections, encouraging church members to vote, providing individuals a base to work on political campaigns, and allowing individuals a base to contribute financially to political campaigns. Furthermore, many middle and upper-income individuals more often than not belong to a number of other organizations and networks and thus had more of a chance of becoming mobilized in the political sphere.

The labor union, in particular, became a force that mobilized many African Americans. A union’s mobilization drives included voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives as their most important campaign activities (Sousa 1993, 741). Beck (1980, 148) notes that individuals who belong to labor unions, which were organizations that behaved much like a social movement because they mobilized their members and their families and advocated for benefits on their behalf, were more likely to vote than those who do not and were more likely to support the political stances of the union.

The issue of becoming psychologically involved is also a factor with respect to how individuals vote. Psychological orientations are also found to be strong predictors of voter turnout. Political interest, political efficacy, and political trust are standard measures of psychological engagement in politics (Brady, Verba and Scholzman 1995, 271).

Political interest is where individuals follow elections and campaigns (electoral interest) and also shows an interest in the day-to-day issues in politics (public interest) (Teixeira 1992). With political interest, African Americans display electoral interest when there are African American candidates; and public interest, when it is in reference to conditions of the African American community. Thus, political interest is only likely to increase voter turnout amongst African Americans when issues arise that concern African Americans and/or an African American for public office. The same holds true for political efficacy. As more African Americans are elected to and campaign for public office, African Americans feel efficacious enough to vote. When this interest decreases, voter turnout also decreases; the same conclusion follows from a decline in political trust.

Political trust measures how well the government is operating according to one's expectations. When individuals state that they trust the government, they are stating that they are satisfied with the outputs of the government and that they are satisfied with the performance of the political authorities (Easton 1979, 1). Thus, the more individuals trust the government to do what is right for them, the more likely they are to vote. Shingles (1981, 82) notes, that African Americans, however, have an inverse relationship with political trust, and voter turnout. He, along with Shingles (1981), found that African Americans who have high levels of political trust are the least likely to vote because they become lax when the status quo is in their favor. Thus, because political trust has been decreasing in strength among the electorate over the years, this concept has yielded mixed results based upon individual characteristics.

Political efficacy is the feeling that one has a say or some sort of influence in the political system—often termed internal efficacy—and that the government is responsive to their needs—external efficacy. Abramson and Aldrich (1982, 510–512) found efficacy of both kinds to be a strong predictor of voter turnout. They found that there has been a decrease in external political efficacy contributing to over half of the percentage decline in voter turnout. If external political efficacy had not declined, “turnout would have been 80.5 percent in 1964, 81.0 percent in 1968, 76.4 percent in 1972, 78.2 percent in 1976, and 77.7 percent in 1980” (Abramson and Aldrich 1982, 512). Shaffer (1981, 74) also attributed a large decline in voter turnout to the attitudes and mindsets of voters. He concludes that political efficacy contributed to 67 percent of the decline in voter turnout outside the South after 1960. From 1960 to 1976, turnout had declined by 8.5 percentage points, but if political efficacy had not declined, voter turnout would have only declined by 2.8 percentage points (Shaffer 1981, 75–78). The same is also true for internal efficacy—individuals feeling that they have a say and that their vote counts. There was a decrease of eighteen percentage points over an eleven-year period from 1980 to 1991 of 91 to 73 percentage points (Teixeira 1987; 1992).

As noted above, economic displacement is a major contributing factor to low voter turnout and therefore individuals who are unemployed, are less likely to vote than individuals who are employed. When individuals are unemployed, they are cut off from associations or organizations; they see themselves as separated from social and economic systems and isolated from the community as well. This concept of economic displacement also has an inverse effect with respect to African Americans. Although African Americans as a group have higher percentages of unemployment than any other racial or ethnic group, they are not worried about the economy per se; instead, they are concerned about the hardships that they will face given their economic status. Thus, if they believe that the political system will bring about better economic times, they will vote accordingly.

