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African American Women: Intersectionality in Politics

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Political participation has been a fundamental constant in the lives of African American people. Whether it is voting, membership in social/political community organizations, or participation in social movements for causes ranging from abolition to civil rights, black Americans have consistently leveraged politics and civic engagement as vehicles for freedom and justice. This article focuses on the history of political activism among African American women, reviewing the manifold ways they have participated while traversing the often perilous American political landscape. It highlights significant trends and provides a broader context for understanding those trends. To that end, the article begins with a broad discussion of the intersectional positioning of African American women. Subsequently, it discusses the patterns of black women's participation between Reconstruction and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Finally, it rounds out the historical account by addressing black women's traditional forms of participation since the Voting Rights Act.

Keywords: political participation, African American women, community organizations, social movements, black Americans, political activism

POLITICAL participation has been a fundamental constant in the lives of African American people. Whether it is voting, membership in social/political community organizations, or participation in social movements for causes ranging from abolition to civil rights, black Americans have consistently leveraged politics and civic engagement as vehicles for freedom and justice. In this chapter, we focus our attention on the history of political activism among African American women, reviewing the manifold ways they have participated while traversing the often perilous American political landscape. Undoubtedly, to capture the full extent of black women's political activism is a task that far exceeds the space limits of this (or any) chapter. As such, we do our best to highlight significant trends and to provide a broader context for understanding those trends. To that end, we begin the chapter with a broad discussion of the intersectional positioning of African American women. Subsequently, we discuss the patterns of black women's participation between Reconstruction and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Finally, we round out our historical account by addressing black women's traditional forms of participation since the Voting Rights Act.

African American Women and Intersectionality

Our attempt to highlight the larger context in which African American women participate in politics borrows much from intersectional theory developed and used by black feminist scholars such as Kim Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 1998), and E. Francis White (2001). Intersectional approaches to understanding human actions and conditions necessitate that researchers take a wide view of the lives of their subjects, paying close attention to the multiple systems and institutions that structure the life choices of individuals. In particular, intersectional theorists argue that it is the intersection of systems that defines the complex social context in which people exist, make decisions, and act.

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So, for example, while we have learned a great deal from scholars who focus exclusively on the work of race and racism in society, black feminist theorists, employing an intersectional approach, believe that we can learn more by studying the intersection of race with other social identities and organizing systems such as gender, sexuality, class, and national origin. It is here at the intersection of multiple identities and social locations that we can begin to see and understand the differing contours of people's lives, especially those most marginal in society. An intersectional approach to understanding human action instructs scholars to pay close attention to the larger social, economic, political, and cultural contexts that continuously shape and reshape people's identities, life chances, and lived experiences. It also underscores the importance of understanding how people interpret differing situations and choices they confront and how they exercise their limited or constrained agency to achieve goals of equality, happiness, and pleasure (Cohen 2004).

When attempting to understand and explain the political behavior of African American women, it is critical that we foreground their intersectional positioning. Without such knowledge and framing, we would miss the unique political experiences that define their political life. For example, as we will discuss in later sections, black women did not fully win the franchise until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. For a limited time during Reconstruction, black men were awarded the right to vote, but because women were not allowed to vote, black women were formally denied such access. Similarly, although women won the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the racist system of Jim Crow once again placed black women on the outside of the franchise.

The intersection of race and gender, as well as class, sexual orientation, nationality, and other socially constructed identities, defines one's position and access to power in the political arena. Any simple categorization of a group along one dimension is sure to miss the contours and contradictions found within communities. For example, if one were to judge the access and political power of black women by looking only at the status afforded Condoleezza Rice, we would neglect to account for the experience of most black women; an experience marked by limited access to resources and power in the political realm or elsewhere. Thus, in this chapter we seek to highlight the general patterns of political participation found among black women with the recognition that those experiences vary within this group in response to the intersection of multiple identities and systems of power. We try throughout this chapter to point to differences within the category black women as well as how the political activity of black women compares to that of black men and white women; always cognizant of the intersections.

