

Interpreting the Intersections of Race and Political Participation¹

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Ask Americans about their interest and involvement in “politics” and most will no doubt reference some aspect of electoral political activity: e.g., following and participating in election campaigns, following the activities and decisions of elected officials, etc. This makes sense because the legitimacy – or lack of it – of U.S. public office-holders and political institutions is widely said to be directly tied to their accountability to the public, as expressed through electoral political participation. Understanding the intersection of racial identities and U.S. politics, therefore, necessarily entails gaining an understanding of such identities in relation to people’s participation in politics, including their involvements in electoral politics. Indeed, much of the political science literature on racial identities in politics is focused on elections and electoral institutions.

At the heart of trying to grasp the meaning of political participation is the relationship between the governing institutions of the state and the populace being governed by those institutions. To what extent, and how, are the people subject to the coercive authority of the state empowered to control – or even influence – the decisions and actions of governing officials by whom they are ruled? There are several ways in which these questions – and the central relationship that underlies them – have been framed in political science writings on U.S. politics. In addition, several methods for addressing the

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questions have been employed by political scientists. In the essay that follows, my focus will be on illustrating the uses of self-conscious and critical *interpretation* in seeking to illuminate the roles of racial ideas and racial identities in U.S. electoral political life, as well as to illustrate some of the limitations engendered by circumscribing the discipline's efforts in this inquiry by sticking solely to the rules of a narrowly behavioralist or positivist approach to political knowledge. Underlying the discussion that follows is the premise that *all* studies of U.S. racial politics are necessarily *interpretive* in nature.² In my view, that is, even positivist political science studies are necessarily interpretive because their investigations are framed and carried out in relation to a subject matter that is socially constructed, and hence subject to reformulation and reinterpretation by the very subjects of their research both independently of, and in relationship to, the research efforts of their fellow political subjects.

1. Race and Political Participation in the Behavioralist Tradition.

Much of the behavioral research on race and political participation has focused on public opinion, election studies, the descriptive representation of peoples of color in U.S. governing institutions and, to a lesser extent, to discerning the roles and impacts of minority representatives in governing institutions. A vast number of behavioral studies have been done in relation to race and electoral political behavior, and most often these have involved the devising of questionnaire items for random sample surveys of public

² This premise has been elaborated and defended in previous writing (Schmidt 2016) for the book project of which this paper is intended to be a part. The core argument is that since "racial" identities do not exist in nature, but are socially constructed, all statements made about such identities are based on interpretations of those socially constructed identities. Epistemologically, that is, there is no possibility of excluding human interpretation from any "facts" we may find regarding social constructions such as racial identities.

opinion and self-reported political behavior; the deployment of survey research teams to ask members of the public to complete the survey questionnaires; the collection, coding, and statistical analysis of survey results; and the writing and publication of articles and books detailing the results of these analyses.

Several generations of political scientists interested in the study of U.S. racial politics have spent much of their energies in this work, and they have produced a very large volume of writing that has increased our store of information on certain aspects of U.S. political behavior in relation to race. We have been able to track and tease out multiple causes and effects of the rise in the number of peoples of color voting in multiple jurisdictions, as well as a growing list of people of color elected to public office at all levels of U.S. government – local, state, and national. And we have been able to study increasing amounts of information on public opinion in relation to electoral behavior so that we can better specify the linkages between voting and racial attitudes and identities, between group identity and attitudes toward various questions about public policies and governmental purposes, and much, much more.

As noted, the primary energies in this vast amount of work have been devoted to identifying and tracking the cause and effect relationships between multiple aspects of racial group identity and electoral political behavior, as well as the opinions and attitudes that inform those identities and behaviors. It is time now to address the question that lies at the heart of this essay: *what does it all mean? Why should we care about this vast amount of information on cause and effect relationships in political life?*

I have claimed that all political science is interpretive in that all writing and research on political life rests on implicit or explicit understandings of the meanings of political

actions. How does the behavioral political science referenced above interpret the meaning of the political behavior it studies? My review of this literature indicates that most, if not all, of the behavioral work on political participation, elections, and racial identities in U.S. political science rests on the understanding that what is at stake in U.S. racial politics is a drive to *empower peoples of color* in the United States. Having been subjected to various forms and degrees of racial oppression and discrimination in political and social life, peoples of color in the U.S. were systematically *disempowered*, and their political actions are best understood as a long-term effort to gain greater *power* in the U.S. political order.

Multiple forms of political action have been proposed and undertaken in the pursuit of this overarching goal, and political scientists have employed a variety of theoretical frameworks to study these efforts, but one of the most prominent is that of *political incorporation*. Perhaps the best-known early articulation of the political incorporation frame is that of Browning, Marshall and Tabb's *Protest is Not Enough* (1984), in which the meaning of racial politics was interpreted as a long-term struggle by previously excluded and politically dominated peoples of color to gain equal membership in the U.S. body politic. As indicated by the title of their book, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb posed the question of whether greater power for disempowered blacks and Latinos could be attained through an outsiders' *protest* strategy, or whether a more productive path was to work toward *insider* status. Their answer was the latter. Political equality, they argued, can better be attained through *incorporation* into the political system than through trying to build power as a militant, but separate, political force. The political trajectory embodied in this frame is one of peoples of color struggling for *empowerment* through their transformation from *outsider* to *insider* political status. In that sense, a key feature of the political

incorporation frame is its *integrationist aspiration*; the empowerment goal, implicit or explicit, is to be realized through integration to full and equal membership in a democratic political order.