These theories of voter turnout have always displayed an uneven effect on different sectors of the population. As laid out above, African Americans have always had a different mechanism for jumping over registration barriers, becoming mobilized, becoming psychologically oriented towards the elections and even dealing with the economy. Surprisingly though, previous research hardly saw the need to analyze this phenomenon in this fashion. However, the 2008 presidential elections have witnessed racism play out along SES lines. Thus, this research illustrates how grave a difference analyzing the electorate on a whole versus by class makes.

### **Data and Methods**

The model that has been developed is tested using a multivariate logit analysis of data obtained from the American National Election Studies (ANES) for presidential election years 1980 through 2000. Presidential elections were chosen because they are the most salient elections compared to those of congressional, gubernatorial, and mayoral elections (Tompkins 1988, 195), and is also where turnout is higher in comparison to state and local elections. The platforms of the presidential candidates contain the most pertinent information with regard to the whole nation at large, but in particular, the presidency has been looked upon as the main institution that can solve the problem of inequality (Ragsdale and Theis 1997, 1287).

The years 1980 through 2000 were chosen because they represent a period of recent changes within the population and policies that were influential to the politics of recent changes within the population and policies that were influential to the politics of those who were considered the least likely to participate such as poor African Americans. Also, the 1980s were a time when there was an acknowledged and noticeable difference between parties and candidates.<sup>6</sup> The 1990s was also an important decade because, although the Democrats took control of the presidency, there were a lot of programs under review that affected the poor, such as AFDC, which sparked debates in public policy.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, programs such as affirmative action had eroded during this decade.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Macro-Level Analysis of Voter Turnout**

In analyzing the data, a logistic regression analysis was employed since the dependent variable—voter turnout—is qualitative.<sup>9</sup> This analysis properly determines the effects that the independent variables have on voter turnout and serves as a baseline model for incorporating the influence of income.

Table 2 presents the results of the six types of influences on voter turnout on the voting age population and reflects the following equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Resources})_i + \beta_2(\text{Social Characteristics})_i + \beta_3(\text{Group Consciousness})_i + \beta_4(\text{Mobilization})_i + \beta_5(\text{Psychological Orientations})_i + \beta_6(\text{Economic Displacement})_i + E_i$$

**Table 2: Logit Model of Voter Turnout in Presidential Election Years 1980 to 2000**

Variables	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	Probability (%)
<b>Socioeconomic</b>			
Less than High School	-.733***	.099	32
College	.617***	.079	65
Income	.234***	.039	56
<b>Demographic</b>			
Age	.023***	.002	51
Female	.143**	.071	54
African American	.002	.111	50
Married	.161**	.078	54
Homeowner	.458***	.080	61
South	-.502***	.075	38
Urban	.122**	.072	53
<b>Group Consciousness</b>			
Race Consciousness	.182**	.075	55
Class Consciousness	-.246**	.085	44
<b>Mobilization</b>			
Partisanship	.367***	.046	59
Church	.298***	.023	57
Union Membership	.204**	.088	55
Candidate Difference	.007***	.001	50
<b>Psychological Orientations</b>			
Electoral Interest	.728***	.055	67
Public Interest	.291***	.051	57
Political Trust	-.073	.061	48
No Internal Efficacy	-.347***	.075	41
No External Efficacy	-.209**	.076	45
<b>Economic Displacement</b>			
Unemployed	-.327***	.086	42
Constant	-2.222***	.189	10
Number of Observations	Wald $X^2$ (df = 22)	1322.	
7,055	One-tailed tests: *p<.10	**p<. 05	***p<.001
Percent Correctly Predicted			
81.49%			



This model correctly predicts 81.49 percent of the cases. The dependent variable, voter turnout, was measured through the question of whether or not respondents voted in a particular presidential election. Those who answered yes were recoded 1 and all others as 0. The resource indicator includes measures of education and income. Education was recoded into two dichotomous variables reflecting education at a level less than high school and education at the college level. The former variable was coded 1 when the condition was met and 0 otherwise. The latter was coded as 1 for college level education and 0 otherwise. Income was coded as a stratified variable ranging from 0 to 4 with five income brackets, with 0 reflecting the lowest income category and 4 the highest.