From Reconstruction to the Voting Rights Act: Black Women's Politics

The political history of African American women is a rich and distinctive narrative that speaks to both the problems and possibilities rooted in “the intersectional experience of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1997). From Reconstruction to the Black Power movement, black women have participated in American politics. In the face of exclusion and threats, via persuasion, force and every feasible means, black women have impacted the political system both directly and indirectly. While they have not been unified in their approaches or perceptions of race and gender, African American women have collectively left a valuable legacy of political activism and resistance in the face of systematic oppression.

Historical exploration of the political contributions of black women in America uncovers details often rendered invisible in the accounts of many historians and political scientists. Such scholars have obscured the political traditions of African American women in two distinct ways. First, by defining involvement in the political sphere via institutional mechanisms such as voting, lobbying, and office holding, scholars limit understandings of black women's unorthodox patterns of participation, which developed in response to their exclusion from conventional politics. Second, both male centric analyses of black history and versions of women's history that emphasize white woman's experiences neglect the particular implications that stem from black women's positioning on the margins of the categories of race and gender. As noted earlier, any adequate account of the political history of black women in America must start from the premise that African American women occupy a unique, intersectional position in American politics. Furthermore, even within the boundaries of race and gender, there is significant diversity of class, sexuality, and other sources of difference. With these principles as a point of departure, we will examine the political history of black women from the late nineteenth century through the late twentieth century, while insisting on complicating that history by acknowledging a multiplicity of perspectives.

Black women in America were not constitutionally entitled to vote until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment

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in 1920. Furthermore, until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, violence, intimidation, and discrimination at the polls prevented black women from having complete access to the ballot. Considering this heritage of disenfranchisement, how does one construct a political history for a group of women who for so many years were excluded from one of the most basic acts of political participation? Discerning the history of black women's political lives hinges on recognizing that the politics of African American women extend beyond the ballot box. Black women adapted to their disenfranchisement by finding a variety of ways to effect political change despite their prolonged exclusion from the formal sphere.

Elsa Barkley Brown demonstrates some of the ways in which African American women were able to influence politics in the late nineteenth century (Brown 1997a; Brown 1997b). During this period, black women perceived the vote as a collective instrument for change, not an individual possession. Although the Constitution declared that only black men could vote, African American women viewed the male franchise as partly their own (Brown 1997a: 352). As a result of this community-oriented conception of political participation, black women employed every available resource, including physical force, intimidation, and community sanction to shape the votes of their male counterparts (Brown 1997a: 351–52). Furthermore, black women organized political societies, engaged in campaigns, and shaped the political climate of their communities. Since they attended political meetings and accompanied their husbands to the polls, black women were able to hold the voting men accountable for their decisions (Brown 1997a: 351–52). Relying on a shared sense of community, African American women “assumed the political rights that came with being a member of the community, even though they were not granted the political rights they thought should come with being citizens of the state” (Brown 1997b: 83). Elsa Barkley Brown's notion of the “ballot as collectively owned” delineates a space for black women's political activism by focusing on the social relations underlying the act of voting as opposed to simply assuming that power only lay in the hands of those who actually cast the vote (Brown 1997b: 72). Brown's elaboration of the role of African American women in the political process during the post–Civil War era is an important example of the ways in which black women empowered themselves well before they were accepted into the formal political arena.

Another avenue through which black women engaged politically was via the formation of clubs and associations specifically aimed at dealing with the issues facing their communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, black women were largely excluded from both white women's and black men's organizations (White 1999: 17). Furthermore, they could not rely upon the vote to bring about changes for African American communities. One response to these dilemmas was the formation of local and national “self-help” groups by black women throughout the country. Black women had for generations recognized the advantages of association and particularly in the post-Emancipation period, black women's associations flourished (Robinson 1997: 108).

In 1896, the National Federation of Afro-American Women headed by Margaret Murray Washington and the National League of Colored Women headed by Mary Church Terrell united their efforts by establishing the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) (White 1999: 27). The NACW was a federation comprised of state and local affiliates. While regional distinctions persisted, the underlying goal of all participating clubs was racial uplift and self-help (White 1999: 27). The NACW confronted the numerous social, political, and economic ills plaguing African American communities. Many of the most well-known African American women leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were affiliated with NACW. Women like Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells Barnett propelled the club movement forward. Since most of the club leaders were well-educated middle-class women, a pervasive sense of class superiority permeated club rhetoric and activity (White 1999: 69).

