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Is the significance of race declining in the political arena? Yes, and no

Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver

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The significance of class is increasing in the USA, in the sense that economic inequality is rising within the black and Latino populations as well as among whites. Growing inequality is associated with increasing disparities in lived experiences. Is class also increasingly significant in political life? Survey evidence shows that the answer is yes: compared with previous decades, well-off blacks and Latinos are less strongly liberal in some policy preferences and feel more politically efficacious, while poor blacks and Latinos tend to move in the opposite direction. Well-off non-whites have not, however, lost any commitment to racial justice or identity, so the USA is not becoming ‘post-racial’. Given the complex patterns of change and persistence in opinions, Wilson’s arguments about when and how race is significant remain as important and controversial as when first expressed.

Keywords: inequality; within-group differences; public opinion; post-racial society; black Americans; Latinos; class conflict; racial attitudes

The economic and political systems in the US have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in allowing talented blacks to fill positions of prestige and influence at the same time that these systems have shown persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower-class blacks. As a result, for the first time in American history class issues can meaningfully compete with race issues in the ways blacks develop or maintain a sense of group position. (Wilson 1980, 22)

Thirty-five years after this canonical statement was published, lower-class minorities struggle for water in Detroit, Michigan, personhood in Ferguson, Missouri, citizenship rights in Arizona, and political standing throughout the USA. Affluent minorities also feel the sting of racial stigma but their lives are more secure, and increasingly so. As early as the 1970s, as William Julius Wilson pointed out in *The Declining Significance of Race*, black Americans in the upper third or even half of the economic distribution had better daily lives on average than almost all blacks had had several decades earlier. As both cause and consequence, for some blacks and for the first time ever, race was declining as a determinant of a person’s life trajectory. With appropriate nuance and caveat, Wilson’s core claim is even truer now: class distinctions within the black population have grown by orders of magnitude, and lived experiences are commensurately even more different.

The same condition obtains, more or less, for all other racial or ethnic groups in the USA. Affluent Latinos live in very different circumstances than poor Latinos,

regardless of whether one controls for immigration status; the same holds for well-off and poor Asian Americans or European Americans. The three non-white groups differ from non-Hispanic whites in important ways – for example, immigration status or nationality is closely linked to economic standing among people of colour – but the key fact of significant and arguably increasing within-group differences holds in all cases.

The Declining Significance, like most social science scholarship, chiefly seeks to explain the causes of the phenomena that it examines. Among the array of possible causes, Wilson focuses mostly on economics and society, although he is cognizant of political forces that shape and are shaped by ‘modern industrial society’. This commentary starts from agreement with Wilson’s basic thesis and extends it in three ways – to include groups other than blacks, to focus on the consequences of growing class inequality rather than on causes or dynamics, and to develop some political implications of intra-group inequality. We also develop a disagreement with Wilson’s thesis: ‘class issues’ do *not* ‘meaningfully compete with race issues in the ways blacks develop or maintain a sense of group position’.

Given space constraints and the enormity of the topic, we can provide only highlights of a more extensive research programme on which we are embarked. Yet even in this brief overview, we are struck by the continuing resonance of Wilson’s thesis; in particular, the claim of ‘declining significance’ has entered the political arena despite the continuing racialized quality of electoral politics.

Intra-group inequality

The Gini ratio offers the simplest way to show rising economic differences within racial and ethnic groups.¹ Presumably all readers know about growing income inequality across the American population as a whole; it rose for all American households from a low of 0.386 in 1968 to 0.476 in 2013. More important here, however, is the fact that although blacks’ (and Latinos’) absolute levels of income are nowhere near as high as those of whites (or Asian Americans), blacks nonetheless show the most intra-group income inequality in 2013 – with a household Gini index of 0.492. Asian Americans showed the second-highest level of intra-group income inequality with a Gini coefficient of 0.472, followed by 0.465 for non-Hispanic whites, and 0.453 for Hispanics (of any race).²