Variables reflecting social characteristics include age, gender, race, marital status, home ownership, urban residence and region. Group consciousness variables include race consciousness and class consciousness, and were coded on the basis of feeling thermometers. Mobilization variables include partisanship, church attendance, union membership, and candidate difference variables. Psychological orientation variables include political interest (electoral interest and public interest), political trust, and political efficacy (no political voice and no political responsiveness). All variables in this model were statistically significant with the exception of race; this warrants a great deal of attention.

This finding leads one to perceive that race is no longer a factor in voter turnout which is incorrect. For many, race being insignificant in this model would seem unsurprising because some researchers (Wilson 1978, 1; Schuman et al. 1997, 1; Marable 1999) were under the impression that the Civil Rights movement marked a decline in the significance of race as the government conformed to the changing times and allowed for African Americans to be more inclusive politically and economically; integration meant better race relations. For example, the number of African American elected officials increased from 103 in 1964, to 6,384 in 1986.<sup>10</sup> This inclusion of African Americans in the political power structure allowed for them to be representative of their group's interests (Barker, Jones and Tate 1999, 257–264). This is a bit naïve for although African Americans had achieved a great deal of accomplishments within the political, economic, and social frameworks over the last few decades (Schuman et al. 1997); it was numerical only and not percentage wise.

According to Wilson (1978, 1–3), this greater inclusion of African Americans in mainstream society would make it acceptable for students of voter turnout to treat the American electorate as a homogenous entity since it appears that their group's interests are now incorporated. As a result, scholars such as Wilson urged civil rights leaders to shift from race-based remedies to more class-oriented programs that would help uplift the ghetto underclass (cf. Marable 1991, 158). This conclusion represents what this research has been stating all along, that scholars have been misinformed. The statistical insignificance of race here should be interpreted differently. Instead of dismissing this variable as having a direct effect on voter turnout one should ask, why would not race be significant when all along there have been historical factors that have either prevented or allowed African Americans to vote? To get the full understanding of the effect of different racial groups in this analysis, one needs a more thorough breakdown for the electorate. Accordingly, a deeper approach in this research is taken in order to make a comparison of social classes.

In comparing social classes, income is used to separate one group of individuals from the other. In fact, Leighley and Nagler (1992, 725) argue that income is the proper measure for classifying individuals in comparison to other resource variables such as education and occupational status because government policies that discriminate based on

socioeconomic status are most likely to do so based upon income. Hence, a comparison is made to the out-group, those with higher incomes, to view the major differences between the classes and find out for sure whether the characteristics that they possess or lack, are indeed contributions to the decline in voter turnout.

### **A Comparative Analysis of Income Groups in the Decision to Vote**

In analyzing the main differences between the low-income population and the middle and upper income populations, the major differences between incomes are described via the theories that have contributed to voter turnout. These differences can be viewed from the Table 3 below and is denoted in the following equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Resources})_i + \beta_2(\text{Social Characteristics})_i + \beta_3(\text{Group Consciousness})_i + \beta_4(\text{Mobilization})_i + \beta_5(\text{Psychological Orientations})_i + \beta_6(\text{Economic Displacement})_i + E,$$

In analyzing the differences between these two income groups, variables with no difference to variables with the most difference are described. Candidate difference is the first. In Table 3, notice that there is absolutely no difference between low-income and middle- and upper-income individuals. In other words, it has the exact same impact on low-income individuals as it does on middle- and upper-income individuals. This variable is also highly significant. Variables with very little difference are: urban (place of residency), marital status, and age, which is all representative of voters' social characteristics. Urban individuals make up 70 percent of this sample. This variable is only significant for middle- and upper-income individuals but insignificant for low-income individuals. Marital status is significant for both income groups and has a slightly greater impact on low-income individuals than on middle- and upper-income individuals. Age is also highly significant amongst both income groups with greater impact on middle- and upper-income individuals.

Variables with a significant difference between income groups include: college, female, homeowner, south, class consciousness, partisanship, church, union membership, political interest, political trust, and political efficacy. A college education matters more for low-income individuals than it does for middle- and upper-income individuals.

Gender is significant for middle and upper-income individuals but insignificant for low-income individuals. The effect between the two is not that huge but what matters most is its insignificance in one group and not the other.