Focused at the municipal government level, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb put forward a series of steps that would mark the path toward full incorporation of previously excluded groups. The *first* step was the mobilization of more minority voters to vote for candidates that would best represent the interests of their black and brown constituents. The *second* step involved the election to office of local public officials who were *of* the communities they were elected to represent, a step most often understood to mean they were of the same ethno-racial group as their constituents. The *third* step in their paradigm of empowerment was for these minority elected officials to become full and equal members of the cities' "dominant governing coalition," which would lead, *fourth*, to their ability to shape local government policies in ways that would reduce the social and economic inequality of minority communities—e.g., by opening up city jobs to black and brown applicants, by awarding city contracts to minority contractors, by more aggressively seeking and implementing Federal government anti-poverty and community development programs, etc.

This framework for understanding the dynamic of an integrationist approach to the empowerment of peoples of color has been widely employed in the study of race in U.S. electoral politics, and it became an implicit, if not explicit, framework for many works aimed at understanding the role of racial identities in politics at the state and national, as well as local, levels of government. With a national frame of reference, for example, Schmidt, Alex-Assensoh, Aoki, and Hero (2010) articulated the empirical benchmarks

needing realization before racial democracy is achieved as: (1) full and equal access to political participation, (2) representation in governmental decision-making offices, (3) substantial power/influence in governmental decision-making through membership in governing coalitions, leading to (4) adoption of ethnoracially egalitarian public policies (p. 125).

Focused on public opinion, electoral participation, and the increasing number of descriptively representative public officials, much of the behavioral political science referenced above can be understood as pursuing more detailed knowledge of the degree to which progress has been made in relation to the political incorporation of U.S. peoples of color. This is not the place to summarize or detail the findings of this huge volume of work, but in general the research has demonstrated that, while significant increases in minority voter turnout have occurred in the post-1965 Voter Rights Act era, leading to an unprecedented number of people of color being elected to public office at all levels of government, significant progress remains to be achieved before the U.S. can be accurately described as a racial democracy. That is, people of color continue to experience significant obstacles to full and equal participation in the U.S. body politic. Racial polarization continues to play a significant role in the election of peoples of color to public office, significant gaps remain in ethno-racial descriptive representation, and no significant effort has been made for many decades to generate public policies to address the country's persistent racial inequalities (see Schmidt, Alex-Assensoh, Aoki and Hero 2010, for a detailed analysis supporting this conclusion).

The behavioral political science research agenda stimulated by the political incorporation theoretical frame, and by other similar frames, no doubt will continue

unabated into the future, since that is what most specialists in U.S. racial politics are trained to do. While that work continues, however, the question I want to raise here is *what is missing from this singular focus on cause and effect relationships* between variables deemed important within the political incorporation frame? And especially, what can self-conscious and focused *interpretive political science* bring to systematic inquiry into the role of racial identities in relation to political participation in the American polity?

There are multiple forms of interpretive research and analysis that could be summoned forth in answer to this last question. There are, for example, ethnographic studies of political participation by people of color that enhance our understanding of what such political action means to the participants, placed into a larger contextual framework of understanding through insightful interpretive political analyses (see, e.g., Garcia Bedolla 2005; Cohen 2012). Similarly, there are other interpretations that view the subject of empowerment for U.S. peoples of color through alternative frames, such as *class* (e.g., Reed 1999), Ronald Walters' "soft" *black nationalism* (e.g., Smith 2014; Walters 2007), etc. Here, however, my intention is to illustrate both what is missing in narrowly conceived cause and effect analysis of racialized political participation, and what self-conscious interpretation can bring to our understanding by focusing the remainder of this paper on a *critical conceptual analysis* of the concept of *power* in relation to racial politics, and to an illustration and discussion of politically engaged political analysis of electoral politics.

2. Critical Conceptual Analysis: The Meanings of Power and Empowerment.

For decades, thousands – if not millions – of people have been engaged in the work of trying to gain greater *power* in political life for peoples of color in the United States. But what does it *mean* to say that groups that have been racially oppressed and excluded have

gained greater political power? As articulated above, the political incorporation frame suggests that “political equality” is the goal for minority empowerment, and that its realization can be approached when members of racialized groups become significant members of *dominant governing coalitions* that control the levers of public decision-making in governing institutions. This level of political power, in turn, requires an increase in *descriptive representation* by public officials who are themselves people of color, which – given the level of racially polarized voting in the contemporary U.S. – requires an increased *voter mobilization* by people of color, as well as their participation in *electoral coalitions* that will increase the numbers of like-minded voters from other groups.

