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African Americans in White Suburbia

SOCIAL NETWORKS *&*
POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Ernest McGowen III

University Press of Kansas

1. The Unique Story of the Suburban African American

To say that African Americans have had a tumultuous history in the United States would be an understatement. Even before the founding of the republic, being black meant your labor was not your own and your body could be assaulted with impunity. Even with the end of chattel slavery, mainstream society (the government and individuals) denied blacks access to the political and social structure of the country by both law and practice. It may be just as much of an understatement to say blacks have not made tremendous social and economic progress in the centuries that followed. This book will tell the story of one particular subset of that group—suburban African Americans.

Suburban African Americans find themselves caught between the two worlds of high socioeconomic status (SES)[1] and low race status. Above-average income has afforded the opportunity to move to the suburbs; however, there has been a history of hostility and exclusion based on race that is not lost on the learned. Educational accomplishments have opened occupational opportunities in the most prestigious firms and businesses, yet their new coworkers have neither the same upbringings and interests, nor the same political ideologies and preferences. Suburban African Americans have abundant political resources to influence government, but lack available political choices and candidates who speak to their racial ideology.

However, there are places more welcoming, with people of similar cultures and upbringings, and political elites working toward the type of racial changes they desire. In the traditional municipality, these places are just a short drive away, in the historic African American neighborhood. The question asked in this book is how does this suburban environment, especially the racial makeup of one's neighborhood and social networks, affect the political behaviors of suburban African Americans who have strong racial identifications and policy preferences aimed at aiding the racial group writ large?

In the following chapters I will show that being one of the few blacks in the neighborhood and workplace makes suburban African Americans feel the discomfort of minority status more acutely. This, in turn, makes them more likely to view their social interactions in these situations as disagreeable and

even hostile to their racial identity. As a result, they seek out more agreeable networks that reinforce their racial identity.[2]

Suburban African Americans can easily find these networks in the majority-black institutions of the historic inner city. Cultivated and refined over centuries, these institutions, such as black churches or civil rights organizations like the NAACP, have dedicated themselves to uplifting the collective group in the face of discrimination. Exposure to these norms will move suburban African Americans toward group-based behaviors even if those behaviors go against their material self-interest. Thus, they will even hold opinions *more* racially radical[3] than their urban coethnics. This is because their suburban residence and constant minority status will heighten the salience of their racial identity and its role in their political behavior decisions.

Differences among African Americans and whites based on environment lead to the motivating research question of this study. How does the metro suburban environment, with its racial disparities and close geographic proximity to majority black institutions and neighborhoods, shape the political behaviors of the African Americans who live there? In some ways, suburban neighborhoods are no different from other environments in that they impact behavior by shaping the informal and formal opportunities to engage in politics. Informally, the people who constitute one's neighborhood (and relatedly, one's workplace), and their demographics, will affect the universe of information to which the individual will have ready access. Social environments cut the cost of acquiring information, which might be conveyed through a conversation at a dinner party or the bumper sticker affixed to a neighbor's vehicle. Instead of having to seek out information and interpretation from multiple outlets, the embedded network inhabitant will have information brought to them by other network members. Additionally, networks filter this information for consonance. For the most part, people's networks are comprised of people with whom they have something in common. (However, not every network has the same level of agreement and inhabitants are not always able to choose network partners with impunity, as the review of the literature will show.) Therefore, social network theory suggests that information of interest to an individual should also be of interest to most of the group. This affinity for network members makes proffered information more credible and suggests that the individual will shape his or her (political) behaviors toward the prevailing norm of the network.

Formally, one's neighbors are also fellow political constituents. Those political ties determine the policies of political jurisdictions and the actions of electoral candidates. Higher income and education levels in suburban neighborhoods suggest that these areas will be more Republican. This setting may be great for African American residents on economic issues like taxes. However, it means that on social issues, like race, there is a chance that even the Democratic candidate's stance will be more conservative. The people with whom suburban African Americans share racial ideologies may be in a different political jurisdiction for the majority of electoral contests. Yet, just because suburban African Americans cannot vote their interests does not mean they cannot still work to advance them. They could participate by donating money or volunteering to help elect a coethnic running for mayor of the city. In chapter 5 the findings show this to be the case: suburban African Americans engage in more alternative political behaviors than suburban whites and urban African Americans.

Viewed as a collective, African Americans have made large socioeconomic gains that have translated into more residential mobility and occupational prestige, especially in contrast to the political and social environment of the 1960s and 1970s. Gone is the time when state-sanctioned segregation relegated blacks to less prestigious majority neighborhoods in the central city. Yet, present-day suburban African Americans can easily find themselves as one of only a few blacks in their neighborhood. For African Americans who identify closely with their race and culture, this isolation can have a psychological and political effect. Minority status may make one less likely to post the only Democrat sign on the block for fear of exclusion from a social setting. The suburbs are a place that has historically been hostile not only to African Americans' residence, but even to their mere presence in the neighborhood. Moreover, suburban neighborhood institutions like churches and volunteer organizations will be much less likely to focus their efforts on racial and ethnic minority issues and populations. Fortunately, for the suburban African American these racially focused networks and institutions are just a short drive away.

That minorities of any stripe will seek out reinforcing networks has a long lineage in the literature, as chapter 2 will show. However, these previous studies have not focused specifically on suburban African Americans. This is a subgroup with strong norms of group solidarity. However, they have a socioeconomic separation from others in the group and a geographic separation

from the historic group-based institutions that have cultivated the culture since emancipation. Examining these citizens provides a set of unique circumstances that will surely augment our understanding of the relationship between environment and participation. The implications of researching this population are obvious and important. America is shifting geographically, and more African Americans are moving to the suburbs. At the same time, many contemporary issues cleave along racial lines. If these suburban African Americans identify more with their class than race, as some scholars have suggested, the amount of attention the mainstream pays to racial issues may lessen.

My assumption for this project is that suburban African Americans will not find the networks in which they spend the most time—their neighborhoods and workplaces—conducive to their racial identity and therefore will not look to them for normative signals or information shortcuts. Instead, they will seek out networks in the central city, such as a black church or a historic African American civil rights organization, or even a barbershop. They will also choose participatory behaviors that can better aid their group and reinforce their racial identity, even if they come at a higher resource cost when compared to simple voting.