Over the last three decades, women have become more independent which can be attributed to the change in family life and differences in the change in the workforce over the last three decades (Gurin 1985, 143–144). They are more conscious of the differences that exist between themselves and their counterparts and are turning out more to minimize these differences. However, gender is insignificant within the low-income category. These females are less socialized politically as they are more prone to household employment for instance, and are not as likely to discuss politics in low maintenance jobs versus higher maintenance jobs (Kasarda 1995).

**Table 3: Logit Estimation of Voter Turnout in Presidential Election Years 1980 to 2000, by Income Groups**

Variables	Low-Income		Middle & Upper Income		Difference
	Coefficient	S.R	Coefficient	S.E.	
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>					
Less than High School	-.665***	.131	-.916***	.147	<b>-.251</b>
College	.671***	.145	.642***	.095	<b>-.029</b>
<b>Demographic</b>					
Age	.020***	.003	.028***	.004	<b>.008</b>
Female	.085	.117	.164**	.093	<b>.079</b>
African American	.267**	.151	-.371**	.158	<b>-.638</b>
Married	.270**	.128	.190**	.099	<b>-.008</b>
Homeowner	.466***	.123	.557***	.102	<b>.091</b>
South	-.599***	.119	-.476***	.098	<b>.123</b>
Urban	.134	.111	.139*	.094	<b>.005</b>
<b>Group Consciousness</b>					
Race Consciousness	-.046	.124	.326***	.095	<b>.372</b>
Class Consciousness	-.204*	.145	-.276**	.106	<b>-.072</b>
<b>Mobilization</b>					
Partisanship	.365***	.071	.379***	.060	<b>.014</b>
Church	.376***	.121	.242***	.038	<b>-.134</b>
Union Membership	.339**	.197	.225**	.101	<b>-.114</b>
Candidate Difference	.007**	.002	.007***	.002	<b>0</b>
<b>Psychological Orientation</b>					
Electoral Interest	.654***	-.082	.796***	.074	<b>.142</b>
Public Interest	.221**	.079	.328***	.068	<b>.107</b>
Political Trust	-.138*	.093	-.022	.082	<b>.116</b>
No Internal Efficacy	-.305**	.093	-.371***	.096	<b>-.066</b>
No External Efficacy	-.173	.125	-.241**	.097	<b>-.068</b>
<b>Economic Displacement</b>					
Unemployed	-.272**	.121	-.483***	.121	<b>-.211</b>
Constant	-1.859***	.279	-1.968***	.249	<b>-.109</b>
Number of Observations	2,190		4,865		
Percent Correctly Predicted	75.53%		84.15%		
Wald X <sup>2</sup> (df=21)	440.27		Wald X <sup>2</sup> (df=21)		
One-tailed tests: *p<.10	***p<.05		***p<.001		731.24

Homeownership is highly significant in both income groups but has a greater impact amongst the middle and upper-income groups. This is not surprising considering that middle and upper-income individuals are more likely to own their own homes than low-income individuals because they have more resources and are more stable in their occupations (Gilderbloom and Markham 1995, 1589). For the south, low-income individuals are hit the hardest. There is a significant difference between the two groups although amongst both groups, the politics of the south causes similar impacts, that these individuals who reside there are less likely to vote than in any other region in the country. Class consciousness matters less for middle and upper income individuals than low-income individuals. Recall that this variable called for individuals to identify with being poor who middle and upper-income individuals are less likely to identify with. Hence the outcome is not surprising.

Partisanship is significant for both groups of individuals. There is very little difference between both groups because both political parties have similar effects on both income categories and are able to mobilize both income groups. However, a bigger mobilizer is the church. Although church is highly significant for both groups of individuals, it matters more for low-income individuals. Union membership is significant for both income groups but matters more for low-income individuals in facilitating voter turnout.