As noted above, this strategy itself embodies an interpretation of the meaning of political empowerment by people of color that is taken for granted by numerous behavioral scholars whose work – in general – seeks to parse out the cause and effect relationships playing a role in determining the strategy’s success or failure. The suggestion I want to develop here is that too much is taken for granted in this framework when it comes to understanding the nature of both *power* and *political equality*. These are core concepts in our understanding of racial politics, and I want to suggest that political science should spend at least as much time trying to understand the complexities and perplexities involved in working out their meanings as we do in trying to “operationalize” them for quantitative cause-and-effect analysis. What is at stake in these efforts toward political understanding is not simply scientific precision, but *political meaning* and *political consequences*. And since at least the 1960s, numerous critical interpretations have questioned the assumption that the above version of political incorporation leads to minority empowerment or political equality. Reviewing these critical conceptual analyses, I

suggest, may increase our understanding of what is at stake in political efforts to better realize racial democratic equality.

One of the earliest critiques along these lines was developed by Kwame Turé (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton in their classic *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1992 [1967]). Turé and Hamilton argued that the goal of political equality for black Americans (a goal they too shared) could not be achieved through simple integration into the existing political institutions of the United States. Integration (another way of describing incorporation) without a transformation of the institutions and values of the U.S. – tainted by colonialism, they argued – would not improve the lives of black Americans because it would leave in place the very values and institutions that deprived them of equal opportunities for power, wealth and prestige. It would amount to mere “tokenism,” helping white Americans feel good about themselves by enabling them to believe they were no longer racially biased, but leaving in place the colonial racist mentality that provided support for racially discriminatory institutions, both public and private. Moreover, integration without a more equal foundation between groups would amount to assimilation, spelling the destruction of the Black community rather than its liberation from oppression (Ibid.: Chapter 2). In short, Turé and Hamilton argued that far more is needed for racial political equality to be realized than simply voting into office more descriptively representative public officials, even if they are members of a “dominant political coalition” such as might be found when the Democratic Party controls a legislative body and chief executive office.

Genuine political equality, according to Turé and Hamilton, requires the *political modernization* of the United States, which they suggest should be understood in terms of

“three major concepts: (1) questioning old values and institutions of the society; (2) searching for new and different forms of political structure to solve political and economic problems; and (3) broadening the base of political participation to include more people in the decision-making process” (Turé and Hamilton 1992: 39). Put succinctly, rather than political incorporation (or integration) into the existing political structures and institutions of the U.S., genuine racial political equality would require radical restructuring of those political institutions and the political behaviors and values that sustain them.

It has been fifty years since Turé and Hamilton published their book on black power, and it is perhaps time for political scientists generally to ask once again whether they were not correct in their critical assessment of the political incorporation approach. In those fifty years, the country has witnessed the actuality of a black president, but the political incorporation literature itself indicates that the United States is far from having achieved racial political equality, as noted above. Indeed, while African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans, as well as American Indians have increased their descriptive representation in decision-making bodies such as the U.S. Congress, not only has racial inequality remained a persistent reality in the country, but even during times when their favored governing coalitions have been in control of the legislative process no significant political or public policy debate has occurred aimed at addressing the multiple forms of racial hierarchy that have remained in place over the past five decades, not to mention any decisive policy moves in that direction. Were Turé and Hamilton correct in their assessment of the prospects for political integration into an unreformed political system? How can we best understand the politics that fails to address the persistence of racial political inequality?

3. Critiquing the *Zero-Sum* Conception of Power in the Political Incorporation Strategy.

The interpretive work of Guinier and Torres (2002) offers a useful framing of several facets of the concept of *power* in relation to electoral institutions, offered to shed light on the limitations of the political incorporation approach to racial political equality. Guinier and Torres suggest that the kind of power sought in the political incorporation strategy and literature – legislative power to shape public policy in a more racially egalitarian direction – has *three dimensions*, each of which must be addressed in an empowerment strategy for peoples of color:

- *First dimension*: Direct force or competition, typically in a winner-take-all contest.
- *Second dimension*: Indirect manipulation of rules to shape the outcome of such competition;
- *Third dimension*: Mobilization, often through psychological means, of biases or tacit understandings that operate to exclude or to include individuals or groups in the collective decision-making or conflict. (Guinier and Torres 2002: 110)

Taken together, these three dimensions of the workings of power in the U.S. electoral system congeal an institutionalized hierarchy of offices and rules, together with a supporting ideological formation (or “cultural narrative”), that work against egalitarian political and social change in a democratic direction. The three dimensions of power, further, work in relation to each other in ways that add to the difficulties of enacting significant egalitarian social change. Guinier and Torres describe this complex understanding of power as “power as *control*,” “zero-sum” power, “power-over” (pp. 110-111).

After suggesting that the minority-empowerment-through-political-incorporation strategy for social change imagines power almost exclusively as a *zero-sum* phenomenon, Guinier and Torres spell out the meaning of its core assumptions:

Hierarchy – that is, a pyramid-like structure of permanent winners and losers – is seen as a normal and necessary outcome. Within hierarchy, upward mobility is a good thing. The goal is to repopulate hierarchies of winner-take-all power to include more people of color or women in the arena of visible conflict. Conventional strategies for social change proceed *as though a change in who administers power fundamentally affects the structure of power itself*. (Guinier and Torres 2002: 114, emphasis added)

It will be instructive to use this tripartite understanding of power as deployed in the political incorporation frame to discuss several interpretive analyses that critically interrogate the efficacy of this political strategy as a path to political equality for people of color in the U.S.

