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Factors that Influence Black Youth Voter Turnout

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Factors of Black Youth Voter Turnout

Honors Capstone

BKST 493: Afrocentricity

Northern Illinois University – DeKalb

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors that influence black youth voter turnout. First, this paper discusses how it is related to and implemented into black studies. After a brief justification of the need, this paper examines specific factors that influence black youth voter turnout. These factors are then applied with factors that affect youth voter turnout. This paper ends with a survey for black students between the ages of 18-25 to study the factors that influence black youth voter turnout.

Black youth voter participation is critically important to fighting inequality and inequity. By not voting, black non-voters are not only ignoring their civic duty, but they are also doing a disservice to themselves. The right to vote embodies the right to representation. The level of representation of black voters is a determinant in the advocacy for black voters. By not voting, African Americans are silencing their voices. There have been many factors that reduce black youth voter turnout and participation, and voter identification laws are one of many tactics used by lawmakers to limit the Black vote as well as the youth vote. My research inquires about the factors that influence black youth voter turnout and how scholars and activists can work to increase black youth voter turnout and participation. Enthusiasm and representation are major factors of Black youth voter turnout, and they influence black voters regardless of their age group.

Methodology

In the chapter, “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects,” in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, Smith describes 25 Indigenous projects and how scholars can work on these projects. One of the projects is testimony. Testimony is formal and a way of talking about extremely painful events. This project can be applied to Black Studies and utilized as a method of data collection. Smith notes that this approach translates well into a formal written document (1999). This approach will be used with the survey; the goal is to generate testimony from survey participants. Using this approach, I am considering and analyzing the lived experiences of black youth as applied to their intention to vote.

Smith describes “intervening” as “the process of being proactive and of becoming involved as an interested worker for change” (147, Smith, 1999). It is described as a necessary approach when in “crisis conditions,” which is the state of Black Studies and other ethnic studies currently.

There is a risk of educational programs being taken from campuses, and Smith presents intervening as a project for changing institutions. The third project is democratizing, which is a “process of extending participation outwards through reinstating indigenous principles of collectivity and public debate” (156, Smith, 1999). This is especially important when studying political participation and researching factors for a seeming lack of participation. Smith’s point reflects that it is the researcher’s responsibility to uncover not only the factors of the lack of political participation but also the historical analysis of why these factors exist.

In chapter six, titled “Caribbean Sociology, Africa, and the Diaspora”, of *African Diaspora and the Disciplines*, Henry and Sweet describe a need for Afrocentric sociology in the Caribbean and African diaspora. Henry and Sweet describe the past, present, and hopeful future of Caribbean sociology. In the first phase of Caribbean sociology, classic works were written, such as *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (Edith Clarke) and *Sociology of Slavery* (Orlando Patterson). However, they state that there was a heavy reliance on Western collaboration, thought, and methodologies. Despite the critical knowledge and theories gained in the first phase of Caribbean sociology, the reliance on Western collaboration, thought, and methodologies limited Caribbean sociology. Henry and Sweet assert that studying a society without considering and implementing the traditions and norms of that society in sociological research limits the research and methods, resulting in limited knowledge and representation of factual Caribbean sociology (Henry and Sweet, 2010).

Leading into the second phase of Caribbean sociology, Henry and Sweet state that there is a “break” from Western thought and culture in Caribbean sociology. When Caribbean sociologists were no longer interested in modernization theories that did not center Afro-Caribbeans, the previous collaboration with the West was greatly reduced (Henry and Sweet,

2010). In the second phase of Caribbean sociology, they state that the foundation of Caribbean sociology must be reworked and point to the need for Afro-Caribbean-centered sociology. The new theories and methods of Caribbean sociology must include the Caribbean intellectual tradition, and scholars must utilize the methods in which the society they are researching defines themselves.