Electoral interest is highly significant for both groups although it matters more for middle and upper-income groups than for low-income groups. This comes as no surprise because middle and upper income individuals usually pay closer attention to politics than low-income individuals. Public interest is also significant but more of a predictor for voter turnout for middle and upper income groups than for low-income groups but not as robust as electoral interest. Political trust is insignificant for middle and upper income individuals and slightly significant for low-income individuals. Recall that this variable, along with race, was insignificant when the electorate was analyzed on a macro-level and now on a micro-level, it matters for low-income individuals. Trust in the governmental apparatus may not have an effect on middle and upper income individuals because they are better equipped to handle the hegemonic structure, since they are more inclusive within the civil society. However, for low-income individuals, trust matters, but it has an inverse effect. Again, this is not a surprise because African Americans are highly represented in this income category.

For low-income individuals, the more they trust the government to do what is right for them, the less likely they are to vote. This makes sense if a person thinks about it in terms of social programs, which these individuals are highly dependent upon. It is widely known that individuals, who are living below the income poverty guidelines, have a right to obtain their basic necessities from the government (Piven and Cloward 1993, 183–189). In other words, the governmental apparatus cannot afford to deny assistance to needy families. Low-income individuals, who are aware of this right, are less likely to become preoccupied with politics when they know that these programs are available to them to consume.

Not surprisingly then internal political efficacy matters more for low-income individuals than middle and upper income individuals. Although there is no big difference between the two groups of individuals, boosting the internal efficacy of these low-income individuals would increase their voter turnout.<sup>11</sup> External political efficacy means that the government is responsive to their needs and in turn, influences them to turn out to vote. However, for low-income individuals, it is not about government responsiveness; what matters is their inner effectiveness—the feeling that their votes count. For middle and upper

income groups though, external efficacy is significant. Middle and upper income individuals have a broader tax base, they communicate more to the governmental apparatus, they do more in the name of democratic governance; consequently, they expect more. How responsive government is to their needs, has an influence on whether they turn out to vote or not, although internal efficacy matters more.

The bigger differences occur with those who have less than a high school diploma, unemployed, race consciousness, and race. There is a big difference amongst these income groups for those who have less than a high school diploma. Obviously, it has a negative impact on whether or not individuals will turn out to vote, which middle- and upper-income individuals are least likely where this variable is concerned. Unemployment is also a significant predictor of whether an individual will turn out to vote or not. It is significant for low-income individuals but even more so for middle and upper income individuals.

Previously, it was noted that unemployment measures how displaced individuals are from the economic system. Hence, unemployed individuals are less likely to vote since they are preoccupied with other conditions. However, it seems to adversely affect the middle and upper income groups more than the low-income groups primarily because low-income individuals either already know how to cope with economic displacement, or it may be easier for these individuals to come across jobs that are less competitive than for the middle and upper class individuals who are looking for prestigious jobs. It may take longer for these individuals to reach the status that they once enjoyed when they have been displaced and so, interest in politics wanes even more for these individuals. Also, low-income individuals are more likely to become mobilized through religious organizations, because they are more reliant on the church during *stressful time* (Harris 1994, 56). Middle and upper income individuals are more dependent upon their skills and hence, they are taken out of the political scene until they are a part of the workforce again.

For middle and upper-income individuals, race-conscious was highly significant, but insignificant for low-income individuals. An explanation that could be offered in terms of race consciousness having an effect on the upper income groups is the way African Americans are perceived amongst Caucasians in the upper classes for instance. Most African American middle class individuals, although they are climbing in status, they do not receive equal respect or treatment in the workforce. It is believed that these individuals have not worked equally as hard as their Caucasian counterparts due to programs such as affirmative action (Sears et al. 2000, 7–10) which has had the biggest impact for social, economic, and political mobility within the African American middle class.

However, there is another finding that needs to be addressed in this research—the significance of race within each group. It makes sense that on a broader level, class seems to be of great importance and perhaps even hint at low-income individuals for depressing turnout rates since they are more likely to possess the characteristics that are associated with low turnout rates such as low resources. However, in a closer analysis, it turns out that race is the biggest divide between the middle and upper income groups because African Americans are faced with major divides within their own racial group. Let's take a look at this picture.