The *first dimension of zero-sum power* is deployed in a competitive setting in which only one person is elected to each public office, and the competitors are ultimately defined as either winners or losers. The dream is that if *our side* can mobilize enough voters to win control of public policy making institutions, *we* will be the winners and our opponents (those working against racial equality) will be the losers. The reality, Guinier and Torres suggest, is more often a *cooptation* of “winners” in which the second and third dimensions of power quickly rob the winners of any significant capacity to effect change. The very hierarchical structure of officialdom means that electoral winners are soon swept up in institutional rules and arrangements, transformed into elites disconnected from the social

groups they represent. Institutional rules mean that they must begin working toward, and raising money for, reelection almost as soon as they have found their offices. To get things done means becoming familiar with, and accepting, a host of traditions and rules by which the institutions operate, so that – “disciplined” by the hierarchy – they “learn to exercise power in the same old ways.” Moreover, a new crop of winners gaining access to office “stiffens the resistance of those already in power, who typically see the claims of outsiders as threatening” (Ibid.: 115).

Guinier and Torres do not argue that increased electoral representation of people of color has no positive effect on addressing issues of racial (and gender) injustice, though “it is often the black elected officials who stand alone to protest obvious injustices, while their white colleagues, though sympathetic, sit back, constrained to follow the rules” (Ibid.: 117). But the hierarchical and competitive winner-take-all structure of the U.S. electoral system works to constrain these minority and women representatives to limit the scope of their most important work to a narrow set of “immediate beneficiaries.” “In this sense, conventional empowerment strategists lock out any possible transformative vision of social justice by restricting the game to a win/lose paradigm. They also proceed on the basis of an essentialized conception of race. In this rigid definition, ‘all’ whites are ‘winners,’ as though working-class or poor whites benefit when rich whites succeed” (Ibid.: 117).

Other interpretive scholars have pointed to different obstacles to empowerment built into the “winner-take-all” structure of U.S. elections. One prominent example is Harris’ *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (2012).

Harris announces his central claim in his Preface: “Far from black America gaining greater

influence in American politics, Obama's ascendancy to the White House actually signals a decline of a politics aimed at challenging racial inequality head-on" (Harris 2012: xviii). The political analysis that Harris used to back up this claim is centered on a critique of *respectability politics*. The argument is that racial polarization in the U.S. combines with the winner-take-all electoral system to present a tragic choice to people of color seeking political office with the aim of addressing long-standing and persistent racial inequalities. Since people of color remain a numerical minority in the electorate in most jurisdictions, a successful black (or Latino) candidate for office must usually eschew direct challenges to racial inequality, or choose to compete for office in one of the (far fewer) electoral jurisdictions where people of color are the dominant majority.

Abundant electoral experience (and empirical political science research) demonstrates that minority candidates who make racial inequality a central campaign issue fail to attract many white voters. Consequently, black or Latino candidates who want to succeed in winning elections in jurisdictions with a white majority of voters must practice so-called *respectability politics*, meaning that they must develop campaign themes that are "race-neutral," that do not directly address the racial injustices that continue to plague the United States. Harris traces Barack Obama's rise as a candidate and the successful respectability campaign he ran for president in 2008, including the "tight-rope" he had to walk to maintain the enthusiastic support of black voters while also attracting large numbers (though not a majority) of white voters. As president, Harris argues, Obama had to maintain a similar posture in which "race neutrality" meant not placing measures directly and explicitly addressed to racial injustice high on the executive agenda. The facts that Obama waited until well into his second term as president to more centrally and

explicitly challenge racial injustice and inequality in the U.S., together with Hillary Clinton's presidential election loss in the face of her explicit campaign calls for measures to combat racial injustices, may support Harris' 2012 analysis.³

Yet another problematic aspect of the winner-take-all system of electoral competition fostered in U.S. politics is highlighted by Beltrán's critique (2010) of Latino politics in the electoral arena. After tracing the drive for ethno-racial identitarian unity fostered by the Chicano and Puerto Rican Movements for empowerment in the 1960s and 1970s, a drive given urgency by the context of cultural and political oppression against which these movements were mobilized, Beltrán sketches out a similar impulse toward pan-ethnic Latino unity in the struggle for electoral representation that has dominated Latino politics since the late 1970s.

Those earlier movements were aimed at transformative political change on behalf of imagined unitary and solidaristic ethno-cultural communities, but the efforts of political elites from these communities in the years since 1980 have focused on a more pragmatic mobilization of "the Latino vote" to gain greater presence and power in U.S. governments through enhanced electoral representation. While in the earlier identitarian movements "disagreement is treated as pathology" (p. 46), Beltrán points out that "the political logic" of this more pragmatic pan-ethnic political incorporation strategy harbors "its own homogenizing impulse" (p. 100). Beltrán's critical analysis is focused on the distortions and

³ Multiple other scholars have made similar analyses of the political dilemmas facing communities of color in trying to gain enough political power to enact policies aimed at rectifying racial injustice and decreasing persistent racial social and political inequalities. See, e.g., Dawson (2011), Fraga and Leal (2004), Frymer (1999), Johnson (2007), Kim (2007), Reed (1999).

suppression of multiple identity formations wrought by these political drives toward both ethnic and pan-ethnic unity, including suppression of open discussions of gender differences and conflicts, interpersonal differences, the national-origin differences of those lumped together into *Latinidad* unity, and more, and she highlights the prices paid by individuals and multiple alternative social groups by this political logic. The “Latino” representatives of the “Latino vote” that are so blithely depicted by the media and by scholars, then, are politically constructed in ways that suppress and distort multiple political differences as a direct price for gaining greater presence and power for Latinos in U.S. governments.

