

Chapter One

RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

THE ARGUMENT

ONE of the striking features of political life in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that racial and ethnic minorities are becoming political majorities. California, Florida, New York, and Texas project that “whites” will be racial *minorities* in their states within decades, while other states’ immigrant populations have increased substantially in selected communities. Whether potential or realized, these demographic changes have seemingly changed the dynamics of national, state, and local politics.

Political analysts and commentators offer decidedly mixed views of the political consequences of these changes. To some, it is inevitable that this diversity will be embraced by political and social institutions, as well as citizens. This positive response to diversity will thus result in greater integration and, ultimately, a society in which “color” is irrelevant. Others are far less positive, anticipating that racial/ethnic diversity will threaten Anglos as well as minorities and lead to heightened political conflict.¹

These predictions, however, are typically based on anecdotal accounts of dramatic or unusual cases of racial/ethnic integration or conflict. For example, the Rodney King “incident” in Los Angeles—when protests and rioting erupted after police officers accused of brutality against King (an African-American) were acquitted of criminal charges—is often used as the specter of an uncontrollable and divisive racial politics of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, some politicians use the language of racial and ethnic integration as a symbol of hope and progress, often demonstrating their commitment to this ideal by choosing minority individuals for appointed positions or as informal political advisors. Both Republican and Demo-

¹ Throughout the text I use the terms “Anglo,” “white,” and “Anglo-whites” interchangeably to refer to non-Hispanic Caucasians; “Black” and “African-American” to refer to non-whites who identify as either; and “Latino” and “Hispanic” interchangeably for individuals of Hispanic or Latino origin. Where possible, I use whichever labels were used in previous research, or by elite subjects. While I use the term “minority” to refer generally to racial and ethnic minorities, the evidence I offer focuses almost entirely on African-Americans and Latinos as ethnic minorities. Finally, I occasionally simplify the phrase “racial and ethnic minority” to “racial minority,” though I nonetheless am referring to both groups.

4 CHAPTER ONE

cratic presidents alike have made it a priority to select a cabinet (as well as other political appointees) that is to some extent racially and ethnically diverse, while political candidates from Jesse Jackson to George W. Bush have sought the advice and endorsement of individuals from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. If individuals of different races and ethnicity can govern together, then different racial and ethnic groups can learn to live together.

But will they? Aside from the strategic use of race by political candidates and officials, how will citizens respond to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in their neighborhoods, their jobs, their communities? And will the reactions of citizens of minority (i.e., racial/ethnic) status to diversity be the same as those of Anglos? These questions are important for they reflect on individuals' fundamental political responses to their social environments.

Consider, for example, the potentially distinctive reactions of two individuals—one Anglo-white, the other African-American—to change in the racial composition of their neighborhood. The first, upon seeing an increased number of Blacks in the previously “white” neighborhood, might view such changes as a positive sign of social progress and embrace the new neighbors by engaging with them socially and politically. Alternatively, this change in social composition might be interpreted as an omen of bad things to come—declining property values, increasing crime, etc.—and thus a threat to house and home. The political response might well be to either mobilize against such a threat or demobilize by remaining silent or exiting the community.

The second citizen in this vignette might likewise embrace such change as a positive sign of social progress, one that would provide this individual with the potential for enriched social interaction and political involvement. It is less likely to imagine a Black individual residing in an increasingly Black neighborhood perceiving this change as a threat, but it is not logically impossible.

The problem is that we simply do not know how individuals—Anglo-whites, Blacks, or Latinos—respond politically to the racial composition of their neighborhoods and communities. Following Hirschman (1970), three options are conceivable: exit, voice, or loyalty. Certainly evidence of white flight in residential neighborhoods confirms that whites have often reacted to increasing neighborhood diversity by exiting. But, for various reasons, exiting is not an option or a choice for many—and important questions regarding how individuals react to racial and ethnic diversity remain. Do political elites, as well as citizens, mobilize or demobilize? And under what conditions do they do so?

INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Scholarly analyses of the consequences of racial diversity for individuals' political behavior are rare. Hero's (1998) recent work on state politics—by far the most encompassing treatment of the concept of racial/ethnic diversity—focuses only marginally on political behavior. And, despite the centrality of individual political participation to democratic politics, few studies of mass political behavior explicitly consider the more narrow question of how individuals' social contexts structure their political participation. Thus, how citizens react to diversity is unknown. Do individuals engage or disengage, and under what conditions do they do so?

