

The Obligation Mosaic:
Race and Social Norms in US Political Participation

Allison P. Anoll

Forthcoming, September 2021

University of Chicago Press

Selections, Chapter 1

This Draft: October 2020

Chapter 1

The Value and Meaning of Political Participation

I'm here today because of the men and because of the women who were lynched, who were humiliated, who were discriminated against, who were suppressed, who were repressed, and oppressed, for equality at the polls, and I want you to know that their blood has seeped into my DNA, and I refuse to let their sacrifices be in vain. ...

And for anybody here who has an ancestor who didn't have the right to vote and you are choosing not to vote, wherever you are in this state, in this country, you are dishonoring your family. You are disrespecting and disregarding their legacy, their suffering and their dreams, when you don't vote. So, honor your legacy. Honor your legacy.

— Oprah Winfrey, Rally for Stacey Abrams, November 1, 2018

In fall 2018, Oprah Winfrey arrived in Marietta, Georgia. The billionaire, producer, Presidential Medal of Freedom winner, and host of the highest-rated talk show of its kind in history was there to support Stacey Abrams, the first-ever Black woman to receive a major party gubernatorial nomination. In a nationally televised event, the two women engaged in a town hall-style meeting that began with a nearly twenty-minute speech by Winfrey to the crowd. Her focus was on the men and women of the past who were denied and fought for the right to vote in American elections, the sacrifices they had made, and

the debt we owe to them. “When I go into the polls,” Winfrey told the crowd, “I cast a vote for my grandmother, who died in 1963 before the Voting Rights Act, and never had a chance to vote. I vote for her.”

I was nearing the final stages of this book when Winfrey made her speech. In the days following the rally in Marietta, my inbox flooded with messages from friends and colleagues who had heard me talk—alot—in recent years about the *honoring ancestors norm*. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, representative surveys of the nation’s four largest racial groups, and a series of experiments, I was convinced that social norms about how we honor the past and help those most in need were central to understanding the participatory choices of individuals and groups in American society. Winfrey’s message echoed what I had heard from Americans across the country: to honor your family, your people, your ancestors, you must claim the rights those in the past fought so hard for. Anything less is a travesty.

I did not start this project with the expectation that beliefs about honoring the past and helping those in need were part and parcel of political participation. Rather, the centrality of both norms emerged during the process of grounded theory development I took in the early stages of this research. Grounded theory is an inductive research method that centers the voice of everyday people in the production of theory and knowledge. It proves most useful in two scenarios: when the researcher seeks to produce new theory and when the population under study is difficult to reach or traditionally excluded from existing bodies of work (Ackerly et al., 2018; Charmaz, 2014). In the face of these challenges, the method of grounded theory provides a flexible but rigorous framework for collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing rich qualitative data into generalizable claims. My sights were trained on interviewing racial minorities in the United States to answer two intertwined questions: why do some individuals but not others engage in politics? And, why are trends in political participation so closely tied to race? These two questions, although age-old, seemed insufficiently answered to me, in part because the existing literature was built on survey data comprised of primarily White Americans.

Historically, scholars have focused on the inherent costs involved in the participatory

process when trying to explain and rectify inequities in engagement. Participation is costly, the argument goes, and individuals with fewer resources have less capacity to overcome those costs (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999; Nie, Powell and Prewitt, 1969; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Race is one demographic category where large variations in cost-lowering resources exist. Census data continually show a chasm in both income and education between White and Asian Americans on one hand and Latino and Black Americans on the other (Ryan and Bauman, 2016; Semega et al., 2019). At the most basic level, the theory of resource mobilization anticipate consistently lower political participation among Black Americans and Latinos who, on average, lack resources and higher political involvement among White and Asian Americans who are resource rich.

Yet, across the spectrum of participatory behaviors, this is decidedly not the case. Rather, Black Americans regularly overcome barriers to participation, turning out at rates close to or exceeding those of White Americans, while Latinos and Asian Americans often trail behind. The 2012 presidential election of Barack Obama to his second term provides a case in point. The election marked a historic year for Black turnout, with proportionally more of the Black community showing up at the polls than any other racial group in the United States.¹ Two-thirds—or 66%—of Black Americans turned out to elect the next president of the United States, compared to 64% of White Americans, 48% of Latinos, and 47% of Asian Americans. The result was a nearly twenty-point gap between Black and Asian Americans' turnout, the two groups most different from each other in average socioeconomic resources. But rather than the high-resourced group dominating the polls, it was the low-resourced group that showed up and helped usher President Barack Obama into his second term.

An analysis of turnout over time controlling for both socioeconomic resources and naturalization hammers home this point: resources alone do not explain participation

¹In contrast to US Census data (Wheaton, 2013), McDonald (2018) contends this shift actually happened in 2008. He argues that coding of “no” responses in the Census Voter and Registration Report artificially increases the size of the denominator, altering turnout figures. But whether it first happened in 2008 or 2012, the point remains the same: a higher percentage of eligible Black Americans turned out than Whites.

levels across racial groups in America.² Rather, resources are a consistently weaker predictor of political participation among minority Americans than they are for Whites (Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010; Tam Cho, 1999; Lien et al., 2001; Wong et al., 2011). Figure 1.1 shows predicted turnout in presidential elections between 2000 and 2008 using Current Population Survey data for each racial group holding constant naturalization status, education, and income.³ The data demonstrate that regardless of election year, predicted turnout is consistently higher among White and Black Americans than among Latinos and Asian Americans. Furthermore, Black Americans regularly outperform the other groups while Asian Americans consistently lag behind. The result is a gap between these two most different groups that is quite large, ranging from 23% to 28% depending on the year.⁴

Why is it that seemingly under-resourced groups sometimes manage to overcome the odds of structural disadvantage to engage in politics, while others, even those with plenty of resources, remain inactive? More specifically, why is it that, for decades, Black Americans have participated in politics at rates far exceeding their resource levels while Asian Americans have consistently remained the least active racial group despite rapidly rising resources?

