

Assessing Cultural and Contextual Components of Social Capital: Is Civic Engagement in Peril?

LINDSAY H. HOFFMAN

Department of Communication, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA

OSEI APPIAH

School of Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Much research on political participation and civic engagement centers on the question: "What motivates people to get involved?" Several communication variables have been purported to influence these activities, such as television, newspaper, and Internet use. The general conclusion is that civic and political participation is declining. However, the rates of decline (or increase) in these activities among certain racial and cultural groups, such as Blacks compared with Whites, is not clear. Furthermore, the roles of religion and the church—an important component in creating bonds and networks that encourage such participation—have received little attention among communication scholars. The authors sought to examine the intricacies among race, religiosity, and political and civic engagement by expanding the current literature on social capital to include cultural and contextual components of church involvement. They found that in a national sample, the more involved Blacks are with church and the more frequently they attend services, the more involved they are in their communities. Moreover, their findings are consistent with previous research regarding media use; newspaper reading, and Internet use were positively related with civic engagement and voting, whereas television use was not. Implications for communication research, social capital, and measurement of race and culture are discussed.

KEYTERMS church, community, culture, ethnicity, media use, participation, race, social capital

Address correspondence to Dr. Osei Appiah, School of Communication, 3140 Derby Hall, 154 N. Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210. E-mail: appiah.2@osu.edu

Some researchers contend that race does not play a role in influencing an individual's political participation or civic engagement (e.g., Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999) whereas others argue that race does correlate with these activities (e.g., Abrahamson & Claggett, 1984; Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000). What is certain is that over the last few decades, voter registration, voter turnout, and civic engagement have dropped significantly among Americans (Cavanagh, 1991; Gilliam & Kaufman, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

Disparities in political participation by race are not as certain. Many scholars believe that the decrease in voter participation may be greater than average for Black Americans (e.g., Musick et al., 2000). However, there appears to be solid evidence that the political participation gap between Whites and Blacks may be shrinking or may even be non-existent (Abrahamson & Claggett, 1984; Cohen, Cotter, & Couter, 1983; Southwell & Pirch, 2003). In fact, much of the data suggesting Blacks are less politically active compared with Whites seem to result more from differences in socioeconomic status than differences in race (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999). For example, Barnes's (2003) study of poor urban neighborhoods found that Blacks were more involved in their neighborhoods than Whites, even after controlling for the constraints of income, transportation, and length of residence in the neighborhood.

Communication researchers have become more involved in this discussion of political participation, adding variables like media use, interpersonal discussion, and social networks (Nisbet, Moy, & Scheufele, 2003; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Brossard, 2003; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2003; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Rarely, however, do these researchers take race into account. Nisbet et al. did measure religion and race, but focused their attention on belief systems (i.e., doctrinal conservatism) primarily among White Protestants, and grouped non-Whites into an "other" category. It is our contention that the Black religious experience is a unique cultural component and deserves attention within the ongoing discussion of social capital. This study attempts to rectify the problem by drawing attention to the important cultural and structural elements that could potentially influence Black political participation and civic engagement. But first, a general explication of social capital is required.

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Much of the research on political and civic engagement can be classified under the rubric of "social capital." This concept has been measured in various ways, but it can be defined generally as a multilevel concept that manifests itself in communities through public and private processes and organizations as well as interpersonal communication networks (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Putnam claimed (2000) that the term *social*