The dominant paradigm in the study of political participation over the past thirty years has emphasized socioeconomic status as the primary determinant of individuals' engagement in politics and repeatedly demonstrated that those with greater status are more likely to participate than those with lesser status. *Why* such a relationship exists has been addressed at length by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), who identify three resources (i.e., skills, time, money) associated with socioeconomic status. According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, individuals without such resources are less able to bear the costs of political activity. Hence the importance of socioeconomic status in explaining who participates.

Theories of racial and ethnic participation, in contrast, tend to emphasize contextual characteristics such as candidate and group mobilization. Motivating this emphasis is the underlying premise that individuals of lesser social status rely on the political mobilization of organized groups more heavily than do individuals of greater social status (see, e.g., Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978).² Given the lower level of individual resources that minorities typically control, engagement in politics is tied to group characteristics that subsidize the cost of participation through the provision of information or psychological benefits. Although this argument resounds throughout a voluminous case-study literature on minority politics, systematic empirical studies of minority political participation—particularly those that consider more than one ethnic group—rarely incorporate measures of political mobilization.³ Furthermore, findings regarding the validity of the

² More specifically: "Lower-status groups, in contrast, need a group-based process of political mobilization if they are to catch up to the upper-status groups in terms of political activity. They need a self-conscious ideology as motivation and need organization as a resource. The processes that bring them to political activity are more explicit and easily recognized. They are more likely to involve explicit conflict with other groups. Our argument is consistent with Michels's contention that organization—and we might add ideology—is the weapon of the weak" (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978: 14–15).

³ Throughout the book, I use the terms "recruitment" and "mobilization" interchangeably

6 CHAPTER ONE

socioeconomic status model for minority individuals are somewhat inconsistent when tested using empirical data.

And therein lies the rub: our theories of participation assumed to be generalizable across racial and ethnic groups are tested primarily on Anglos and typically ignore the contextual characteristics emphasized in theories of minority participation, while theories of group mobilization are rarely tested empirically in a systematic fashion across racial and ethnic groups. Thus, the relative importance of individual and group (i.e., contextual) characteristics as predictors of participation across racial and ethnic groups is unknown.

More broadly, the goal of incorporating individual and group factors into our theories of political participation challenges two fundamental and related assumptions in the study of political participation: first, that participation in democratic political activities is individualistic (i.e., motivated within the individual participant) and second, that political behavior more generally is independent of the social context within which the individual resides. The socioeconomic status model is a perfect example of the first assumption; social and political processes beyond the individual are not considered essential to explanations of political behavior. Explanations of minority participation that emphasize the critical importance of political mobilization (i.e., being asked to participate) to individuals' participation decisions challenge this first assumption by posing individuals' decisions to participate as being structured by political elites rather than individuals' resources.⁴

The second assumption, though similar to the first, reflects more on the methods used to study political participation than it does on the theories offered to explain it. Specifically, the widespread use of survey research and its reliance on large-scale, national probability samples in the study of political participation have sustained decades of research, for which the only appropriate and available data are on characteristics of the individual—randomly chosen from an unspecified political environment—rather than the individual's political context.⁵ Hence, in part due to the lack of

to refer to direct requests of individuals to participate in a particular way (to vote, to campaign, to attend a local meeting, etc.). In contrast, "participation" refers to engaging in political behavior with the intention of influencing government or policy outcomes. This usage is distinct from various studies that use the term "mobilization" to refer to voter turnout or racial/ethnic group voting patterns. I also use the word "mobilization" when referring to *elite* mobilization activities such as party targeting, campaign spending, and grassroots outreach by group leaders.

⁴ Note that this use of the term mobilization differs from that often seen in urban politics, minority politics, and comparative politics studies. Individuals who are mobilized (i.e., asked or encouraged) to participate in politics may or may not choose to participate; whatever their choice, the fact that they have been mobilized is beyond their immediate control.

⁵ An elegant exception to this generalization is Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).

RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 7

data on individuals' political environments and to the wealth of data on individuals' demographic characteristics, our explanations of political participation focus on individual characteristics, independent of the social and political context. The argument forwarded in the following chapters thus takes issue with the assumption that individuals' political environments are essentially irrelevant to their political engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The underlying theoretical model on which this empirical analysis rests is drawn from rational-choice models of voter turnout and collective action, described in greater detail in chapter 2. These models posit individuals' decisions to participate as a comparison of the costs of contributing (i.e., voting or engaging in collective action) to the benefits gained by contributing (i.e., preferred policies being pursued by successful candidates, or as a result of some other group effort such as protest). The "paradox of participation" is that, contrary to the model's prediction (zero turnout, in most cases), voting or engaging in collective action is fairly common.