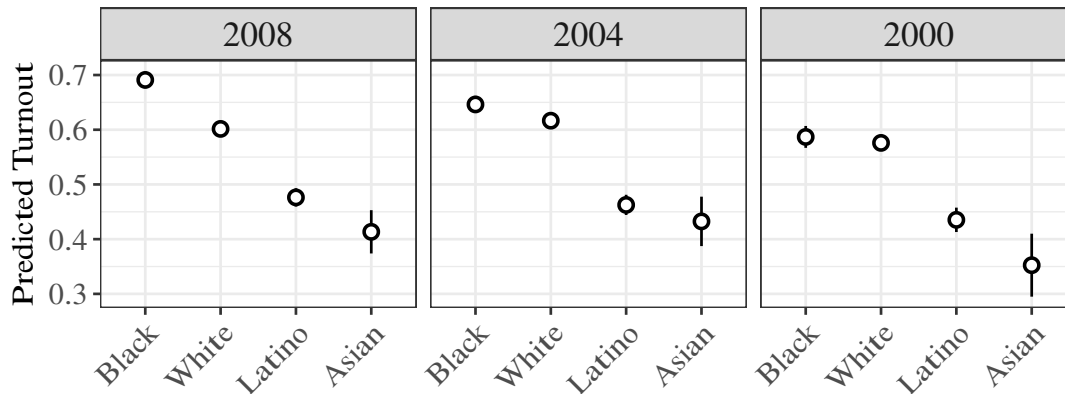
Social norms, or the unspoken rules and habits of a group, provide a possible answer. A relatively new literature suggests that norms are a central part of why people participate in politics and can be leveraged to increase involvement (e.g., Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; McClendon, 2014; McKenzie, 2004; Sinclair, 2012). This work persuasively demonstrates that social pressure and social observation can increase participation

²Many others have made this claim, showing not just that resources may not explain cross-group differences (e.g., Danigelis, 1978; Junn, 2015; Lien et al., 2001; Tam Cho, 1999), but also that income and education may be much weaker predictors of participation for all groups than originally thought (Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2013; Bernstein, Chadha and Montjoy, 2001; Kam and Palmer, 2008; Silver, Anderson and Abramson, 1986).

³The November Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) is one of the rare datasets that includes both over time data on turnout and large numbers of White, Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents. The CPS is administered jointly by the US Census Bureau and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics to approximately 60,000 households, resulting in roughly 110,000 to 135,000 respondents each cycle. The CPS's primary goal is to collect data on labor force statistics but in addition, the survey includes a biennial supplement on voting and voter registration. Furthermore, the bureaus occasionally field questions about civic and political engagement. While the CPS is not a validated voter supplement, its estimates more closely approximate confirmed turnout—potentially because the official governmental nature of the study makes respondents less willing to inflate their answers.

⁴Full regression results are available in appendix Table C.1

Figure 1.1: Predicted Likelihood of Turning Out, Controlling for Resources



Notes: Turnout estimated for each group separately, controlling for income, education, and nativity status. Plotted point estimates represent predicted probabilities with education set at a high school degree, family income held at \$40,000–49,999 a year, and nativity status set at US born. 95% confidence intervals are plotted with vertical lines, but because of the large sample, many points are very precisely estimated and confidence intervals are not visible.

in both traditional and contentious forms of politics. And yet, reflecting the psychological tradition from which it derives, it provides little insight on how these mechanisms might produce national-level, across-group differences in participation. Rather, this work is dedicated to identifying the *micro mechanisms* of social pressure and has remained agnostic about the macro forces that lead to norms in the first place.

Can social norms, so central to shaping the participation of individuals, also explain macro-level differences in turnout and other forms of political activism? This is the question that brought me to a picnic bench on a community college campus nestled in the hills of the San Francisco Bay Area in spring 2014. I was there talking with Aisha, a first-generation Asian American living in San Francisco, who had agreed to chat with me before her 9 a.m. class.⁵ Aisha and her family immigrated to the United States twenty years earlier and settled in California. I asked Aisha how she would describe herself to someone who does not know her—my opening question in many interviews—and she told me a story about her grandfather:

My grandfather—he’s a musician. ... He plays classical, south Indian music.

... And he’s been trained from his father, so my great, grandfather. It’s

⁵Throughout this book, I use pseudonyms for my interviewees and change details about their occupations slightly to protect their privacy.

been in our family for four or five generations. ... I started learning from [my grandfather], continued here [in the United States] with a couple other teachers and, even when he was in India, my sister and I, we both started learning from him again through the phone. ... I'm very honored to be part of that, just, you know, live up to my tradition and keep up the tradition in my family.

As I sat for a few hours the next day coding each passage of this interview, I did not think much of Aisha's opening comments. At the time, her discussion of tradition, ancestral lineage, and pride in continuing a family custom seemed to my naive ear devoid of politics, irrelevant in my search for the variables that shaped engagement in the political sphere. But four months later, I interviewed Martin, a man of similar age and education to Aisha who lived across the country in the suburbs of Washington, DC. Martin, who is Black, also talked about the influence of a grandparent on his life and the way it shaped his perspective of the world:

[My grandmother] is 96 years old, so she grew up in an era where she experienced so much hate. ... She actually was involved in the [civil rights] movement. Actively involved. ... She marched on Washington, and she did things locally in her community. ... My grandmother, you know, she was my light. When I was at the lowest parts of my life I could call my grandmother. ... I thought about the struggles that she had to go through. And then I was almost like, how dare me even complain? You know, look what she had to endure. Could I have made it if I had to endure the things that she did? I don't know.

