

**African Americans & Socio-Economic Status**  
Issue Brief: Majority Rule, Minority Rights  
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Key words

Race, class, attitude, political variance, linked fate, economic stratification

Description

Does the variation in class status of African Americans challenge notion of singularity among black race? I will explore attitudinal differences and political party differences to address the question of the impact of socioeconomic diversity on what has been previously called a singular African American community.

Key Points

-Socioeconomic stratification has caused a slight increase in political party variance, but more strongly correlates with political activism: middle and upper class black Americans are significantly more likely to be politically active than poorer black Americans

-Significant socioeconomic variation has called into question the singularity of the black race

-Nevertheless, the concept of linked fate argues that many black Americans view themselves as still unified with a large black community because of their linked fate – their position as a result of continued discrimination and individualized racism

-Overall, the precise effects that socioeconomic variation has had on African Americans is highly contested among scholars

Issue Brief

The increasing stratification of African Americans among class has caused sociologists, historians, and political scientists alike to question whether African Americans are still a unified race. Indeed, there exists a growing gap between the poor and upper-middle class African

Americans. Three main questions have pervaded the discourse concerning the diversity of black class status: firstly, do political differences align with class status among African Americans? Secondly, does the significant variation in class status challenge the idea of a singular black race? Finally, and most significantly, which has a greater impact on African American self-perception – class status, or race?

The first main question pervasive in literature on this topic asks whether differences in political party membership align with class among African Americans. Does the increasing socioeconomic stratification of African Americans result in increasing stratification of political views? It is unquestionable among many political scientists that African Americans have become increasingly diverse in socioeconomic status. For example, in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson argues that due to an increase in opportunities for education (through affirmative action, less explicit discrimination, Civil Rights movement, etc.), a new black middle class has emerged, one that has the social mobility to relocate out of the poverty stricken inner cities into the more affluent suburbs. Wilson argues that these increasing class differences, in combination with the spatial differences, has caused political stratification among African Americans. While many political scientists agree that economic differences do result in political differences, the nature of these political differences is contestable. For example, a study entitled “Class Differences in Racial Attitudes: A Divided Black America” shows that middle class black Americans are more likely to point to structural explanations of racial inequalities than lower class black Americans. Indeed, as the authors of this study write, “[these findings] are inconsistent with the class alignment argument that proposes ‘higher

socioeconomic status decreases the sense that one is a victim of racial discrimination”<sup>1</sup>.

However, this report did find that political activism correlates directly with socioeconomic status – upper and middle class black Americans are significantly more politically involved than lower class black Americans. Thus, while scholars have agreed on political divisions among African Americans, these political divisions are far from predictable. What has been substantiated, however, is that middle and upper middle class black Americans are more politically active than lower class black Americans.

QuickTime™ and a  
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are needed to see this picture.

Taken from Pew Social Trends, “Blacks See Growing Values Gap between Poor and Middle Class”

The second important question asks whether the significant variation in class status challenges the idea of a singular black race. This question is more sociological than political, and varies largely based on individual conceptions of race. However, many political scientists have touched on this question and have held distinctly different answers. In the book *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, Eugene Robinson argues that the combined political activism, wealth, and education of a certain class of black Americans has created a break in a previously

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<sup>1</sup> Sean-Shong Hwang, Kevin Fitzpatrick, and David Helms, “Class Differences in Racial Attitudes: A Divided Black America?”, *Sociological Perspectives* 41, No. 2 (1998): 376

unified black community, and this break severely calls into question the idea of a singular black race. Additionally, in Pew Research Center's November 2007 study on black Americans, class, and political views, they found that 53% of black Americans believe that blacks can "still be thought of as a single race", but 37% of black Americans think that they cannot.<sup>2</sup> However, this argument relies on a particular conception of race – one that argues that those of one race have similar education and economic statuses – and many scholars also disagree with this conception of Race and Robinson's thesis. For example, the theory of the linked fate argues that the remaining institutional and individualized racism unifies black Americans as one race, despite differences in socio-economic status and education.

Indeed, the stratification of class among African Americans has begged this final important question: which has a more substantive impact on identity of black Americans – social class, or race? Many scholars have addressed this question, including prominent political scientist Michael Dawson in his work *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. In this book, Dawson argues that despite economic differences and increased wealth, race is still a determining factor in many African Americans' life experiences and opportunities. Because of this, many black Americans still see themselves as connected with other black Americans. Continued racial discrimination and institutionalized racism, Dawson argues, puts race before socioeconomic status; and thus unifies political views despite economic stratification. Dawson essentially embodies the concept of 'linked fate' – the theory that many African Americans "see their fate as individually linked to that of the group"<sup>3</sup>. Despite greater economic stratification, then, race may still have a more substantive impact on identity than social class. In

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Social Trends Staff, "Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class", *Pew Social & Demographic Trends* (Nov 13, 2007): 2

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Bobo, "Book Review, Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics", *American Journal of Sociology* 101, No. 3 (November 1995): 755

a climate of, as Bobo writes, “laissez-faire racism”, black Americans stand unified in the face of continued discrimination.

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