Despite the valuable perspective that Henry and Sweet offer, they do not define the key concepts being studied: sociology and Caribbean sociology. It is important to define these terms because, as the essay is written, the ideas and criticism can be applied to political science, as it is in this paper. Political science is considered to be a sub-field of sociology, as it is the study of politics and political behavior. I plan to answer this for new research and methods to be developed that consider the African diaspora. In my survey questions, I will add questions that result in qualitative data in addition to the quantitative questions. I will do this because Henry and Sweet assert a need for an Afrocentric approach. In traditional (Western) quantitative political science research, open-ended questions do not allow for numerical analysis. However, there is a need to consider the analysis of open-ended questions to gauge possibilities that researchers may not have considered or considered to their full extent. In this way, I am attempting to center the African American experience and testimony.

Do voter turnout factors vary by race?

In *Afrocentricity*, Asante discusses the existence of an African Cultural System. What this means is that “we respond to the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities” (2, Asante, 1992). It is the idea that there is a single unifying cultural system that exists in each person of African descent throughout the diaspora. Considering the African Cultural System, it leads one to believe that there are factors that influence the behavior of

African-descended people (including African Americans). There must be specific and unique factors that influence black voter turnout. Much of the past research is limited because it focuses on factors like income, education, and partisanship. When researchers study black voter turnout, they must center the black experience with politics and political figures.

Zingher and Moore (2019) have shown that the geographic spatial distribution of racial groups influences voter turnout in different ways. The results of their study, *The Power of Place? Testing the Geographic Determinants of African-American and White Voter Turnout*, show that black turnout decreases as a function of parish-level and precinct-level segregation. Conversely, white voter turnout increases “as a function of the size of the African American population and increased levels of segregation” (1067, Zingher and Moore, 2019). Southwell and Pirch find that political cynicism, defined as distrust in political figures and government, increases the likelihood of black eligible voters voting. This is in direct opposition to the political behavior of white eligible voters. There is a clear division in the factors that influence black voter turnout and the voter turnout of other groups.

What factors affect African American voter turnout?

In *Fired Up, Ready to Go: The Impact of Age, Campaign Enthusiasm, and Civic Duty on African American Voting*, Collins and Block Jr. study the conditional effect of enthusiasm and civic duty on each other and predict the average intended voter turnout depending on the levels of these factors. Additionally, they attempt to study the role that age plays in the variation of these factors. Collins and Block Jr. identify enthusiasm as a central motivator of voter participation for African Americans. To ask voters to be enthusiastic or “fired up” is defined as an emotional investment from Black voters in candidates, competition, and the democratic process (Collins and Block Jr., 2020). It refers to how much people care. To ask voters to fulfill

their civic duty is to request them to be “ready to go.” Collins and Block Jr. identify the necessity for citizens to be both passionate and persistent in their political action in a democracy.

Enthusiasm, referred to as E, is defined as “a measure of how closely a person follows politics” (111, Collins and Block Jr, 2020). Civic duty, referred to as D, is not defined, but it is noted that civic duty resolves the paradox of voting; about half of eligible voters participate in presidential elections, and this number remains steady despite the increases in educational attainment. Civic duty offers an explanation for the voting paradox that accounts for both political science and economic models of political behavior (Collins and Block Jr., 2020). Collins and Block Jr. present two alternatives each for three hypotheses for a total of six hypotheses. The results of this study show significant support for hypothesis 2a and provide preliminary evidence for hypothesis 3b.

Hypothesis 2a asserts that “campaign enthusiasm and civic duty represent mutually reinforcing conditions of African Americans’ intention (or propensity) to vote: enthusiasm can boost the influence of duty and vice versa” (112, Collins and Block Jr., 2020). Their findings present evidence that enthusiasm is predicted to have a positive effect on average predicted intended voter turnout, referred to as T, regardless of the level of civic duty, see Figure 1, Appendix A (Collins and Block Jr., 2020). In fact, their findings show the average predicted intended voter turnout is twice as high when there is low civic duty and high enthusiasm than when there is low civic duty and low enthusiasm. This shows that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between enthusiasm, E, and African Americans who do not feel a sense of civic duty, D (Collins and Block Jr., 2020). Figure 1, see Appendix A, shows that when there is high enthusiasm, the average predicted intended voter turnout increases when civic duty is high. While this increase does not appear to be significant, it is statically significant

(Collins and Block Jr., 2020). This means that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between civic duty, D, and African Americans who are not enthusiastic about a campaign.