Various solutions to this paradox essentially require that "extra-individual" considerations such as group identity or benefits, social interaction, and elite mobilization be considered in the calculus. These are the very types of contextual factors identified in the minority politics literature as critical to the understanding of minority participation. Some of these factors—in particular those relating to social interaction and mobilization—are occasionally identified in contextual studies of (Anglo) political participation as well.

I conceptualize the contextual influences discussed in these literatures as consisting of three types, with each type either reducing the costs or increasing the benefits of participation. *Elite mobilization* refers to the explicit or implicit solicitation of individuals' engagement in political activity by elites, who provide an information subsidy (i.e., regarding where to vote, or how to become registered, or when the meeting is scheduled) to individuals. *Relational goods*, as developed by Uhlaner (1989b), refer to a set of incentives enjoyed by individuals as members of groups. These incentives—available only to group members—range from group identity to social interaction and recruitment, but the essential mechanism is again that of information provision: the group provides information that reduces the costs of participation.

The third type of contextual influence is the *racial/ethnic context*, which refers to the racial/ethnic composition of the individual's immediate social context. This contextual influence may indirectly reduce the costs of participating by affecting the likelihood of elite mobilization and the provision of

8 CHAPTER ONE

relational goods, but more important, it increases the benefits of participating more directly. For minority individuals, the potential benefits of participating are greater as the racial/ethnic group increases in size because the group consequently enjoys a higher probability of being successful in its political efforts.⁶ For Anglos, an increase in minority group size acts as an informational cue of group threat—which again should increase the potential policy benefits of engaging in political activity.

This threefold conceptualization of contextual influences is drawn from numerous studies of race, politics, and political behavior in the United States and justified further in chapters 2 and 3. Based on this conceptualization, I advance the following thesis:

Contextual influences that reduce the costs of participation have a greater effect on minority participation than on Anglo participation, while contextual influences that increase the perceived benefits of participation have a greater effect on Anglo participation than on minority participation. Moreover, the nature of this relationship differs for Blacks and Latinos.

More specifically, I offer three distinct models of how contextual influences structure Anglo, Black, and Latino participation, distinguished primarily by whether the racial context influences elite mobilization and relational goods, and whether racial context directly influences participation, of each specific group. These distinctions rely in part on previous empirical findings on political participation, as well as extensions of various theoretical frameworks used more broadly in the study of political behavior.

I model Anglo participation as a function of relational goods, elite mobilization, and racial context, with the latter having no independent effect on either elite mobilization or relational goods (see figure 1.1). The basic argument here is that Anglos are more likely to participate when there are greater relational goods incentives, when there are higher levels of elite mobilization, and when Anglos reside in more racially diverse contexts.⁷

⁶ To be more accurate, it is not “being large” that matters for the group, but being pivotal. By definition, however, due to the relatively small proportion of minorities in most electoral districts, I assume that the larger the group size, the more likely it is to be pivotal.

⁷ An alternative interpretation regarding the behavior of Anglos in minority contexts is that Anglos who do not want to reside in a minority context self-select by moving elsewhere. What we then observe is the result of this self-selection process rather than a “real” relationship between context and participatory behavior. As with most research on contextual effects, I assume that whites’ decisions to move (or not move) are guided by considerations other than their desired level of political participation or social interaction. Therefore, the evidence offered in the chapters that follow should reflect on how the racial context influences whites’ behaviors.

RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 9

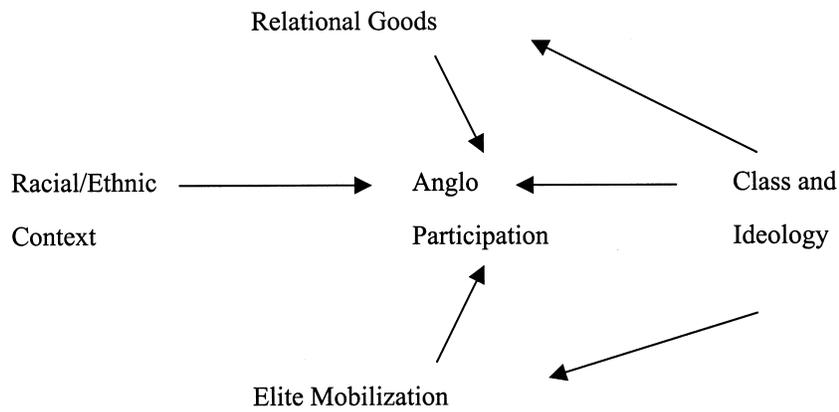


Figure 1.1. Model of Anglo Participation: Race, Class, and Mobilization

In contrast, for both Latino (figure 1.2) and African-American (figure 1.3) participation, I argue that the racial context—the size of individuals’ racial groups—structures the provision of both relational goods and elite mobilization. This set of hypothesized relationships reflects the importance of strong group-oriented (social or political) institutions where minority citizens live in concentrated areas and therefore enjoy greater opportunities for social interaction and organization.

Socioeconomic status, relational goods, and elite mobilization are hypothesized to increase participation for both African-Americans and Latinos. The notable difference between the African-American and Latino models relates to the effect of the racial context on individuals’ participation decisions. Specifically, I argue that the racial context will directly af-

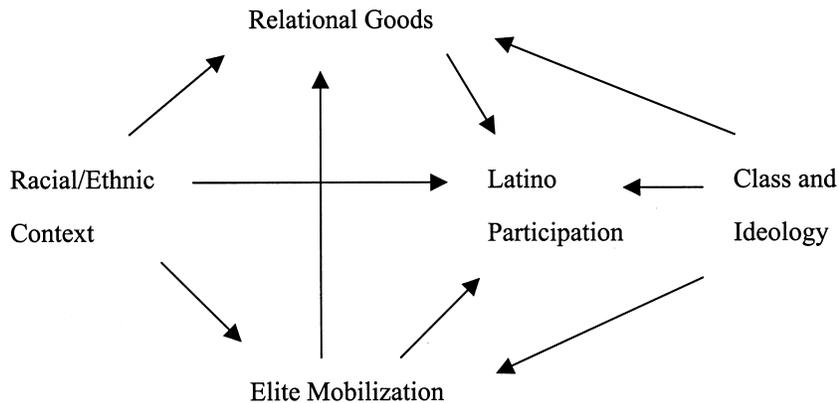


Figure 1.2. Model of Latino Participation: Race, Class, and Mobilization

10 CHAPTER ONE

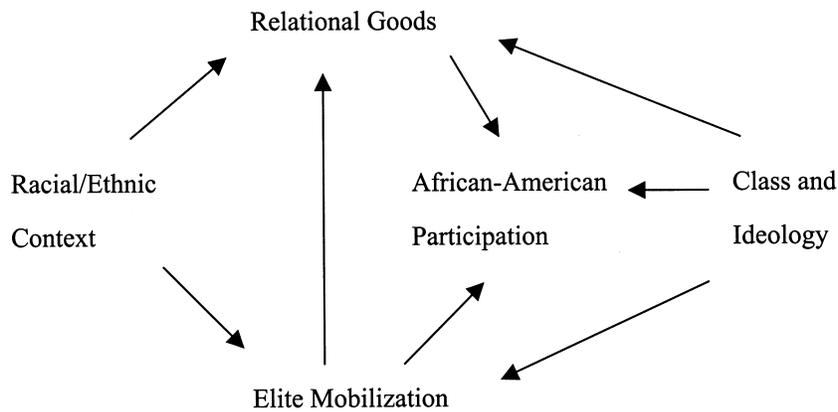


Figure 1.3. Model of African-American Participation: Race, Class, and Mobilization

fect Latino but not African-American participation, for three reasons. First, African-Americans have few opportunities to be true political majorities (i.e., pivotal), as their potential size in any political or electoral coalition is undoubtedly lower than that of Latinos. Although there are notable exceptions, of course, African-Americans are most likely to be minorities in most states and cities (and most likely majorities in electoral districts drawn specifically for that reason). In contrast, Latinos have become dominant electoral forces in a much wider array of cities and states and have far greater potential in the coming decades. Thus, group size has far greater potential to be of political consequence, and I believe that individuals' decisions to participate will reflect this calculus.

Second, the greater assimilation of Latinos into non-Latino neighborhoods (largely by virtue of their relatively higher levels of economic success, as compared to African-Americans) also suggests that Latinos are additionally advantaged with incentives to participate as their presence increases: viewing a more diverse neighborhood or electorate signals that such economic success might be translated into greater political success.