The point I want to emphasize here is that these are prices *necessarily* paid in a winner-take-all electoral competition that sees power only in terms of “power over,” zero-sum power. But all this is only in respect to the first dimension of power outlined by Guinier and Torres. Their analysis of the second and third dimensions of zero-sum electoral power paints a broader and more complete picture of the limitations of the political incorporation strategy.

The second dimension of zero-sum power outlined by Guinier and Torres involves the “indirect manipulation of rules” to shape the outcomes of the competitive, winner-take-all hierarchy of governing power. And here again, they find, the rules are most often “stacked” to enhance the dominance of the already powerful. This is the case because the hierarchical structure must exclude some while it includes only the winners. Winners want to remain winners, so in a zero-sum competition they have strong incentives to ensure the rules work to their advantage. As a result, Guinier and Torres argue, “if one is an outsider now operating as an insider, unless mechanisms are in place that give other outsiders

power, the insider's power will come to depend increasingly on the views of other insiders" (Guinier and Torres 2002: 122). "The structure of power itself," they continue, "more than the ideology or personal inclinations of each newly powerful individual, defines how power is exercised in the long term" (Ibid.: 122). Once they get into public office, at least part of the power of people trying to represent the needs of people of color comes from the institutional rules through which they now work, as well as their colleagues who also hold office in those institutions. As the old adage (attributed to former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn) goes: "to get along, go along." Thus: "If the source of their power comes from acquiescence and cooperation, then they are not only less likely to resist but they are less capable of exerting counter-pressure" (Ibid.: 123). In short, since hierarchical institutions operate to exclude outsiders by definition, cooptation is virtually inevitable for newly elected insiders.

Once again, other interpretive analysts have developed multiple aspects of the argument being made here by Guinier and Torres, and that may be brought to bear in relation to the struggle for power to realize greater racial democracy. Several examples will need to suffice. One of the earliest examples in U.S. political science is Bachrach and Baratz' "Two Faces of Power" (1962, 1963) analyses, which pointed out that power is exercised not only in the making of decisions but as well in the *prevention* of decisions being taken. Institutional rules and incentives, as well as hostile or indifferent political competitors, routinely operate to thwart the efforts of minority representatives in policy making bodies who want to address issues of racial inequality and racial injustice, rendering them invisible, excluded from the inner workings of decision-making, and challenged as lacking in epistemic authority (Hawkesworth 2003).

Moreover, early interpretive critiques of, and efforts to replicate, the optimistic findings of Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984), sketched above, led to several important observations on how rules are structured to limit the outcomes of such a strategy. Critics pointed to inherent weaknesses in urban governance structures when it comes to developing public policy aimed at structural obstacles to social and political racial equality. Central cities (and more recently, many suburban municipalities), for example, where a disproportionate percentage of low-income people of color have been concentrated for generations, lack the resources to enable a local policy strategy aimed at greater social and political equality. And the legal rules creating separate suburban municipalities ringing these central cities, enacted by state governments, have operated to exclude and disempower local government officials seeking to address issues of racial inequality and injustice (see, e.g., Lowi 1979[1969], for one of the earliest versions of this critical analysis; for more recent versions, see, e.g., Roithmayr 2014, Troutt 2013).

Equally instructive is Stone's insightful interpretation of the limitations on the incorporation strategy in Atlanta, where a coalition of black activists had seemed to become the indisputable "dominant governing coalition" in city government by the mid-1970s, controlling the mayor's office and the city council, and therefore the municipal bureaucracy. As Stone's *regime* analysis makes clear, however, while some middle class blacks were thus "incorporated," working class and poor blacks in the city benefitted little or not at all from such incorporation. Stone attributed this failure to address racial social and economic inequality not only to the continuing power of Atlanta's white business elite, but more generally to the diffusion of institutional power in a legal regime in which elected officials lack the resources to effect change in the status of the black poor and are

dependent on the resources of corporate leaders to do anything more than basic municipal caretaking functions. Thus, Atlanta's governance regime prevented possible moves toward addressing racial inequality in that city (Stone 1989, 1990). Rosales has made a similar argument in respect to the empowerment efforts of Mexican American political leaders seeking to gain greater political and social equality in San Antonio, Texas (Rosales 2000).