In *The Effect of Black Descriptive Representation on Black Electoral Turnout in the 2004 Elections*, Whitby analyzes the effect that representation has on black voter turnout. Whitby focuses on data from local elections in Louisiana and South Carolina due to their large black population/voter population and their history with the Voting Rights Act of 1962 and the amended 1982 version. These acts were aimed at deep south states, including but not limited to Louisiana and South Carolina. Although a larger sample size would have been beneficial to the generalizability of the data, Whitby insists that “the fact that African Americans have achieved some success in winning legislative seats in two southern states with troubling histories in the area of black voting rights makes them ideal laboratories for conducting this investigation” (1014, Whitby, 2007). Additionally, South Carolina and Louisiana are two of the few states that record race in local elections (Whitby, 2007).

Whitby’s results reveal that descriptive representation has a positive and statistically significant effect on black voter turnout. Whitby is even able to provide a coefficient of 0.231, meaning that a percentage increase in black descriptive representation on county councils increases black voter turnout within the eligible electorate by 0.231 percent (1018, Whitby, 2007). Although Whitby’s results provide evidence for black descriptive representation being a positive factor of black voter turnout, the scope and generalizability are limited to local governments in Louisiana and South Carolina. In *Collective Descriptive Representation and Black Voter Mobilization in 2008*, Clark studies the relationship between black descriptive representation across the nation and black voter turnout.

Clark asserts that collective descriptive representation accounted partially for black voter mobilization in 2008. He argues that collective descriptive representation of black voters encourages black voter turnout because it reduces the cost of voting for disengaged black voters through voter contact. Voter contact reduces the cost of voting by providing information – about the campaign, how to register to vote, where to vote, and for whom to vote. Clark’s argument is based on the deficit that black elected officials face from white voters, which necessitates the mobilization of black voters for black state legislators. This leads him to believe that black state legislators accounted partially for black voter mobilization in 2008. Clark defines collective descriptive representation as black state legislators and argues that they had a role in the mobilization of black voters in 2008.

There are two types of black voters, according to Clark; engaged black voters and disengaged black voters. His findings show that collective descriptive representation was associated with disengaged black voters being contacted and that neither contact nor collective descriptive representation shaped the political behavior of engaged black voters. Clark asserts that the reduced cost of voting via voter contact is a factor in black voter turnout. With reference to Collins and Block Jr., Clark’s results show that engaged black voters may be in a similar, if not the same, demographic as black voters who feel a sense of civic duty. Clark asserts that more scholars should recognize black state legislators as a source of black voter mobilization (316, Clark, 2014). His unique experience as a black man has provided him with the cultural context to value representation in government offices, otherwise referred to as black descriptive representation in his study. Because many scholars do not recognize the role of collective descriptive representation, Clark’s research offers a unique perspective on the factors that influence black voter turnout.

What factors affect black youth voter turnout?

In *Fired Up, Ready to Go: The Impact of Age, Campaign Enthusiasm, and Civic Duty on African American Voting*, Hypothesis 3b states, “the impact of campaign enthusiasm and civic duty as conditional predictors of African Americans’ intention (or propensity) to vote should *NOT* vary by age group” (115, Collins and Block Jr., 2020). Figure 2, see Appendix A, shows that there is little to no difference between the average predicted intended voter turnout of African Americans under 50 and African Americans over 50, considering enthusiasm and civic duty (Collins and Block Jr., 2020). While this may seem significant, the study is limited because researchers are not able to disaggregate the results by age. Because Collins and Block Jr. are limited by the methodology, future researchers should consider recording age in statistical survey studies such as this.