Third, the distinctiveness of contextual influences on Blacks and Latinos reflects on the political histories of these groups in the United States, which have been marked by repeated attempts to gain full citizenship and participation. This political history has, for Blacks, been accompanied by the development of a highly complex set of political institutions that seek to foster their members' political involvement, while for Latinos such mobilizing structures are fewer in number and scope (McClain and Stewart 1999: 44–51).

The literature on minority politics suggests that African-Americans have

RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 11

the strongest infrastructure to facilitate participation, due to the historical role of the Black church and civil rights organizations in mobilizing their members. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in the number of African-American candidates in the post-Civil War era along with the significant residential segregation of the African-American community suggest that the level of elite mobilization is relatively high compared to that of other ethnic groups.

With the exception of Cuban-Americans, Latinos generally have a much weaker infrastructure to facilitate participation.⁸ The Mexican-American community has fewer groups organized to mobilize political participation. Until recently, fewer (though increasing) Mexican-American candidates ran for or were elected to office; unlike the majority of African-American candidates, successful Mexican-American candidates have used various political strategies and displayed more diverse ideological stances, both resulting in different types of political coalitions seemingly less tied directly to Latino interests. Additional barriers to broad-based mobilization of Latinos result from nationality and language differences, a less concentrated population, and the relatively lower proportion of citizens within the Mexican-American community (Hero 1992: 194–201).⁹

Cuban-American politics, on the other hand, is marked by “a remarkable level of cohesiveness” sustained by a significant increase in native-born Cuban-Americans over the last two decades (Diaz 1996). The relatively high socioeconomic status enjoyed by Cuban-Americans as well as high levels of English usage in second-generation Cuban-Americans suggest that the Cuban-American population is becoming both “more mainstream and more Latino (in terms of identification with other Hispanics)” (Hill and Moreno 1996: 178). These advantages in mobilization infrastructure are likely reflected in high levels of electoral organization and participation in Cuban-American communities (Diaz 1996: 162–63).¹⁰

Absent this high level of organization, and despite its diversity, the size of the Latino population acts as an indirect measure of the potential policy benefits of participating in a way that does not necessarily hold for African-

⁸ There are other exceptions such as local, highly organized, and mobilized Latino or Chicano groups, many of which are in California, while others are scattered across local communities in the United States.

⁹ The Asian-American community similarly struggles with nationality and language differences among an even smaller population and has no mass-based groups devoted to political mobilization. Unfortunately, the data used in this book do not include sufficiently large samples of Asian-Americans to incorporate in the analysis.

¹⁰ This distinction between Mexican-American and Cuban-American clearly suggests that the “Latino” label is an oversimplification that masks a wide variety of interests, beliefs, and behaviors. However, it is impossible to consider these native-origin differences in the analyses in later chapters due to the low number of cases even from countries such as Cuba and Mexico.

12 CHAPTER ONE

Americans, who are able to rely on more formal organizations and social institutions for the collective representation of their political interests.

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND DATA SOURCES

As noted above, this theoretical framework is justified in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3, along with some initial confirmatory evidence. I then test various implications of these models more fully. Chapters 4 and 5 examine several propositions associated with elite mobilization, while chapter 6 tests various hypotheses regarding individuals' (self-reported) recruitment to political activities by other individuals. Chapters 7 and 8 then consider the relative importance of racial context, relational goods, and elite mobilization, controlling for socioeconomic status, across these three racial/ethnic groups.

The empirical analyses rely on a variety of data sets. The first is the biennial American National Election Study (NES), consisting of nationally representative samples taken in every presidential election year from 1956 to 1996 (Sapiro et al. 1998). The NES time series provides the opportunity to assess changes in the mobilization (i.e., party contacting) of African-Americans, as well as its impact on participation levels, over time.

The second data source is a survey of party county chairs conducted in 1996. These survey data were collected from Republican and Democratic Parties' county chairs in Texas, primarily through telephone interviews conducted between November 16 and December 7, 1996. Questions on the survey focused on a number of topics, including characteristics of the county chair; organizational characteristics (e.g., money spent, staff, office); the priority and nature of get-out-the-vote efforts in the county; the presence of other party or nonparty organizations devoted to get-out-the-vote efforts in the county; the ideology of various groups in the county; and early versus election-day campaign strategies, among others (see appendix A for the questionnaire).