Educational achievement shows a similar pattern for blacks and whites. In all groups, students with well-educated parents have always scored higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than have students with poorly educated parents. At any level of parental education, furthermore, whites and Asian Americans almost always score higher than do blacks or Latinos. What is relevant here, however, is that, within both black and white student populations, the test score disparity between students with well-educated and poorly educated parents was greater in 2012 than it had been in 1978 (math) or 1980 (reading).³ In short, the educationally best off are becoming educationally better off at a faster rate than are the worst off, who are stagnating or even losing ground in test scores. Wilson’s claim that ‘these systems have shown persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower-class blacks’ (Wilson 1980, 22) remains as true today as it was almost forty years ago.

Lived experiences

Throughout most of American history, non-whites have found it very difficult to use their resources or status to improve their living conditions or pass on better lives to the next generation. By law or practice, well-off people of colour were prevented from moving into white communities or expanding into neighbourhoods in which others of their class could congregate. That is less the case now than it used to be; black and perhaps white segregation has declined in many metropolitan areas, while class segregation has increased. Figure 1 shows how these racial and class dynamics intersect:

In 1970, African Americans in metropolitan areas lived in neighborhoods with the least income segregation; by 2009, they lived in neighborhoods with the most income segregation. Their level of separation by income was 65 per cent greater than that among whites. Hispanics experienced the same changes, moving from one of the groups least separated by income to one of the most separated. While these changes surely benefit some nonwhite families, Wilson’s caution in the epigraph again rings true; as these analysts put it, “racial segregation coupled with income segregation means that low-income black and Hispanic families will tend to cluster in communities that are disadvantaged along a number of dimensions, such as average educational attainment, family structure, and unemployment” (Bischoff and Reardon 2014, 216).

Living in a predominantly affluent or poor neighbourhood is associated with, among other things, the quality of one’s daily life. Affluent neighbourhoods have amenities – good schools, public safety, parks and playgrounds, access to transportation, clean air, well-stocked grocery stores and effective public services – that can help

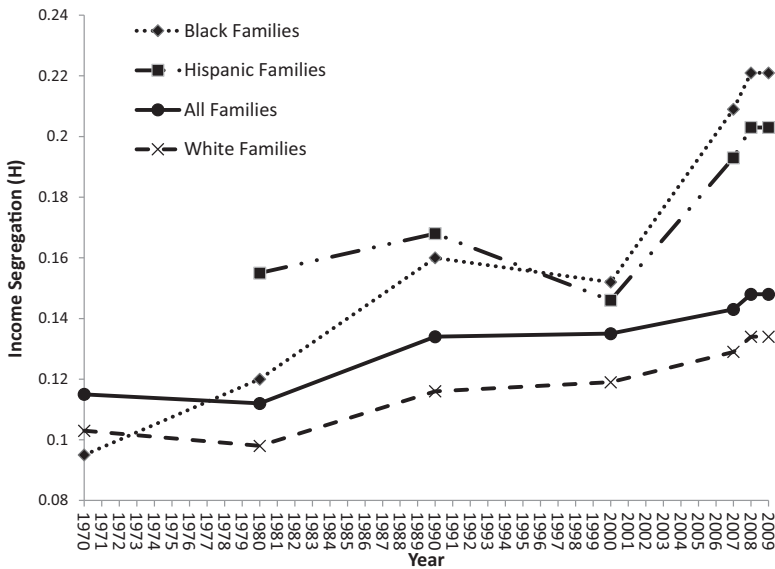


Figure 1. Trends in family income segregation in metropolitan areas with population greater than 500,000 by race, 1970–2009. Source: Bischoff and Reardon (2014).