Prior (2018) uses turnout data, political interest data, presidential debate viewing data, cable news audience data, and convention and election night viewing data to predict and analyze the level of youth political interest and voter engagement in 2016. The results show that youth political interest and voter engagement have been increasing in each election since the fall of 2015. However, the enactment of voter identification laws has attempted to halt this expansion of political involvement for the youth. Gillespie (2015) has shown that when voter identification laws were enacted in Georgia, the percentage of black voters decreased. Many voter identification laws are aimed at students because they do not accept student identification cards, even those from state institutions (Barker 2012).

Conclusion

The findings in this paper are not absolute, but they provide a basis for the study of black youth voter turnout. By studying the factors of voter turnout, researchers and policymakers can

attempt to increase voter turnout by creating the right conditions. Mobilizing the black vote is a mystery for many candidates. A continuation of this research is likely to reveal more factors and insight into how they operate in relation to the voter turnout levels of black youth. In conclusion, these findings present that there is a relationship between enthusiasm, representation, and black youth voter turnout. To further explore these, I have created the following survey. Each answer has a numerical value associated with it. In this survey, the higher the value of a participant's survey total, the more likely the participant is to vote.

Survey Questions

This survey is designed to be distributed to African American college students between the ages of 18-25 years old. Before the survey questions begin, students will be asked to tell the surveyor about their voting experiences, intentions to vote, and overall political participation. For the survey, I have used the sources in this literature review to formulate the following questions.

Considering Sweet and Henry (2010) and Smith (1999):

1. Did you vote in the last presidential election?
 - a. Yes = 1
 - b. No = 0
 - i. Why or why not?
 - ii. This question will be asked to consider other factors that may not be inquired about in the survey.
2. Will you vote in the upcoming election?

Considering Collins and Block Jr.:

3. Do you care about the upcoming presidential election?
 - a. Yes = 1
 - b. No = 0
2. On a scale of 0 – 3, how excited are you about the upcoming presidential election?
 - a. 0 = Not excited at all
 - b. 1 = Slightly excited
 - c. 2 = Excited
 - d. 3 = Very excited
3. Do you feel a sense of duty to vote in the upcoming presidential election?

- a. Yes = 1
 - b. No = 0
4. On a scale of 0 – 3, how high is your sense of duty to vote in the upcoming presidential election?
- a. 0 = I don't feel any sense of duty
 - b. 1 = I feel a slight sense of duty
 - c. 2 = I feel a sense of duty
 - d. 3 = I feel a high sense of duty

Considering Whitby (2007), Asante (1992), and Clark (2014):

5. Do you know of any black elected officials in your area/district?
- a. 0 = no
 - b. 1 = yes
6. Do you know of any black elected officials anywhere in the country?
- a. 0 = no
 - b. 1 = yes
7. Do you feel like your interests and values are represented by the elected officials in office?
- a. 0 = no
 - b. 1 = yes
 - i. Why or why not?

Considering Zingher and Moore (2019):

8. Do you live in a predominately white area?
- a. 0 = yes

- b. 1 = no
9. Do you live in a predominately black area?
- a. 0 = no
 - b. 1 = yes

Considering Gillespie (2015), Barker (2012), and Prior (2018):

10. Have you ever tried to vote but couldn't?
- a. 0 = yes
 - b. 1 = no
- i. Why weren't you able to?

How to interpret results:

- 1) Each answer has a numerical value associated with it.
- 2) Add all the numerical values of the respondents' answers.
- 3) The higher the value of a participant's survey total, the more likely the participant is to vote.