I went on to ask Martin whether his grandmother votes and he responded, "Absolutely. That's not even a question. Absolutely. She votes. ... Because there was a time where she couldn't."

Slowly, from these interviews, I began to build a grounded theory of norm divergence in the United States. Martin, like Aisha, extolled the virtues of honoring the sacrifices

and traditions of those in the past but the two Americans, embedded in different racial groups and histories, connected different behaviors to their acts of honoring. Aisha emphasized her cultural heritage through music, honoring the past through continuing to learn and perform traditional Southeast Asian songs; Martin coupled political participation with honoring, giving me a synopsis of Oprah Winfrey's headline-catching speech on the franchise four years before the celebrity took the stage with Stacey Abrams. I discovered that while many Americans told me that honoring their forebears, continuing tradition, and looking to the past were core tenets of their identities and centrally defined their sense of obligation, the *behaviors* that followed from these expectations diverged remarkably by race and reflected each group's unique composition, history, and experiences.

In this book, I advance a novel theory of norm divergence in the United States. I argue that two norms—the honoring ancestors and helping hands norm—appear in cultures across the world and traverse the boundaries of race in America. However, how one honors the past or helps those in need are highly context-dependent. Experiences in the past and status in the present shape the content of group-based social norms, producing variation in the behavioral expressions of compliance. When these norms are coupled with political participation, as Martin and Winfrey model, they become potent forces of mobilization, helping some groups overcome resource constraints to engage politically while others remain inactive even with resources.

I call this theory of political participation the *Racialized Norms Model* (RNM). In a nutshell: social norms about the value and meaning of political participation vary by race due to both racial segregation and distinct group histories. These norms, I find, have enormous consequence on the landscape of political participation in the present moment, deciding who participates in politics, who stays home, and which groups are able to overcome the inherent costs and barriers of political participation. But the honoring ancestors and helping hands norms also gesture to pathways for change, providing unique opportunities to mobilize traditionally marginalized Americans. I show strong participatory norms in Black communities help members of this group confront an array

of barriers in the political arena. If Asian American and Latino elites or community members are similarly able to couple these two norms, already widespread but apolitical in these communities, to political involvement, the rewards would likely be immense.

1.1 Defining Key Concepts

Over the course of this book, I engage with three big concepts: *social norms*, *race*, and *political participation*. As a first order concern, we will determine if social norms related to political participation exist in the United States; then, test whether they diverge by race; and finally, determine if their existence and divergence affects involvement in politics at the individual and group levels. Because of the enormity of these concepts, it is worth spending some time upfront establishing what I mean by each, especially given the abundance of scholarship developed over many years on the three topics individually.

1.1.1 What Are Social Norms?

The power of social norms features prominently in a diverse body of literatures ranging from behavioral economics to normative theory (e.g., Durkheim, 2014; Elster, 1989; Foucault, 2012). I gather my insight primarily from social psychology, a sub-discipline that has spent the better of the past half century defining and studying the influence of norms (Asch, 1955; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Borrowing from Tankard and Paluck (2015), I define social norms as the unwritten rules and standards that describe typical or desirable behavior within a context or group. Norms are not formalized rules or institutional law; rather, they more closely mirror habits and customs that are consciously or subconsciously adopted. In simpler terms, social norms define—without formally defining—what is typical, acceptable, desirable.

Social psychologists delineate three types of norms, each distinct in the pathway through which they influence action (see Cialdini and Trost 1998 for a review). Social norms that affect individuals by providing information about what others do, devoid

of any moral or prescriptive claims, are called *descriptive norms*. These norms motivate behavior not by leveraging social rewards or sanctions, but simply by providing individuals with information about possible routes of effective or common action (e.g., Goldstein, Cialdini and Griskevicius, 2008; Perkins, Craig and Perkins, 2011). *Injunctive norms*, on the other hand, prescribe behavior. They define what is good and moral within the boundaries of a group and influence human action through the promise of social rewards for compliance or sanctions for deviance (e.g., Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Panagopoulos, 2010). Over time, external injunctive norms are integrated into one's sense of identity and morality. These *personal norms* motivate action by evoking concepts of obligation and eliciting cognitive or affective considerations like guilt, self-esteem, and values (Schwartz, 1977; Thøgersen, 2006).

Reams of evidence demonstrate that collectively, social information, pressure, and self-esteem powerfully shape human behavior. Norms can make people conform to illogical standards (Asch, 1955), engage in behavior they blatantly oppose (Westphal and Bednar, 2005), and even encourage life-threatening choices (Crandall, 1988). But social norms also motivate important pro-social behavior, helping to lubricate social relations and address collective action problems (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Paluck and Green 2009). These social needs are nowhere more abundant than in the world of politics where recent scholarship confirms that norms influence everything from policy positions to political participation (e.g., Chong, 1994; Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; Janus 2010; McClendon, 2018; White and Laird, 2020). To name just a few persuasive examples, the randomized presentation of descriptive information about high or low turnout changes commitment to voting (Gerber and Rogers, 2009) and the application of social observation influences the direction and magnitude of campaign giving (Sinclair, 2012; White, Laird and Allen, 2014).