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their residents attain or keep a high standard of living. To choose only one important indicator, in 1978 poor blacks aged twelve and over were only slightly more likely than comparable but better-off blacks to be victims of violent crime – about forty-five and thirty-eight per 1,000 people, respectively. By 2008, however, poor blacks were much *more* likely to be crime victims – about seventy-five per 1,000 – while affluent blacks were *less* likely to be crime victims – about twenty-three per 1,000.⁴ (Well-off whites were also less likely to be victimized in 2008 than in 1978, but poor whites did not suffer a rise in crime victimization over that period.)

Political attitudes and preferences

The growing social and economic disparities between the top and bottom within each group point to the question of whether non-whites' political views and policy preferences are changing in a parallel fashion. Blacks have traditionally evinced little class-based voting or policy views, and Latinos or Asian Americans not a lot more. Almost all African Americans voted Democratic in the last two presidential elections, as did about seven-tenths of Latinos and two-thirds of Asian Americans. Blacks hold the most liberal views of any demographic cluster on tax policy and social welfare issues; Latinos are close behind.⁵ Michael Dawson (1994), in fact, developed the now established concept of the black utility heuristic or black linked fate in order to explain the puzzle of little or no class variation in blacks' political choices despite economic differences. But perhaps that pattern is changing under the pressure of rising inequality and all that it implies.

We used the American National Election Study (ANES) to determine whether there is a declining political significance of race associated with diverging incomes and lived experiences. We compared the 2012 ANES to a period encompassing 1984–1988, for which we combined three surveys into one data set in order to have enough non-whites for analysis. We operationalized class as educational attainment (less than high school, high school, some college, BA+).⁶ Using all relevant survey items asked in both periods, we found three clusters of responses.

The first reveals a Wilsonian pattern. Racial differences have not disappeared; in both periods, blacks and Latinos in all classes are more liberal than whites with regard to government social policy spending. Nonetheless, we found growing class differences within the black and Latino samples. College-educated blacks evinced less support for government services in general and for spending on the poor in 2012 than did college-educated blacks in the 1980s, while poorly educated blacks did not shift. Blacks' support for government spending on crime control increased across the board, but much more among the badly off than among the well-off (a result that makes sense given striking divergences in victimization). As a result of these movements, in all three arenas (government services, spending on the poor, and spending on crime control), class differences that were minimal or non-existent among blacks in the 1980s became statistically and substantively significant by 2012.⁷

Latinos showed the same increasing class disparities in policy views but not always in the same domains. Like blacks, well-off Hispanics became less likely to support governmental provision of services over the three decades while the badly off increased their support. Intra-Hispanic class differences were also statistically

significantly different and substantively meaningful in 2012 but not in the 1980s for government provision of health insurance and spending on welfare.⁸ Whites already differed by class in the 1980s, in some cases very substantially, on five of the seven items. Nevertheless, they showed similar movement; class differences among non-Hispanic whites were significantly greater on government spending on crime control and welfare in 2012 than they had been in the mid-1980s.⁹

Figure 2 shows these results graphically for the most general item – government service expenditures.¹⁰ Differences across races were, and remain, substantial, but that is not our central concern here. Instead, note that the (dark) bars for the 1980s are flat for Hispanics, slightly rising for blacks, and declining for whites as one moves from the least- to the most-educated respondents within each group. But in 2012, the (light) bars decline in all three groups as one moves across each panel from least- to most-educated. In short, the class differential with regard to government spending on social services that existed among whites in the 1980s now also exists among African Americans and Latinos.

A second cluster of items shifts the focus from what the government should do for individuals to what individuals can do with regard to government. If ‘the economic and political systems in the US have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in allowing talented blacks to fill positions of prestige and influence’, as Wilson argued in 1980 (Wilson 1980, 22), one would expect well-off people of colour to feel increasingly efficacious in the public arena. Conversely, given that ‘these systems have shown persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower-class blacks’, (Wilson 1980, 22) one would expect the worst-off people of colour to register a low and even declining sense of efficacy.