The women of NACW were not homogenous nor were they unconditionally united solely on the basis of race and gender. Class conflicts, disagreements over organizational direction, and tensions over ideological divergences abound among the clubwomen. Nonetheless, these women were able to organize effectively and help improve black communities in spite of their differences (Neverdon-Morton 1997: 132). While the efforts of the clubwomen were largely directed toward the social and economic assistance of poor and less educated blacks, the work of these women was also highly political. NACW and its affiliates established and maintained kindergartens, orphanages, hospitals, reformatory schools for juvenile law breakers, and other community institutions that African Americans needed but could not get from their local governments (Neverdon-Morton 1997: 120–33). Women from NACW clubs lobbied for increased government aid for education and encouraged political consciousness among members by reporting political news through publications such as NACW's *National Notes* (Higginbotham 1997: 141; Neverdon-Morton 1997: 125).

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Black women's clubs also supported women who were important national voices in American politics. Ida B. Wells, a prominent anti-lynching crusader, journalist, and publisher was a member of the NACW and several other state level clubs (Robinson 1997: 107–9). When opposition to Wells's anti-lynching activities forced her to abandon her weekly publication, *Free Speech*, she relied on black women's clubs in New York and Chicago for assistance (Robinson 1997: 108). These clubs provided Wells with an organizational base for her national campaign against lynching and supplied the funds to publish one of the most well-known indictments of lynching, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (Robinson 1997: 109). The social programs and support system that black women's clubs established were political responses to the circumstances of African Americans at the time. Black clubwomen created public institutions and social networks to meet the needs of African Americans that had been overlooked by the federal, state, and municipal governments. Hence, while many clubwomen initially eschewed "party politics," they were nonetheless intensely engaged in political work (White 1999: 51). As the twentieth century dawned, clubwomen would become more blatantly political as they came to the fore in the women's suffrage movement.

Three generations of black women actively participated in the suffrage movement. While some accounts of the women's suffrage movement omit black women, posit that they were against suffrage, or claim they were indifferent, a vast majority of African Americans who responded to the movement supported women's suffrage (Terborg-Penn 1998: 108, 134). In particular, black women were ardent suffragists from the earliest days of the seventy-two-year movement and as the movement progressed into the twentieth century increasing numbers of black women joined the ranks of those rallying for the right to vote (Terborg-Penn 1998: 1). The suffrage movement was challenging for black women. At every turn, whites inside and outside of the movement worked to ensure the exclusion of African American women. Moreover, black women themselves had varying opinions about the best strategies for achieving suffrage. Despite these obstacles, black women (and men) were able to unite for the common cause of suffrage.

Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist preacher from New York, was the first known African American women suffragist (Terborg-Penn 1998: 14). Aside from Truth, there is little evidence of the participation of many black women in the earliest stages of the movement. By 1854, more black women began appearing at women's rights meetings and conferences (Terborg-Penn 1998: 14). The black women who were active in the suffrage movement prior to the mid-1860s were able to find refuge with early white suffragists, many of whom were abolitionists and advocated the end of slavery as well as universal suffrage (Terborg-Penn 1998: 22). In the 1860s and 1870s a schism arose between suffragists that pitted women's suffrage against "negro suffrage" (Terborg-Penn 1998: 24–25). As the divide grew between women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton who promoted "women's suffrage first" and those who endorsed universal suffrage, black women began to develop their own race-specific perspectives toward suffrage.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary was the first African American woman to organize a suffrage association specifically for black women (Terborg-Penn 1998: 39). As the end of the century approached, black women began to branch out, organizing nationally and locally among themselves. As black women's activism evolved and white women systematically shut them out of organizations and political programs, black women began to advance strategies that clearly defined race as a significant element of their struggle for suffrage (Terborg-Penn 1998: 59). Women like Adella Hunt Logan, a professor at the Tuskegee Institute, began to argue that black women, because of their double oppression, were in more dire need of the vote than their white counterparts (Terborg-Penn 1998: 60). Other black women insisted that in the context of rapid industrialization, black working-class women needed the vote in order to empower themselves economically by aligning with parties that would support worker's rights (Terborg-Penn 1998: 74–75). Still other women, like Lugenia Burns Hope, believed that black women should focus on gaining the political backing of liberal whites (Terborg-Penn 1998: 76).