This robust literature confirms that social norms matter in the political arena, but we can push this literature forward by considering how *groups* undergird the content and enforcement of participatory social norms. Groups are the backdrop of social behavior, the compost in which norms are cultivated (Hogg, 2003; Ellemers, Spears and Doosje,

2002). Groups delineate the boundaries between people and in doing so, influence the social information one receives (Larson and Lewis, 2017). They determine the extent to which an individual cares about the acceptance and admiration of those around them (Huddy, 2013). And, the cohesiveness of a group shapes levels of observation and the ability to sanction (Oliver, 2010). Groups, then, influence whether an individual will ever confront a particular social norm and whether the stakes will be high enough to induce compliance when they do. My interest is in one particular category of groups that reigns supreme in many American contexts: race.

1.1.2 What Is Race?

Race is arguably the oldest and most consistent cleavage in the American political landscape. Its influence appears in the anatomy of the US Constitution, which identified enslaved Africans as only three-fifth human and denied them representation of any kind. Race is the spark that ignited the nation's only civil war, killing more than half a million Americans but freeing eight times that number. And still today, the government's role in solving issues of racial income inequality, police brutality, and immigration figures prominently in both local and national elections.

Political scientists have long acknowledged this “centrality of race in the study of American politics” (Hutchings and Valentino, 2004, p. 383), generating decades worth of research on the subject. Much of this scholarship has focused on the racial attitudes of White Americans and the political behaviors that follow. White racial animus is historically quite high in the United States—although it has changed in its expression over time—and affects a wide range of political outcomes (Kinder, Sanders and Sanders, 1996; Tesler, 2013). Racism has influenced the structure of cities and redistributive policy (Gilens, 2009; Trounstine, 2018), influences candidate choice (Mendelberg, 2001), and continues to be primed on the campaign trail (Banks and Hicks, 2018). The internalization and activation of racial animus among White Americans remain, arguably, the determining factor in presidential politics (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2018).

But the study of *racism* is distinct from the study of *race*. The former seeks to define, measure, and determine the causes or effects of prejudice against an outgroup; the latter seeks to investigate the meaning and origin of racial categories, and ascertain the implications of categorization on ingroup behavior and attitudes. This conceptual distinction often leads to differences with respect to the populations under study. Research on racism tend to evaluate the attitudes and behaviors of the dominant, majority group, focusing on White attitudes toward “the other” in the context of the United States. In contrast, scholarship on race has worked to develop cross-group theories of attitudes and behavior or focused on the within-group attitudes of racial minorities (e.g., Dawson 1994; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Mora 2014; Smith, 2014a).⁶

Our focus in this book is primarily race, not racism. I am interested in examining how macro forces divide and define social space based on race and infuse group identity with meaning. By race, I refer to a set of phenotypical characteristics that vary across people, have robust historical meaning, and are infused with social consequence within a specific context (Omi and Winant, 2014). In the United States, racial categories reflect a complicated amalgam of historical forces that have divided and defined people with long-lasting consequences on dialect, diet, skin color, status, religion, and resources, to name a few (Sen and Wasow 2016). These categories are not a product of some natural, stable order, but rather reflect political power and contestation over time (Haney Lopez 2006; Prewitt, 2013; Omi and Winant, 2014).

My focus is on the four largest racial groups in the United States: Asian, Black, Latino, and White Americans. In my studies, the race of an individual is based on their self-selection into a category, their choice likely reflecting widespread beliefs about the ancestral, phenotypical, and experiential components that comprise race in the US (Hochschild and Sen 2018; Omi and Winant, 2014; Prewitt, 2013). This measure of race should be thought of as capturing *group membership*, or inclusion in a group based on arguably objective characteristics (Huddy 2013), but in the world of race, determining

⁶Recent work on race has begun to also take note that White folks have a racial identity as well, one that increasingly seems to influence their orientation to politics separate and in addition to outgroup prejudice (Jardina, 2019; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2018; Weller and Junn, 2018) and a small literature examines racial animus of non-majority group members (e.g., Gay 2004; Kaufmann, 2003; Lopez and Pantoja, 2004).

“objective characteristics” is anything but straightforward (Mora 2014; Prewitt 2013). The US Census, for instance, currently defines Hispanic/Latino as an ethnicity rather than a race, but mounting evidence suggests members of this group increasingly view the label as a racial category and statistical analyses almost always mirror this thinking (e.g., Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez 2015; Reist 2013; Rodriguez 2000; Prewitt 2013). In my own analyses of survey data, I define four racial categories: single-race non-Hispanic Whites, single-race non-Hispanic Blacks, single-race non-Hispanic Asian Americans, and Latinos who may additionally identify as White, Black, or Asian⁷

My focus on single-race individuals and the analytical bounding of racial categories for the purposes of statistical tests should not be taken as evidence that race is in fact easily defined, measured, or even truly categorical in nature. Rather, it is of critical importance to note that the boundaries of race are fluid, constantly constructed and redrawn within the context of a society (Omi and Winant 2014; Davenport 2020; Prewitt 2013; Saperstein and Penner 2012). In the United States, racial categories have changed over time and are regularly contested (Davenport 2018; Haney Lopez 2006; Mora 2014). And widespread consensus suggests that rather than something natural or essential, race is a *social construction*, meaningless outside a specific time and context (Hirschman 2004; Omi and Winant 2014; Prewitt 2013).