The party chair data are valuable, for I know of no other existing data in which political elites are asked to report on which groups they mobilized, or targeted, in an election campaign. Although my argument that elites are strategic in their decisions to mobilize voters is not necessarily new, the ability to test that argument using elite reports, rather than voter self-reports, is important. With its relatively large African-American and Latino populations (discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5), the state of Texas is a reasonable venue for preliminary data collection on elite mobilization of racial and ethnic minorities. The findings using this data must be interpreted cautiously, however, as a case study of Texas elites rather than

RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 13

evidence suitable for generalizing to all party elites in the 1996 presidential election.

The third data set used in the analyses that follow is Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) Citizen Participation Study (CPS), a national public opinion survey that I have supplemented with data on minority group size and political empowerment.¹¹ This survey provides individual-level data on individuals' resources, political attitudes, and civic skills, as well as self-reports on recruitment and participation. Conducted in 1989–90, the CPS includes oversamples of political activists, Blacks, and Latinos (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady [1995] and Verba et al. [1993] for a more detailed description of the sampling and weighting details).

In addition, in chapters 4 and 8 I use or refer to the Texas Minority Survey, a statewide public opinion survey of Texans that oversampled African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Asian-Americans.¹² The survey was conducted using randomly selected telephone households in Texas between October 29, 1993, and February 23, 1994. An extended analysis of these data is provided in Leighley and Vedlitz (1999). Also reported in chapter 8 are analyses published in Hill and Leighley (1999) using data on the racial composition of state electorates, state mobilizing institutions, voter registration requirements, and voter turnout in the 1950s, 1980s, and 1990s. The state-level data set confirms the analyses of the survey data reported in chapter 7 and generalizes these findings by using a different level of contextual analysis (i.e., states as electoral units).

CONTRIBUTIONS

The empirical evidence that follows confirms the critical importance of integrating contextual influences in studying individuals' decisions to participate. Moreover, it demonstrates that these contextual influences vary across racial/ethnic groups. Taken as a whole, this work highlights the critical importance of developing and validating general models of political

¹¹ I owe each of these scholars numerous intellectual debts, as well as gratitude for their gracious assistance in sharing the data they originally collected. This book would have been impossible to write without them.

¹² Research funding for this project was provided primarily by the Office of the Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Studies, Texas A&M University; through the Interdisciplinary Research Initiatives Program, along with the Center for Biotechnology Policy and Ethics; through the Institute of Biosciences and Technology; the Racial and Ethnic Studies Institute (RESI); the Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI); and the Department of Political Science, all academic units of Texas A&M University. Principal investigators are: James Dyer, PPRI; Jan Leighley, Department of Political Science; George Rogers, Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center, Texas A&M University; and Gail Thomas, RESI.

14 CHAPTER ONE

behavior that incorporate distinctive, group-related features of race and ethnicity.

The models introduced above are generally supported in the chapters that follow, though not in the exact manner that I anticipated. In particular, I find some interesting variations across racial/ethnic groups in how the racial context, elite mobilization, and relational goods affect different types of participation.

Nonetheless, these analyses address several notable gaps in our empirical evidence regarding elite mobilization and mass political participation. First, the evidence suggests that standard models developed in the study of “mass” political behavior in the United States are not as powerful in explaining minority behavior as they are in explaining Anglo behavior. Second, the evidence also points to the critical importance of minority group size in structuring mobilization for minorities and, in contrast, structuring the participation decisions of Anglos. This finding thus broadens the utility of the group-conflict model used previously in studies of vote choice rather than political participation. Third, the analyses provide unique evidence regarding the importance of race/ethnicity to political elites’ mobilization strategies. Fourth, the analyses integrate and extend the political empowerment model developed in the study of Black politics to Latino politics.

More broadly, the chapters that follow suggest that at the most fundamental level, citizens’ responses to racial/ethnic diversity are indeed complex. Anglos respond to diversity differently than do African-Americans or Latinos. These variations in response patterns primarily reflect the incentives associated with majority/minority status—as structured by political institutions—rather than class differences across these groups. These chapters also demonstrate the underlying principle that racial/ethnic homogeneity enhances citizens’ engagement in the political system. Thus, democratic politics will likely thrive in a more diverse society only if elites seek to mobilize not “just” racial and ethnic minorities (as currently defined), but instead minorities as determined by the social context, *independent of race and ethnicity*.