Another form of institutional rules that have worked to limit the power of local governments in addressing issues of racial inequality are found in the workings of the U.S. federal system. One of the reasons Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) could be optimistic in their assessment of impacts of the city government incorporation strategies they documented is that these strategies were formulated and enacted during a period when the U.S. government was relatively generous in grants of Federal funds to city governments. Thus, minority coalitions that succeeded in gaining substantial control over city halls during the late 1960s and early 1970s could make use of funds from a variety of Federal programs (e.g., Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Head Start, the Community Action Program, the Model Cities program, the Manpower Training and Development Act, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, etc.) to work with low-income minority communities in efforts to address human resource development aspects of racial inequality. The advent of the Nixon and (especially the) Reagan Administrations, however, soon demonstrated the vulnerability of such efforts to the backlash of an increasingly hostile white population susceptible to the strategic racism of "dog-whistle" politics (Haney Lopez 2014). In short, the electoral and Congressional institutional rules that have operated to prevent enactment of racially egalitarian policy initiatives at the national level have also worked to limit the ability of state and local

governments from implementing similar initiatives at their levels. There are multiple other ways in which entrenched institutional rules have thwarted those people of color elected to elite positions in U.S. governance, but these will suffice as examples of the phenomenon.

The *third dimension of zero-sum power* articulated by Guinier and Torres deploys hegemonic ideological power through the mobilization of “biases or tacit understandings” that reinforce the status quo of racial inequality. Hierarchical institutions that have staying power create their own legitimacy in public opinion simply by continuing to exist as consequential. Guinier and Torres point to one of the consequences in suggesting that the “insider-access” political incorporation strategy “functions as if existing forms of hierarchy are acceptable and merely need to be inclusive of a more diverse group of participants” (Guinier and Torres 2002: 125). This “acquiescence in zero-sum power,” however, “fails to mobilize a broad-based coalition to support the gains it does realize. Without an activated outsider-based movement, the successful insiders are less able to continue the struggle. *In other words, participation by a few may mean isolation of the many*” (Ibid.; emphasis added). And this “pragmatic social-change strategy . . . is too often accompanied by increasing quiescence of those on whose behalf the civil rights or the women’s rights movements claim to operate” (Ibid.).

Put differently, the point made by Guinier and Torres here is that insider-access into an existing institutional hierarchy, one that limits the actual exercise of power to an elite few, generates a mostly *symbolic* benefit that operates to help those presumed to be represented “feel” better about the political system, thereby legitimating it in public opinion, while simultaneously deflating the critical movement for change that mobilized those voters initially. In addition, this psychological quiescence limits the public spaces for

political action in which that movement could be regenerated and reinvigorated.⁴ “Common sense” dictates a “realistic” political strategy of gaining insider-access to the existing hierarchical institutional arrangements, but that very common sense robs movement activists and their leaders of public places in which to act together to continually question and reshape the power dynamics in play, all of which results in political quiescence (see, e.g., Rocco 2014, for a congruent analysis that draws on Gramsci to depict the “exclusionary inclusion” of Latino communities). Finally, in conjunction with the competitive winner-take-all dynamic interrogated above in relation to the first dimension of power, this ideological formation works to limit people of color from finding allies in competing groups (e.g., white working class Trump voters) who might also have reasons to critique the limitations of elite hierarchy. Meanwhile, the outcomes of this legitimization of existing hierarchical structures may be seen in the very limited and constrained gains made against socio-economic racial inequalities through decades of efforts by activists and candidates from communities of color pursuing political office at local, state, and national levels in the political incorporation strategy (see, e.g., Schmidt, Alex-Assensoh, Aoki, and Hero 2010: Chapter 6).

But all three of these dimensions of power critically interrogated by interpretive scholars in relation to the dominant political incorporation strategy for the empowerment of people of color are aspects of a “power *over*” conception of power. There are other interpretive scholars who have made important critiques of this *zero-sum* conception of power, and who argue that we need to take more seriously an alternative “power *with*”

⁴ See Edelman (1985) for a parallel classic analysis focused on the politics of regulatory policy.

conception that could transform our understanding of what is at stake in political life and how a more racially egalitarian politics might be enacted.

4. Alternative Conceptions of Power.

Borrowing from Kreisberg (1992), Guinier and Torres offer “*power with*” as a primary alternative conception to that of zero-sum power. Drawing also on Foucault and some aspects of feminist thought, Guinier and Torres depict “*power with*” as “the psychological and social power gained through collective resistance and struggle through the creation of an alternative set of narratives. It is relational and interactive. It requires participation” (Guinier and Torres 2002: 141).

A similar conception of power was articulated decades earlier by Hannah Arendt, a conception that is also relational and interactive, as well as constitutive. Arendt claimed that power is generated when people come together in a public “space of appearances” to speak and act together so that something happens that was not there before: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt 1958: 200). Power in this sense is what holds people together without destroying their individuality or their capacity for action; rather, having come together, they make things happen that could not otherwise happen.

This conception of power was implicit in Turé and Hamilton’s call for a radical democratization of American political institutions. Their appeal for “broadening the base of political participation” in black communities “has as much to do with the quality of participation as with the quantity” (Turé and Hamilton 1992: 43). And their valorization of

the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party's challenge of the white establishment Democratic delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention (Ibid.: Chapter 4) seeks to demonstrate the power of an internally democratic group that challenges hierarchy through participatory political development.