In addition to *racial group membership*, I engage with a few other conceptualizations of race throughout this book. The first is racial group identity, or the degree to which an individual has integrated the importance of that group into their sense of self and need

⁷It is of some irony that my own racial identity does not fit neatly into these four racial categories. According to census definitions, I am both White and Hispanic, but my dominant cultural and institutional experience is one of Whiteness—I think—and others seem to race me as White most of the time. This ambiguity in what, exactly, I am and the dissonance that comes when asked, “what is your race?”, affect my interests, my experiences, my friendships, my psychology, my life. But, all this complication is lost in my choice to simplify the data and define four separate racial categories, under which I would appear in the Hispanic/Latino set. This is in part a reflection of the constraints in my data collection: GfK, the survey platform I used, asks respondents about their race before I fielded the Participatory Social Norms Survey. But it is also a by-product of social science and statistics more generally: simplifications are made in the name of generalizability. However, if this is a topic that interests you, I suggest looking to any of the excellent treatises on mixed-race individuals, the crossing of ethnicity with race, and the creation of Latino/Hispanic as a category including Davenport (2018), Smith (2014a), Waters (2009), Mora (2014), and Beltrán (2010). (I also write this footnote knowing that while its content will likely remain in perpetuity, my own racial identity is subject to change over time. Change is endemic in racial categorization precisely because it is a human construct—created by humans, contested by humans—but this is even more so for those currently “in-between” on the racial schema of the moment.)

for belonging (Huddy, 2013; McClain et al., 2009). An individual may self-select into a group based on their understanding of the objective characteristics undergirding that category, but not feel closely connected to others in the group or consider that group's expectations very often (McClain et al., 2009; Wong, 2010). This is one element of *racial group embeddedness* that likely affects conformity to norms: if an individual cares deeply about inclusion into a specific group, social information and social rewards will weigh more heavily in their decisions (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). I'll call this sense of closeness to other group members *psychological embeddedness*.

In addition to psychological embeddedness, *geographic embeddedness* and *social embeddedness* into one's racial group may affect the absorption and enactment of group-based norms. By geographic embeddedness, I refer to the racial composition of one's immediate physical space—namely, neighborhood (Oliver, 2010; Velez and Wong, 2017; Wong, 2010). By social embeddedness, I mean the degree to which an individual's close social ties are primarily co-racial (Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears, 2006). These two concepts of racial group embeddedness capture not what is going on inside an individual's head, but rather the broader racial context in which they function. The physical and social arrangement of peoples has been shown to affect perceptions of group cohesion (Enos, 2017), the flow of information (Larson and Lewis, 2017; DeSante and Perry, 2016), and levels of trust and interaction (Oliver, 2010). Together, these factors may contribute to social norms by affecting the clarity of signal one receives about group based norms as well as the levels of observation and enforcement one faces.

Non-White Americans have been a meaningful component of the nation for as long as it has existed (Takaki, 2008), but understanding their political behaviors and attitudes has arguably never been more important. In 2012, the number of babies born to racial minorities in the United States outnumbered those born to only-White families, reflecting surging immigration, differences in birthrates, and multi-racial unions—a first in the nation's history (Tavernise, 2012). This newly minted cohort of non-White Americans is one of many indicators contributing to the projection that the United States will be a majority-minority nation by midcentury, with no single racial group comprising the bulk

of the country's population (Bureau 2012). Some, touting “demography as destiny,” cite the growing numbers of non-Whites as inherently leading to increases in political power for traditionally marginalized groups. Almost by definition, comprising a larger part of the population in a majoritarian government should lead to more representation and responsiveness. Yet, the political power of American citizens relies importantly on political involvement (Michelson and Monforti 2018; Ramírez 2013). To understand whether minority Americans in the coming years will exert increasing power over the political infrastructure requires a look at the determinants of participation for these groups.

1.1.3 What Is Political Participation?

This book will focus on identifying the causes of political participation and sources of its variation, but this endeavor is only worthwhile if participation itself matters for outcomes we care about. If political involvement among citizens has no effect on political representation, policy outcomes, or the production of a peaceful and prosperous society, then understanding why some people participate but not others is of little consequence. Similarly, if inequalities in political participation across politically relevant groups produce no practical difference in the political world compared to the counterfactual of equal participation, then, again, identifying sources of variation is a pursuit of little value. Defining what exactly political participation is, discussing its theoretical connection to democracy, and analyzing the empirical evidence to date about if and when it matters can help determine whether studying it is a worthy undertaking.

In classic theories of democracy, political participation is revered. It is believed to be the bedrock of a representative government, the mechanism through which the people select their rulers and set the agenda. Actions as diverse as rioting, attending parent-teacher association meetings, voting in presidential elections, and boycotting have all managed to find a home under the umbrella term *political participation* in past treatises (e.g., Conway 2000; Enos, Kaufman and Sands 2017; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). These behaviors are united under a common banner when they have “the intent

or effect of influencing government action” (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995 p. 38). While political participation is not always successful at achieving its goals, it does, at its inception, have the ambition of affecting the legal distribution of rights and resources in society (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). This focus on policy separates political participation from other forms of civic volunteerism or neighborhood involvement.

How, exactly, does political participation influence government action? The answer depends on the type of political participation under study. Voting influences policy outcomes through the selection of like-minded individuals and by providing reelection incentives that hold officials accountable, in theory (Dahl, 2005; Griffin and Newman 2005; Mayhew 1974). But voting alone is not particularly communicative. While policy issues are many and multidimensional, the choice between candidates is often circumscribed. As a result, elected officials must use other means to identify the issues important to their constituents. Non-electoral political participation provides one dimension of information, communicating top concerns and educating elected officials about policy possibilities (Dahl, 2005; Gillion, 2013; Kingdon, 1984; Verba and Nie 1987).