### **The Racial and Class Divide**

According to Figure 2, low-income African Americans are more likely to turn out to vote than any other group in this figure. What is even more striking is that middle—and upper-income African Americans are least likely to turn out to vote in comparison to low-income

Caucasians. Another appealing factor in this figure is that low-income Caucasians and middle- and upper-income Caucasians have similar turnout rates. These findings run contrary to the dominant theories on voter turnout, most notably, the SES theory. Recall that this theory has been noted as the standard model for voter turnout even in the midst of vast differences between individual characteristics. In fact, the SES theory was upheld when the electorate was analyzed on a broader level, but when the electorate is divided by income—a proxy for class—the theory is no longer upheld. Most of these studies have not taken these class struggles into account as Winders (1999, 834) has noted. They merely discuss the sharp distinctions between voters and nonvoters (Ragsdale and Rusk 1993, 721–723). As noted previously, Avey (1989) has long-critiqued the strength of SES in predicting voter turnout. He states that SES merely serves to enhance voter turnout thereby acting more as an exogenous force rather than a direct influence. This research also shows that voter turnout is not guided specifically by resources but more importantly by race.

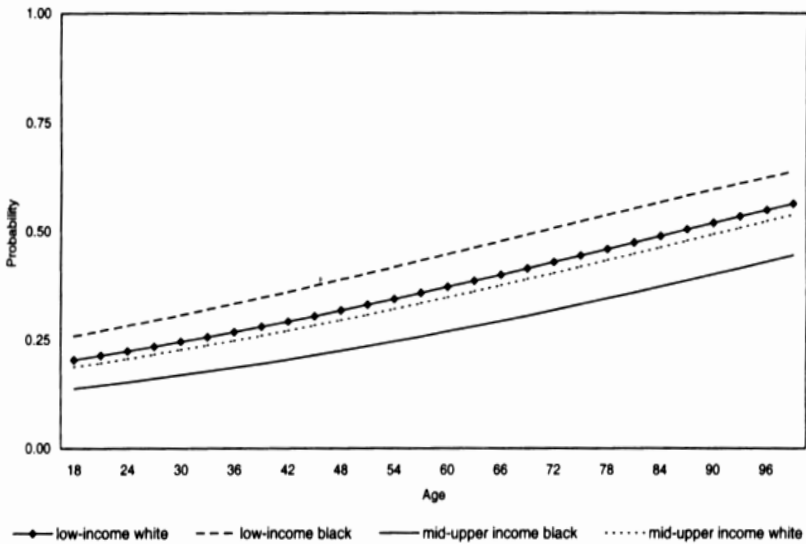
I am not trying to completely discount the SES resources because they have made vast contributions to the literature on voter turnout. My aim here is to illustrate how these differences in voter turnout are reflections of the ongoing struggles between classes and racial groups within the political, economic, and social systems, and were perhaps overlooked when analyzing the dominant causes of voter turnout decline in presidential elections.

For example, the exceptional gains that African Americans have made within the second half of the twentieth century has been noted (Sears et al. 2000, 3). However, it can be argued that these considerable gains have been inflated and are only substantial in absolute terms rather than relative to Caucasians for instance (Sears et al. 2000, 3–4). In fact, one can even take note of gains made in earnings. “The African American/white ratio in median annual earnings for men increased from 43 in 1940 to 73 in 1980. Since then African Americans’ income has continued to increase in absolute terms, but the African American/Caucasian ratio has not improved further” (Sears et al. 2000, 3). African Americans may attribute this inflated progress with the increased resentment against race-specific programs such as affirmative action.

Most individuals agree with the sentiment that the Jim Crow ideology that once plagued the U.S. prior to the Civil Rights movement declined sharply and may have even vanished (Schuman et al. 1997, 1). However, middle-income African Americans in particular, would argue that it has been replaced with a more “symbolic” form of racism (Sears et al. 2000, 5 – 6).

Middle and upper-income African Americans are more likely to experience this “symbolic” form of racism because most often than not, they will come into contact with Caucasians within the same income brackets in social and public spaces such as employment, higher education, restaurants, etc. African Americans within this category often feel that their presence is unaccepted because they are perceived to be not as smart for instance due to social programs such as affirmative action that assist with upward mobility (Feagin 1991, 104–107). According to Feagin (1991, 101–103), when these resentments arise, middle class African Americans will either fight back or withdraw. Withdrawal does not only occur in social spaces, but in electoral participation as well (Feagin 1991, 103).