Those expectations are met in the ANES. In both periods and across all three groups, the well-educated were more likely than the poorly educated to reject assertions that officials do not care about people like them or that they have no control over the government. Within that context, whites showed no significant changes in

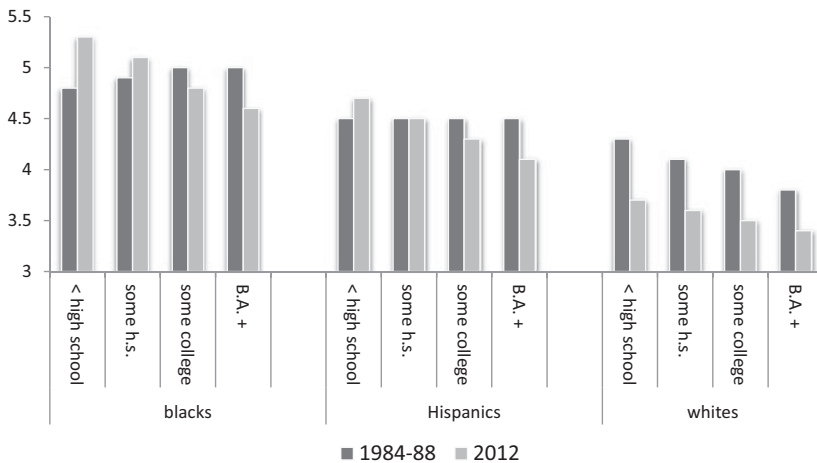


Figure 2. Support for government expenditure on social services, by race or ethnicity and education level, 1984–2012.

Source: Authors’ analysis of the American National Election Studies. The y-axis is the expected value of a measure that ran from 1 to 7.

class disparity between the 1980s and 2012. Well-educated African Americans, however, were significantly less likely to agree that they have no say in their government in 2012 than in the 1980s, while poorly educated African Americans became more likely to agree.¹¹ The changes were similar and even greater among Latinos, and held for both questions about efficacy.

It is in the third cluster of two survey items that we disagree with Wilson's statement in the epigraph. He posits that 'as a result [of growing intra-group class differentiation], for the first time in American history class issues can meaningfully compete with race issues in the ways blacks develop or maintain a sense of group position.' Our analyses of the ANES in 2008 and 2012 show that affluent or highly educated blacks retain just as strong a belief in linked fate as do the badly off. Analysis of the third cluster of policy items similarly challenges Wilson's claim. Asked about support for government aid to blacks or minorities, blacks evinced no class differences in either the 1980s or 2012. Hispanics showed the same class disparities in both periods, and whites showed the reverse class disparity (i.e. stronger support among the well-off) in both periods. The final item, asking about support for government efforts to ensure fair treatment for blacks in jobs, shows even clearer disagreement with Wilson's prognosis.¹² Virtually no blacks opposed anti-discrimination efforts in the 1980s, but by 2012 more poorly than well-educated blacks expressed opposition. Many more Latinos were opposed in both periods, with a very slight rise in opposition in both periods as education levels increase. Whites show the opposite trend from Latinos, much more distinctly. Overall, Latinos support black job fairness more now than three decades ago, and well-off blacks support it more than do badly off blacks. Improvements in daily life have not led the best-off blacks or Hispanics to pull away from minority-group identification; the reverse may even be the case. In short, affluent minorities' movement away from strong policy liberalism does not imply post-racial identities or loyalties.

Conclusion

Income dispersion in the USA means that the lives of some members of non-white racial and ethnic groups are no longer overdetermined by colour. That implies greater opportunities, more freedom of choice and more power. But it may also imply a troubling loss for the worst-off non-whites if their affluent counterparts are moving away psychologically and politically, as well as economically and geographically. How severe a loss depends on how one interprets declining policy liberalism. Combined with persistent group loyalty and identity, a turn towards conservative policies might mean that the affluent remain committed to helping the poor but are losing faith in liberal strategies as the best means of doing so. Conversely, declining policy liberalism might mean that the affluent increasingly feel the tug of self-interest or other priorities (or are simply less exposed to the plight of the worse off), and are becoming less concerned about ameliorating inequality. The former could possibly alleviate America's 'persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower-class blacks', but the latter will surely worsen their bleak circumstances.