In theory, then, political participation is the link between the preferences of the ruled and the policies of the rulers, but many modern social scientists have questioned whether this link works as theorized. Noting the multitude of examples where majority positions do not become the law of the land, the massive influence of the wealthy few, and the instability of citizen policy preferences, some have suggested that the “folk theory of democracy” is rotten at its core (Achen and Bartels, 2017). Most individuals do not have fixed or reliable preferences, this line of scholarship argues (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Converse, 1964; Lenz, 2013), and even when they do, elected officials often do not enact those preferences into law (Bartels, 2016; Gilens, 2005). In this account, inequalities in political participation exist and the structural mechanisms of responsiveness are built on faulty assumptions: democracy is unresponsive not just to the inactive few but to the majority of citizens who may or may not know what they want anyway.

One response to critics regarding the value of participation is that involvement in political life and self-governance are important for reasons unrelated to policy outcomes.

Political participation in-and-of-itself may create better, happier citizens. Early theorists including John Stewart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that democratic political participation can have positive psychological and social consequences, increasing the quality of citizen character, fostering a sense of belonging, and generating regime stability (for reviews, see [Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993](#); [Pateman, 1970](#)). Modern empirical work suggests there is basis in these claims, showing that participating in system-affirming acts like voting and campaigning creates higher levels of external efficacy and feelings of governmental legitimacy ([Finkel, 1985, 1987](#)). Furthermore, institutional opportunities for direct and deliberative democracy that engage citizens also change them, increasing political knowledge and cooperation ([Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004](#); [Tolbert and Smith, 2005](#)).

These positive externalities, though, are likely beside the point for the majority of citizens who look to their government for the fair arbitration of resources, production of high-quality public education, stimulation of economic opportunities, enforcement of justice in the courts, and refurbishment of safe neighborhoods. These individuals and the many formal organizations that work to lobby government, mobilize the public, and organize neighborhoods each year are interested in real outcomes as a result of their efforts. Democratic government demands more than that individuals *feel* like the system is responsive; it demands substantive representation and actual responsiveness.

So, when does political participation produce positive, measurable increases in substantive representation, if ever? With respect to voting, a convincing body of work suggests that turnout levels, per se, are not very important. Rather, it is the relative turnout across groups that influences policy outcomes, at least at the state level. Work on redistributive spending and the implementation of welfare policies like Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program show persuasively that relative turnout between the rich and the poor in the preceding election affected stringency in state-level adoptions of these federal policies ([Avery and Peffley, 2005](#); [Fellowes and Rowe, 2004](#); [Franko, 2013](#); [Hill and Leighley, 1992](#)). Furthermore, class bias in turnout at the state level has lasting

effects on income inequality, potentially because an upper-class bias in turnout leads to fewer restrictions on predatory lending and a lower minimum wage (Avery 2015; Franko 2013). Hajnal and Trounstein (2005) find that localities with more equitable turnout among racial groups leads to higher-quality representation for racial minorities. When Latinos and Asian Americans turn out at rates commensurate with their size in urban, metro areas, they are more likely to be represented by mayors of their choosing and co-racial city council members.⁸

At the federal level, evidence on whether turnout influences representation is more mixed and requires nuance to interpret. Scholars have argued that full voter turnout would likely have only marginal effects on the partisan composition of Congress (High-ton and Wolfinger 2001b; Sides, Schickler and Citrin 2008), but within party, elected representatives would likely be more liberal in their platforms and show less ideological alignment with White Americans (Griffin and Newman 2005, 2007, but see Ellis, Ura, and Ashley-Robinson 2006). Simulations suggest the incorporation of otherwise disenfranchised individuals, like those with felony convictions, would alter only a few close federal elections, but these alternative outcomes would have multiplicative downstream consequences due to the staying power of incumbency advantage (Manza and Uggen 2002). Political participation and turnout equality does seem to matter for policy outcomes and substantive representation at the federal level, although imperfectly so.

Setting voting aside, evidence suggests non-electoral political participation that is either contentious or information-rich influences substantive representation. Examining both the scope and salience of minority political protests, Gillion (2013) shows that activism during the civil rights era affected the voting record of congressional representatives in locations where protests took place, shaped the content of executive orders, and had agenda-setting effects on the Supreme Court. Enos, Kaufman and Sands (2017) show that the 1992 riots in Los Angeles led to more support for redistributive spending on education. Griffin and Newman (2005) find that individuals who contact senators are more likely to see their ideological preferences reflected in policy outcomes. And

⁸This racial descriptive representation is important as it allows representatives to better anticipate the needs of their constituents as new situations arise (Mansbridge, 1999) and empirically, leads to more responsiveness from representatives (Broockman 2013; Butler and Broockman 2011).

Kalla and Broockman (2016) show that campaign contributions increase the likelihood of securing meetings with congresspeople and their senior staff.

Even under conditions of full electoral involvement, policy outcomes would likely still be skewed in the direction of the extremely wealthy and organized lobbies, though (Gilens 2005; Grossmann 2012). As a result, some have suggested the only way forward is through systematic revisions to government with respect to campaign finance and distribution of economic resources, actions that begin with the powerful rather than reform initiated by every-day people (Achen and Bartels 2017; Gilens 2005; Page and Gilens 2017). History suggests, though, that power and resources such as these are never freely given; they must be demanded, fought for, and taken⁹. Political participation is a power-resource (Avery 2015; Korpi 2006; Stephens 1979), an arrow in the quiver of those historically boxed out of self-governance and a pathway for change, however imperfect. Studying political participation and examining when and how people overcome the inherent costs of involvement are important for understanding how broader systematic reform might be achieved.