Least likely to vote

Moderate

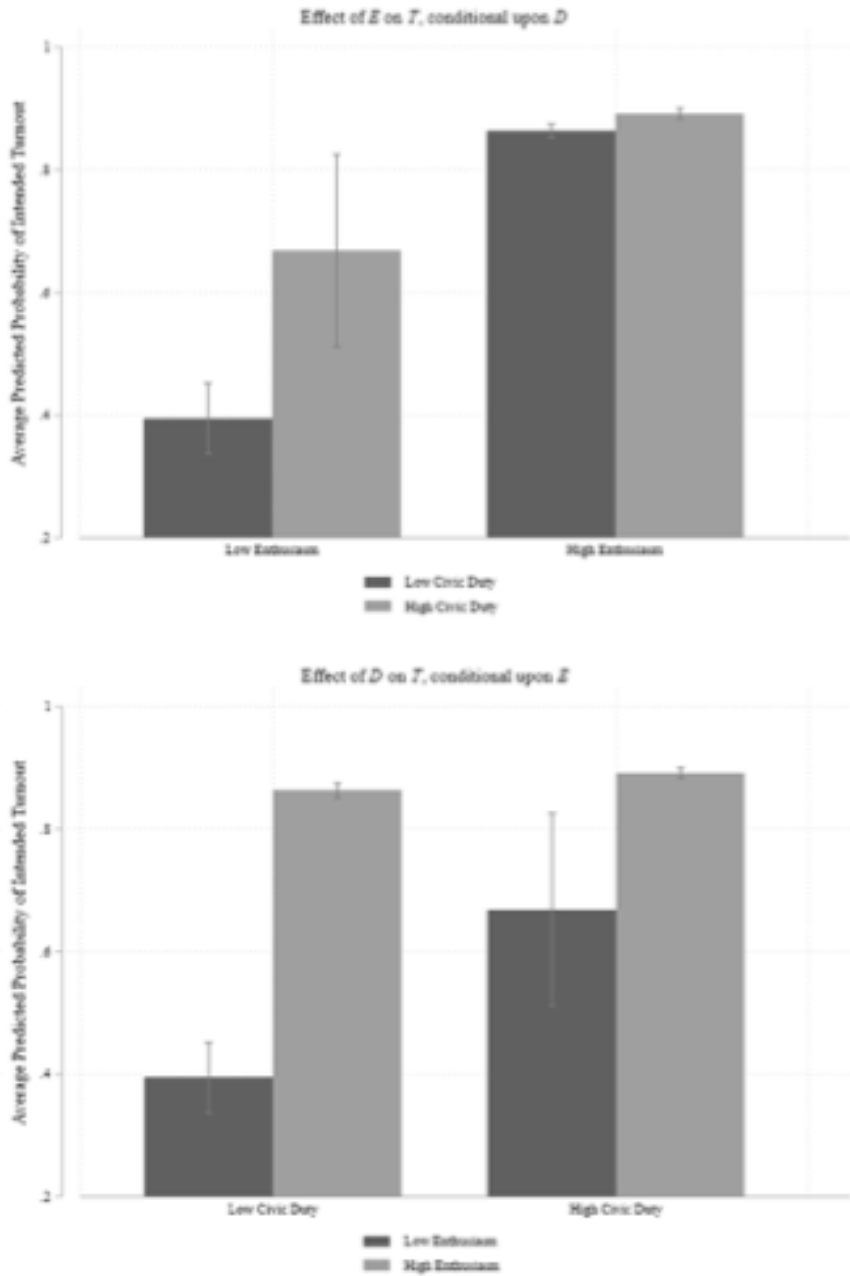
Most likely to vote

0

15

Appendix A

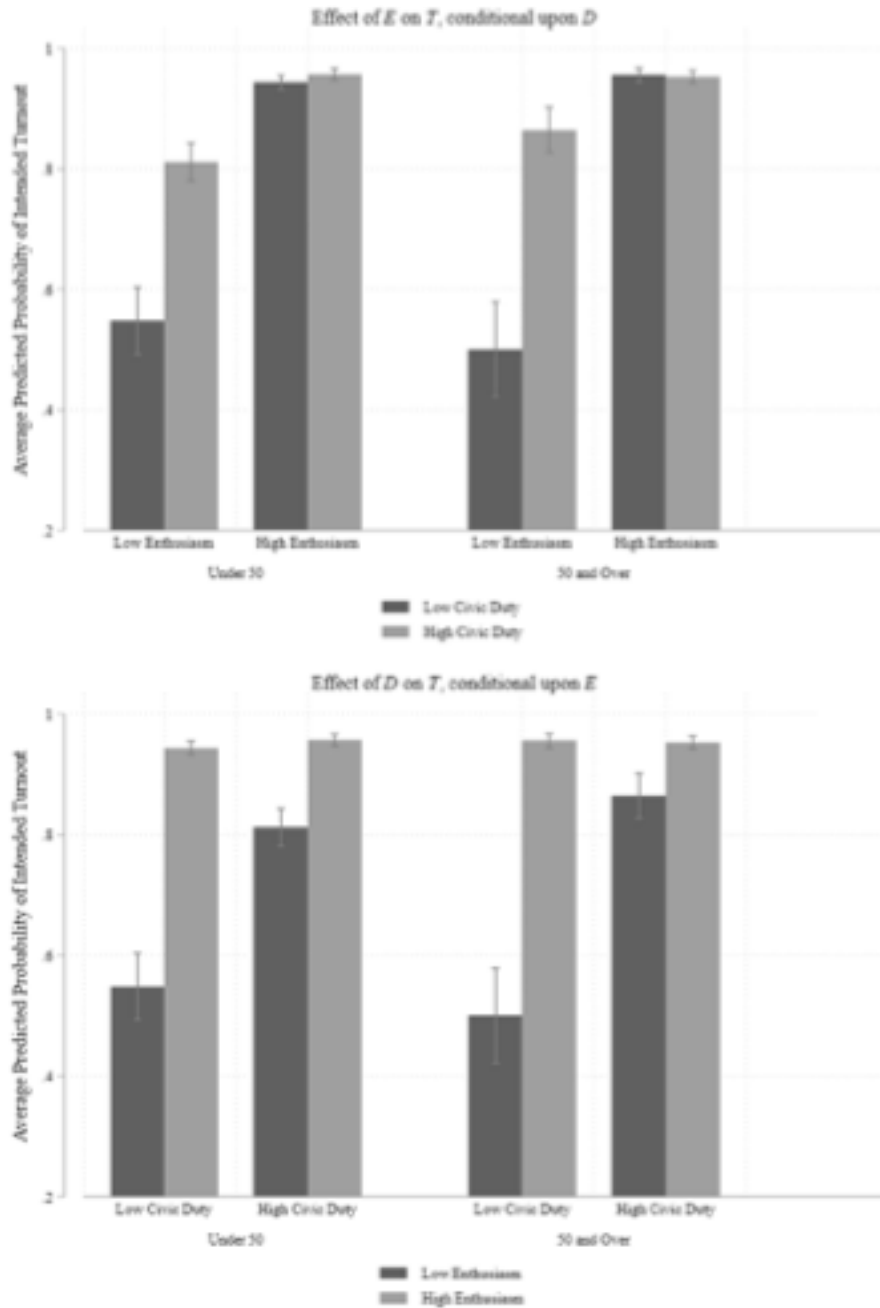
Figure 1



“How the predicted probability of Blacks’ overall intended turnout in 2012 changes across levels of campaign enthusiasm and civic duty. Post-estimation results are predicted probabilities, sorted

by values of the campaign enthusiasm (E) and civic duty (D) variables” (121, Collins and Block Jr., 2020).

Figure 2



“Age group differences in the predicted probability of Blacks’ intended turnout in 2016, sorted by campaign enthusiasm and civic duty. Post-estimation results are predicted probabilities, sorted

by values of the campaign enthusiasm (E) and civic duty (D) variables” (127, Collins and Block Jr., 2020).

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