Stone's analysis of community power in Atlanta reached a congruent understanding of the concept of power. In critiquing both "elitists" and "pluralists" on the question of community power, Stone argued that both schools operate within a *social control* conception of power, i.e., a conception that understands power in terms of domination and subordination. Stone suggests that community power is better understood as the ability to engender *social production*, i.e., as a "capacity to act and accomplish goals. The power struggle concerns, not control and resistance, but gaining and fusing a capacity to act – *power to*, not *power over*" (Stone 1989: 229; emphasis in original). "Challenging a regime," he suggests, "is not simply a matter of mobilizing opposition. It means restructuring the way in which people and groups are related to one another and providing new avenues of cooperation between them" (Ibid.).

Similarly, Hardy-Fanta's (1993) ground-breaking analysis of the role of gender difference in the political efforts of Boston-area Latinas and Latinos contrasted the zero-sum conception of power held by most of the Latinos she interviewed with the "power with" ideas held by most of her Latina interviewees. Her analysis finds that Latinas involved in Boston politics had a more *participatory* and *relational* understanding of politics and political power than did their male co-ethnics. While her male respondents understood political power in terms of the offices they held and the powerful people with whom they had "connections," the politically active Latinas she interviewed tended to

articulate their experiences of political power as focused on communities coming together and making change for the better. Thus, men understood politics in terms of “the essentially hierarchical ladder of representative government, in which a few are elected to represent the interests of the many” (Hardy-Fanta 1993: 23). In contrast, her Latina interviewees tended to speak of politics in participatory ways, “firmly rooted in beliefs about community, collective organization, self-government, and above all, opportunities for participation by the many, not restricted to the elite few” (Ibid.).

Hardy-Fanta sums up a core part of her findings as follows:

An examination of political participation in the Latino community in Boston reveals that (1) the most successful mobilizing experiences in the Latino community are those that involve “doing things together,” not those that rely on isolated, individual initiative; (2) collective methods and collective organizational structures promote a more participatory model of politics; and (3) Latina women stress collective methods and collective organization to a much greater extent than do Latino men. (Hardy-Fanta 1993: 76)

Thus, Hardy-Fanta finds that the Latinas she interviewed tended to build collective, inclusive organizations while the males replicated hierarchical and formal organizations; the women tried to “make connections” with others in the community, while the men spoke of “having connections” with powerful people; and overall, her male interviewees understood power as “power over” others, while the Latinas saw power as a collective process of making things happen for the good of the community. Not rejecting an electoral politics of incorporation, in the end Hardy-Fanta searches for a way to meld the two

gender-based conceptions of power together in the hopes of empowering the Latino community, as well as other communities of color. Similarly, Guinier and Torres present (in Chapter 5) a series of examples of cooperative, inclusive, participatory organizations that generated power for themselves and others through coming together in non-hierarchical connections to make things happen in a positive way for their communities.

Beltrán offers still another conception of power in her analysis of Latino politics. In an innovative interpretation of the 2006 immigration marches – mobilizing millions of undocumented immigrants, along with other Latinos, to protest an anti-immigrant bill passed by the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives in late 2005 – Beltrán draws on Arendt’s nonconsequentialist understanding of politics to point to a different meaning for political life, one that cannot be encapsulated in the political incorporation model of empowerment. She interprets the meaning of the 2006 marches as a “democratic moment” when people who are forced to live in the shadows and toil anonymously, took to the streets and made themselves known to us in an unexpected and exhilaratingly *political* way; it was political action understood as a *moment of public self-disclosure*. In doing so, undocumented immigrants challenged their anonymity and claimed for themselves the central meaning of an alternative understanding of political life: being seen, being heard, and being remembered. For Beltrán, whether the immigrants achieved their goals (“legalization,” access to formal citizenship) matters less than the memory of their democratic moment. In short, by *acting politically*, even racialized undocumented immigrants may experience a more profoundly public life than can “legal” citizens who confine their political lives to occasional trips to the ballot box (Beltrán 2010: Chapter 5).

For Beltrán, the form of power embedded in the immigrant marches was the Arendtian conception of people acting together in a “space of appearances” to make something appear that had not been there before. Guinier and Torres point to what may be at stake in this form of power, suggesting that “power might take the form of autonomy or dignity. Such nonconventional engagements with power can include what we label the affirming power of struggle. It can reinforce the value of human agency especially when exercised in relationship with others” (Guinier and Torres 2002:140).

While there is much more to say about the meanings of minority “empowerment” in U.S. politics, the point of this discussion is not to resolve this question here, to fix the nature of power required to end racial hierarchy and usher in racial democracy in the United States. Rather, it is to suggest that such discussions of the meanings and complexities of power, and the strengths and limitations of multiple understandings of power are necessary engagements for political scientists interested in coming to terms with what is at stake in the struggle for the “empowerment” of communities of color in the United States.

Other concepts in the political incorporation strategy for empowering U.S. peoples of color would also benefit from such critical interrogation, including political participation, representation, coalition-building, citizenship, democratic institution-building, racial democracy, etc. However, this discussion of critical interrogations of the concept of power should be sufficient to illustrate the kinds of understandings that may be enhanced through interpretive political inquiry.