1.2 Plan of the Book

My intention for this book is to explain why and show how norms about political participation vary by racial group in the United States today. I begin this task in Chapter 2, building a theoretical framework that draws insight from across social science disciplines. Social norms shape the incentive structure for political participation, I argue, but divergent histories and continued racial segregation create variation in the form and strength of these norms. Americans of different racial groups have for centuries experienced their government in distinctly different ways. From citizenship to the franchise, property rights to incarceration, Asian, Black, Latino, and White Americans have engaged with, and continue to experience, remarkably different institutional constraints (Dawson 1994; Jiménez 2010; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Takaki 2008).

⁹In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed” (King Jr 1992).

These separate historical narratives combine with the systematic separation of groups through persistent and widespread racial segregation to form contexts ripe for norm variation (Larson and Lewis 2017; Lawler, Ridgeway and Markovsky 1993; Logan and Stults 2011; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001; White, Laird and Allen 2014). I combine these insights to create the Racialized Norms Model (RNM), which concludes: norms about the value and meaning of political participation likely vary across racial groups in the United States in ways that matter significantly for engagement.

The RNM has a number of observable implications. If the theory is correct, we should find racial variation—by group membership and embeddedness—in the form and strength of social norms related to political participation. Strong participatory social norms should predict political involvement and explain at least some of the observed differences in turnout across groups. Further, social rewards for political participation, rather than simply internalized norms, should vary across racial groups and embeddedness, reflecting the prescriptive rather than purely personal nature of norm enforcement. And, the elite priming of norms should increase participatory commitments among groups that couple the norm with politics.

The RNM expects that participatory social norms vary across racial groups in the United States, but it does not identify which norms specifically are of consequence. I use original qualitative interviews and the method of grounded-theory development in Chapter 3 for this task. I expose two norms related to political participation that vary across racial groups: the honoring ancestors and the helping hands norm. Analyzing twenty-three original interviews conducted with Black and Asian Americans across the country, I show these two norms are prevalent across groups, shape orientations toward the world and expectations for behavior, and vary in their connection to political participation. For Black Americans, honoring ancestors means claiming political rights once unavailable to the group; helping those in need includes correcting injustices of racial discrimination and poverty through political action. For Asian Americans, compliance with these same norms is expressed in distinctly apolitical ways. Members of this group are more likely to honor ancestors through continuing cultural traditions and state that

helping those in need must be balanced with other obligations like family economic stability. Analyzing differences across these two groups, I build a theory of participatory norm divergence in the United States: Americans of different races share core commitments to help those in need and honor the past, but group-based histories influence the behavioral expression of these norms and their possible connection to politics.

Having identified specific norms that might vary across groups, I turn to designing and validating measures of these norms in representative samples of the nation's four largest racial groups. For this work, I draw extensively from the Participatory Social Norms Survey (PSNS), an original online study I conducted in March 2018. The survey was administered using the platform GfK, which draws respondents from a pre-constructed probability sample. The survey was administered to American citizens older than age 17, was fielded in both English and Spanish, and lasted roughly twelve minutes.¹⁰

The PSNS is a unique dataset in three respects. First, the study includes a sizable number of respondents from each of the four largest racial groups in the United States. One thousand White, 1,000 Latino, 1,003 Black, and 1,020 Asian respondents are included. This unique multiracial dataset allows for detailed within-group explorations and precise across-group comparisons with respect to the strength and effect of participatory social norms.¹¹

Second, the PSNS includes unique batteries of questions designed to measure social norms and racial social context. Using a combination of census block indicators, name-generator questions, and psychological batteries, I develop and deploy three kinds of racial embeddedness measures throughout my analyses. I study the moderating effect

¹⁰A post-survey weight was constructed and is applied for each racial group throughout to ensure the sample is roughly representative of the US population. The wording for questions analyzed appear in the appendix; the complete instrument, as well as the Spanish translation, is in the online appendix. A total of 601 of the Asian respondents were drawn from an opt-in panel to supplement GfK's pool. For these respondents, the study was longer in length because I had to collect demographic data that were already on file for the other respondents.

¹¹Rarely are representative survey samples generated for the four largest racial groups in the United States on a single platform with respect to any topic. Even the American National Election Studies (ANES), the most commonly used data source among political scientists, rarely incorporates oversamples of Black Americans and Latinos and has never produced a meaningful sample of Asian Americans. One modern exception to this dearth of data is the Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey, a relatively new initiative that seeks to address exactly this problem.

of the racial composition of geographic census block, the racial composition of a respondent's close social network, and the strength of racial identity with respect to group closeness. When combined with my unique measures of social norms, these measures provide a novel account of norm variation in the United States within-groups, across-groups, and at varying levels of racial embeddedness.

Finally, the PSNS includes multiple measures of political participation. It has self-reported voting history in national elections and validated voter history for multiple years. It gauges frequency of participation in local politics and engagement in contentious political activities, including protests. I use these measures to go beyond explaining political participation in salient, national elections—the focus of the vast majority of scholarship on political participation to date—to explore how norms shape involvement in higher cost forms of engagement including political rally attendance and local politics.