While black women had varying justifications for suffrage and numerous ideas about how to achieve suffrage, their mutual goals allowed them to organize large-scale efforts that included women from assorted regional, ideological, and educational backgrounds. The NACW and the Women's Convention (WC), an auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention, emerged as the primary representative organizations that pushed black women's suffrage at the national level (Terborg-Penn 1998: 79). Both groups varied widely in terms of ideology and political affiliation. Ultimately, however, the cause of black women's suffrage was able to gain national attention and political support via these two prominent organizations and due to the toil of many black women (Terborg-Penn 1998: 81–106).

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Black women's inclusion in electoral politics was not an automatic function of an evolving political process. Before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, many states attempted to write black women out of suffrage legislation (Terborg-Penn 1998: 131–35). Black women had to actively labor to ensure that they were not disregarded (Terborg-Penn 1998: 11). Unfortunately, the Nineteenth Amendment did not effectively franchise black women. Within a decade, black men and women in the South were impeded by legal and illegal measures taken by ardent white supremacists to inhibit the political participation of African Americans. Yet, the history of the struggle for the vote is an important piece of black women's political story. In fighting for their right to vote, black women forged the networks of resistance that would poise them for future battles.

Although black women were eventually disenfranchised in the decade following the Nineteenth Amendment, they used what little opportunity they did have in the 1920s to exert themselves politically. Throughout the country black women registered and voted in the presidential election of 1920 (Terborg-Penn 1998: 135). In the northern and western regions of the country, black women campaigned for candidates and ran for office. Black clubwomen also became more active in electoral politics during this period (Higginbotham 1997). Women from NACW created the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLRCW) in an effort to become the political arm of African American women (Higginbotham 1997: 144). Some clubs were able to have a direct impact in areas with high concentrations of African Americans such as Chicago. In her autobiography, Ida B. Wells credits the Alpha suffrage club for the election of Chicago's first black alderman as well as other Chicago officials (Higginbotham 1997: 136). As the 1920s progressed, the political participation of African American women was continually stunted by exclusionary practices. Black women found that the very officials they campaigned for would treat them with racial contempt (Higginbotham 1997: 151). They were disillusioned and frustrated with the scant political influence that electoral politics provided them.

Despite the anticlimax of the Nineteenth Amendment, African American women continued to be a political force on many fronts into 1930s and 1940s. In the mid-1930s, the majority of black voters shifted to the Democratic Party as the black electorate began to perceive the Democrats as the most viable source of racial justice (Higginbotham 1997: 151). Many black women adjusted to the shift in the political terrain by realigning themselves accordingly. Noted educator and African American leader Mary McLeod Bethune was appointed by President Roosevelt to head the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration and was one of the most visible black political figures of the 1930s (Giddings 1984: 218–30).

Women like Mary McLeod Bethune demonstrated the continued determination of black women to influence American politics. Yet, not many black women had the privilege of being heard in the highest ranks of the American government. Black women from working-class backgrounds had to rely on more grassroots activism to defend their political rights. In the wake of the Great Depression, black women increasingly began to organize around communist and socialist agendas. In 1935, spurred on by communist leaders, hundreds of working-class black women protested against high meat prices in Harlem (Naison 1983: 149–50). Women like Bonita Williams, Audley (Queen Mother) Moore, Claudia Jones, and Maude White obtained leadership positions within the Communist Party and were able to organize against the economic exploitation of working black women (Naison 1983: 137–38, 149–50).