5. Politically Engaged Political Analysis: a Model for Emulation.

While the above critical interrogation of the concept of power provides one way of illustrating what is missing from most behavioral analyses of the role of race in U.S.

electoral politics, I want to conclude this paper with an example of what can be gained from politically engaged political analysis through a summary and discussion of a recent book by Ian Haney Lopez: *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (2014).

Haney Lopez' analysis is thick with explicit meaning-making and with his considered political judgments. His politically engaged exposition of the role of race in recent American electoral politics provides a rich and nuanced understanding that even the best of behavioral work does not match. Drawing on historical research and documents, empirical political science research, critical race scholarship, media analyses, critical conceptual analyses, and more, Haney Lopez articulates the meaning of much political campaigning in the last six decades as involving "dog whistle" politics, a form of "strategic racism." In dog whistle politics, candidates and their handlers implicitly invoke the racial fears and resentments of white voters, manipulating them to cast their votes for (mostly Republican) candidates who, once elected, support legislation that directly undermines the New Deal public policy regime that has provided the material foundation for most of these voters' middle-class way of life. Haney Lopez traces the development of such dog whistle politics from the campaigns of presidential candidates Goldwater and Nixon in the 1960s through Carter, Reagan, both Bushes, Bill Clinton, and Mitt Romney, concluding that even the nation's first black president, Barack Obama, employed a form of dog whistle politics in his campaigns.

Along the way, alternating historical chapters with analytic chapters, Haney Lopez provides readers with descriptions and analyses of how and why dog whistling works, with a politically engaged discussion of the New Deal policy regime and how it provided the

material foundation for the U.S. middle class, contrasting in-depth analyses of several forms of racism (e.g., racial animus vs. structural racism vs. implicit racism vs. strategic racism), with a critical analysis of “color-blind” ideology, and much more. The book concludes with a discussion of possible alternative strategic moves to defeat dog whistle politics in the future.

The point in summarizing this work here is not to suggest that Haney Lopez’ analysis is flawless, but to suggest that it is exemplary in its critical engagement of political questions that lie at the heart of the country’s long struggle over racial hierarchy and racial injustice. By eschewing the posture of the “outside observer” that is central to behavioral political analysis, Haney Lopez’ perspective raises issues that are crucial for gaining understanding of what is at stake in U.S. racial politics. Haney Lopez has invested the time and energy to master a vast amount of political information that provides him with a nuanced understanding of how things work in electoral politics, as well as what is at stake for various persons and groups in mounting political campaigns in U.S. electoral politics. He is able, therefore, to provide substantive reasons for his claim that the New Deal policy regime provided a solid material foundation for the American middle class, and that voting for free-market ideologues who employ racial dog whistling in their campaigns for public office means that white middle class voters who vote in this way are voting against their own interests. Among other subjects, he also draws upon several literatures to provide a substantive discussion of the nature of racism and the ways in which color-blind ideology sustains racial hierarchy.

Again, my claim is not that Haney Lopez’ positions in these matters are flawless, but rather that they are substantive political claims based on relatively wide and deep

understanding of U.S. public policy, as well as intensive thought on what is at stake in U.S. electoral contests. It is my claim that these are the kinds of issues and questions that need to be addressed more fully in our discipline if U.S. political science is going to help purchase greater understanding of the political realities of race and racialization in this country.

And again, my claim is not that behavioral and quantitative analyses of cause and effect relationships among variables in U.S. electoral politics are wasted effort. Indeed, such studies can provide valuable insight and information about their subject-matters. Rather, my argument is that we should be encouraging more political scientists to gain the kinds of breadth and depth of knowledge demonstrated by Haney Lopez in his study, and to contribute more proactively to the public discussion of substantive issues of racial politics in a similar manner of direct political engagement. But this requires that we and our colleagues spend more time reading a wide range of materials on racial politics – in disciplines ranging from history to philosophy, political biography, geography, sociology, anthropology, literature, etc. – and that some of us directly engage in political advocacy and political life to gain the kinds of tacit knowledge that can only be gained through political involvements. We need to encourage our colleagues, as well, to pursue ethnographic research in racial politics, to write political biographies, to write political histories, to do value-critical policy analysis involving issues of race, and more. And, of course, this means we must broaden and deepen our understanding of graduate student training in the field of political science, especially among those who want to devote their lives to understanding the role of racial identities and racialization in American political life.

6. Conclusion.

Public participation in political life lies at the heart of any understanding of efforts to generate greater racial democracy in the United States, or for that matter, in any political community. There is widespread agreement among political scientists studying race in U.S. politics that realizing racial democracy requires greater empowerment of people of color and greater commitment to a racially egalitarian political order. The aim of this paper has been to explore the contributions of explicitly and self-consciously interpretive approaches to understanding race and racialization in political life, and to argue that the discipline needs to encourage more education in, and practice of, interpretive methods for political research and analysis. It was possible here to merely skim the surface, and provide a couple of examples of the kinds of political insight and understanding that are possible through interpretive political analysis, but it is hoped that these examples whet the appetites of readers and stimulate greater discussion of these, and other, possibilities.

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