In Chapter 4, I turn to testing empirically the observable implications of the RNM using the PSNS. I begin with an examination of the honoring ancestors norm. I find a commitment to honor the sacrifices and struggles of those in the past is widely endorsed in the US, but the behavioral interpretations of this norm—that is, how one goes about honoring the past—vary systematically by racial community. Expressions of the norm, I argue, are tied to the timing and nature of ancestral arrival in America and the group's location on the racial hierarchy with respect to perceived foreignness. I introduce and validate a novel norms measure that captures the degree to which an individual believes honoring the past requires political involvement. I show that this measure is distinct from other known political variables including racial linked fate, political interest, and partisanship, and its strength varies not just with racial group membership but also with geographic, social, and psychological group embeddedness. Racial community in the United States shapes the expression of the honoring ancestors norm and its relationship to politics.

In Chapter 5, I undertake a parallel investigation but for the helping hands norm, defined as a prescriptive commitment to help those most in need. Again turning to the PSNS, I show that the helping hands norm is widespread in the United States, but takes

on a variety of behavioral forms including religious, charitable, and political activities. Like honoring ancestors, a politicized interpretation of the helping hands norm varies in its propensity and strength across both racial group membership and embeddedness, but this divergence is muted compared to the previous norm. I develop and validate an index measure that captures the degree to which an individual believes helping those most in need requires political involvement.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I shift my attention from examining political attitudes to their effect on political behaviors—namely, involvement in politics. The first behavior under study: turnout in high-salience, federal elections like those for Congress or the presidency. Using my novel norms measures, I find that a politicized version of the honoring ancestors norm is strongly related to validated turnout in federal elections. The effect size, which ranges from 17% to 35% depending on the group, outpaces traditional explanations like education, income, racial linked fate, political recruitment, and even, political interest. Furthermore, accounting for both the prevalence and predictive capacity of these norms explains the participatory over-performance of Black Americans compared to other racial minorities.

Next, I use two novel survey experiments to demonstrate variation in peer-level social rewards for voting and responsiveness to elite-level priming. In the first experiment, I show that Black Americans evaluate potential neighbors who are regular voters more positively than do either White Americans or Latinos, a finding that is strongest among Black respondents who live in primarily Black neighborhoods. In the second, I find that attempts by elites to prime the honoring ancestors norm—like the comments of Oprah Winfrey in Marietta, Georgia—effectively increase the perceived importance of voting, but only among groups that already connect the norm to politics. Namely, I find that comments like Winfrey’s are most likely to increase a commitment to voting among low-propensity Black voters.

Voting in federal elections may be the most common form of political participation in the United States, but as we have discussed, it is not necessarily the most important. Rather, higher-cost forms of participation like involvement in local elections, protesting,

and contacting government officials are both more communicative and more effective in changing policy outcomes. This is especially true for racial minorities who have lesser electoral influence in national elections due to both their minority status and *de jure* and *de facto* disenfranchisement. In Chapter 7, I turn to examining the relationship between participatory social norms and forms of political involvement other than turnout in federal elections. I find that both the honoring ancestors norm and the helping hands norm shape participation in local elections and other, nonvoting forms of involvement. In these contexts, the helping hands norm is often a stronger predictor of political involvement than the honoring ancestors norm, suggesting its unique connection to high cost political participation.

Experimental evidence further shows that social rewards for nonvoting activities like political rally attendance diverge by racial group membership and embeddedness. Minority Americans are more likely than Whites to reward individuals involved in these high-cost, system-challenging behaviors. Further, elite-level priming of participatory norms proves a fruitful avenue for increasing willingness to engage in local political organizations for even traditionally inactive groups.

Surveying my findings, some may be disposed to conclude that “weak norms” cause Asian Americans and Latinos to participate in politics at relatively low rates; this interpretation is both incorrect and obtuse. Participatory social norms are a resource communities can wield to overcome the inherent costs and barriers of engagement, both of which are significantly higher and more prevalent for racial minorities in the United States regardless of income and education levels (Fraga, 2018; Philpot and Walton, 2014; Ramírez, Solano and Wilcox-Archuleta, 2018). My findings show that in the absence of personal, participatory norms, all minority groups—including Black Americans—would be severely disadvantaged compared to White Americans when it comes to turnout. But exceptionally strong participatory norms in many Black communities that reward engagement allow this group to overcome disadvantage and turn out at a rate roughly equal to that of Whites.

Understanding this distinction—that norms are not a source of minority deficiency,

but rather a powerful resource that can confront otherwise entrenched inequalities—generates unique insight about how norms might be leveraged to change patterns of political participation in the United States. Policy changes that lower the cost of engagement or attempt to level the resource playing field likely influence turnout rates, but are also the product of hard fought battles that require political participation and mobilization. This catch-22 begs us to consider whether there are alternative methods that organizers and activists can pursue to build their base and confront participatory inequalities.

In Chapter 8, I propose an asset-based organizing approach that utilizes norms to mobilize racial minorities in the United States. This approach draws on the principles of Asset-Based Community Development, which evaluates the resources, skills, and assets communities *do have* to build capacity and power, rather than focusing on what communities lack. To date, the vast majority of research on inequalities in political participation focuses on the latter rather than the former, outlining what is missing or identifying barriers to participation in communities of color. In contrast, I suggest that the helping hands norm and the honoring ancestors norm are two resources widely shared in the United States and are especially potent in minority communities. Identifying these latent norms as assets to be activated, I suggest organizers work to explicitly couple political participation with these norms, using the widespread obligation Americans feel to honor the past and assist those in need in the movement for more equitable participation and representation in America.

Collectively, the evidence compiled in this book demonstrates that social norms about the value and meaning of political participation vary by racial community in the United States with wide-reaching consequences for who engages in the political process. But norms, even deeply entrenched ones, are malleable and provide pathways for organizers and activists to change patterns of participation in American society.