At this point, we cannot adjudicate between those possibilities. Instead, we offer a different conclusion: Wilson's diagnosis of the declining significance of race in the social and economic arenas is even more persuasive now than in 1980. So is his

distinction between flexibility for the well-off and rigidity for the poor in the American economic and political systems. His prognosis of the declining significance of race in the ‘sense of group position’, however, is not persuasive in light of the ANES results, overwhelming black support for President Obama, a persistent sense of linked fate among most people of colour, and the possible rise in white racial identity and anti-black hostility (Tesler 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013). Whether the current slight rift between policy and racial liberalism persists, grows and has discernible impacts remains unclear; what is certain is that William Julius Wilson’s wonderful book will remain as important for the next thirty years as it has been for the past thirty.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Arguably, wealth disparities are rising at an even faster rate, and with greater consequences, both in the American population as a whole and within each racial and ethnic group. Data on wealth-holding, however, are less systematic and require more extensive explication than data for income as revealed through Gini coefficients, so we limit ourselves here to the latter.
2. The yearly starting points for Gini coefficients differ in the US census for different groups. The Gini index was 0.378 in 1968 for whites, 0.412 in 1968 for blacks, 0.454 in 2002 for Asians, and 0.373 in 1974 for Hispanics (of any race). In short, income inequality has risen within each racial or ethnic group as well as across the population as a whole (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/household> – Table H-4). Note that ‘White, not Hispanic’ begins only in 1972; however, the Hispanic population in the USA was too small in 1968 to affect the results for that year more than marginally.
3. That pattern does not hold for Hispanics; data are not available for Asian Americans. Data are from Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2013). This report was generated using the NAEP Data Explorer (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ltdata>). Our analysis spans the earliest and latest years in which data are available.
4. Authors’ analyses of the National Crime Victimization Survey. Data for 1978 are from Bureau of Justice Statistics (1980; Table 15). Data for 2008 are from Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011; Table 15). Due to data limitations, these reports do not show breakdowns for Hispanics or Asian Americans.
5. Asian Americans show a more mixed or perhaps volatile profile, due to some combination of methodological complexities in surveys, small sample sizes, and genuinely libertarian or conservative sentiments that accord poorly with liberal social policy views.
6. The first period includes 6,473 respondents, and the second (2012) 5,916. Even with these large sample sizes, the ANES does not include a large enough sample of Asian Americans in either period to permit an analysis of class patterns. Analyses using income and occupation instead of educational attainment yielded similar results; analyses using class self-definitions found many fewer statistically significant results.
7. Four other items (spending on schools, health insurance, welfare, job guarantees) show few class differences or little change in class differences between the two periods.
8. For the other four items, class differences among Latinos already existed in the 1980s (spending on the poor, government guarantee of jobs), or were slight in both periods (crime control, public schools).

9. On a few items, however, the ANES shows slightly less class disparity among whites in 2012 than in the 1980s, which does not accord with our expectations.
10. **Figure 2** displays expected values of ordinary least squares regressions, holding other variables at their mean values. Models control for age group, gender, region, native born, and in the case of Hispanics, origin nationality (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban). Hispanics may identify with any race; blacks and whites do not identify as Hispanic.
11. Blacks showed no changes in class disparities on the issue of whether public officials care about the views of ‘people like me’.
12. The results reported in the text are predicted probabilities of logit regressions, holding other variables at their mean values. Models control for age group, gender, region, native born, and in the case of Hispanics, origin group (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban). Hispanics may identify with any race; blacks and whites do not identify as Hispanic.

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