Figure 2. Probability to Turn out to Vote: Comparison by Race and Class Strata



## Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to capture more fully the relationship between different segments of the population and the ballot box. In other words, which segment of the population has been responsible for the decline over the past four decades? Using ANES data from 1980 through 2000, models were developed to test how much each of these theories could account for this decline. Clearly, I did not expect to find the African American middle class at least in comparison to lower income African Americans, were the least likely to vote in presidential elections especially since it has long been established in the dominant literature that those who are of a higher socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to vote than those of a lower socioeconomic status (Verba and Nie 1972). This theory certainly does not hold across racial and ethnic lines which clearly indicate that race and racism has a great deal of significance at the ballot.

Very few authors attributed the decline of voter turnout in presidential elections to race or racism. Most studies claim that the reason that voter turnout declined over the last four decades was due to registration requirements, a decline in partisanship, and civic attitudes. However, there is a reason why it has taken so long to elect an African American president as well as limit their role at the national level in different branches of government such as Congress. This past presidential election has shed light on a particular problem that should have been known all along, even at the polls that *race matters*. Although African Americans have become more integrated into the political and economic structures now than at any time in history, the environment states that racism still exists.

It is very apparent that the rationale for voter turnout in the African American community is a complicated one that encompasses a range of theories. African Americans

from diverse socioeconomic groups have always utilized varied mechanisms for overcoming registration barriers, becoming mobilized and addressing issues of trust and group dynamics. Surprisingly though, previous research hardly saw the need to analyze this phenomenon in this fashion. Clearly, each theory on its own is not sufficient to account for voting patterns among heterogeneous African Americans in the United States. However, when combined they do provide a framework for analyzing why race is still a factor in assessing voter turnout and voting patterns among African American communities.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Downs (1957) discusses voter turnout as a rationality model. He states that if the costs outweigh the benefits, such as information costs associated with registration, individuals are less likely to vote.

<sup>2</sup> Registration laws have been liberalized, that is no more poll taxes, literacy tests, discrimination in voting had been outlawed with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, voting is more inclusive with the 26th Amendment in 1972 reducing the voting age to eighteen.

<sup>3</sup> See Ruy Teixeira (1992) for a detailed account of the rise in college education during this steady decline of voter turnout.

<sup>4</sup> See Ruy Teixeira (1992) for a detailed account of the rise in college education during this steady decline of voter turnout.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruy Teixeira (1992) for a detailed account of the rise in college education during this steady decline of voter turnout.

<sup>6</sup> See Lucas 2001.

<sup>7</sup> The Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Act of 1996, known less formally as the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, ended welfare as we knew it. Cash assistance was no longer provided by the federal government but was implemented in block grants by state governments (Piven 2000). There were now limits on the amount of time an individual could be guaranteed funding. This was an attempt to end this cycle of dependency, which is inherent in the culture of poverty thesis. “The public rightly wanted welfare reform that expected work and parent responsibility” (Bane 1997, 1).

<sup>8</sup> Affirmative Action is a social program that is institutionalized to provide equal opportunity for groups that have established discrimination in the political, economic, and social systems on the basis of race, gender, or ethnic background (Lipset 1999). During the 1990s, a sequence of verdicts by the courts removed or decreased the use of affirmative action in university admissions, government contracts, congressional redistricting, and in other areas (Sear et al. 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See Aldrich and Nelson (1984). This model is used as opposed to an ordinary least squares (OLS) model, because OLS would yield estimates that are improperly inefficient for this model; it would misestimate the effect that the independent variables have on the dependent variable. Hence, the statistical inferences that were drawn previously or the hypotheses constructed will not be warranted using an LPM model no matter how large the sample is because the error term is not evenly distributed. Not having an evenly distributed error term, of course, violates an assumption of OLS; essentially, there is heteroscedasticity in the model, a serious flaw in the OLS model because it limits the model’s predictive power.

<sup>10</sup> See Schuman et al. (1997) for more details on inclusion of African Americans in the political, economic, and social structure.

<sup>11</sup> See Blair and Lucas 2000.



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