Black women were also active organizers for CIO unions like the Steelworkers and were active in organizations like the National Negro Congress (Alkalimat 2003). They led militant protests and demonstrations against unemployment, against discrimination in housing and jobs, and for social welfare legislation (Alkalimat 2003). The 1930s and 1940s were very trying times for America and even more so for black women. Beset by economic and international crises, black women never ceased their political activities. While Communists like Bonita Williams and democrats like Mary McLeod Bethune had vastly different approaches, their examples attest to the participation of black women on every viable ideological and political front. As the 1950s approached, black women had a long heritage of activism and resistance on which to draw as the struggle for civil rights came to its climax.

In 1955 Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and her subsequent arrest is often credited as the catalyst for the civil rights movement. It is important to note however, that the actions of Rosa Parks stemmed from years of experience working with the NAACP and communicating with black activists via well-developed social networks (Morris 1984: 51–52). During the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott that followed, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and other men emerged as leading figures. Yet, the role of African American women in organizing, supporting, and leading within the movement cannot be overstated.

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Ella Baker was the national director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the founder of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), two of the central organs of the movement. In the Deep South, where segregation was worst, women like Fannie Lou Hamer were beaten and jailed for repeated attempts to register to vote (Lee 2001). Hamer then went on to be an integral part of “an independent, third political party of farmers, former sharecroppers, and other grassroots people,” called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) (Crawford 2001: 123–24). Gloria Richardson was a radical political activist and leader of the protest movements in Cambridge, Maryland, from 1963 to 1964 (Harley 2001). Septima P. Clark developed the Citizenship School programs, a vital component of the massive Voter Education Projects launched by several major civil rights organizations in 1962 (Rouse 2001).

All of these women played major roles in defining and directing the civil rights movement. Yet, because the majority of formal leadership positions were held by men, many accounts of the civil rights period minimize the contributions of women (Morris 1984). An overemphasis on national visibility and formal titles has led to the centering of men in analyses of the civil rights struggle. However, black women made up a crucial “intermediate layer” of leadership within the movement (Robnett 1996). By working on the grassroots level, black women helped to connect rural and otherwise isolated blacks to the larger movement (Robnett 1996: 1678). Locally, black women had the networks and leverage that enabled them to act as “purveyors of political consciousness” (Robnett 1996: 1689). Hence, despite the fact that gender exclusion prevented black women from rising to prominence in male-led organizations like the SCLC, they were not deterred from leading in different and arguably more significant capacities (Robnett 1996: 1670–80).

As traditional civil rights advocates engaged in the long and bloody battle for racial equality, a more militant strand of activism known as the Black Power movement emerged. “Black Power,” a slogan coined by Stokley Carmichael in 1966, was an approach that called for African Americans to close ranks and unite on the basis of race (Fleming 2001). This era was characterized by increased militancy and unfortunately intense male sexism (Fleming 2001). Concurrently, the second wave of the women's movement began in the mid-1960s with the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Black women were active participants in both movements and had to struggle to reconcile the conflicting obligations and challenges of being both black and female. In general, black women did not rigidly separate the fight for women's rights from the fight for the rights of African Americans (Kelley 2002: 141). Instead, they worked within the black movement, in organizations such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), and confronted the pervasive sexism they encountered (Matthews 2001).

Black women also organized independently and eventually formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) (Kelley 2002: 143). However, even within the NBFO tensions developed due to the organization's exclusively heterosexual orientation and failure to fully commit to the needs of poor women (Kelley 2002: 148). In 1974, a group of feminists separated with NBFO to form the Combahee River Collective (Kelley 2002: 148–50). In 1977, three collective members produced a “Black Feminist Statement” that offered a multifaceted, radical position on racial, sexual, and class oppression (Harris 2001). The women of the Combahee River Collective ultimately perceived, “black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (Harris 2001: 292).

From the women in Richmond, Virginia, who insisted on shared ownership of the votes of black men to the women of the Combahee River Collective who refused to trade in one form of oppression for another, the “histories of struggle for a political voice are pertinent to the exercise of political rights today” (Gordon 1997: 1).

Incorporation through the 1965 Voting Rights Act

While there is a massive amount of work on political participation and gender, and a great deal of research on participation and race, there is a relative dearth of scholarly work focusing on the intersections between race, gender, and political participation. When scholars do focus on these intersections, they tend to highlight differences in attitudes and ideology rather than variations in patterns of participation. Further still, in the few instances in which participation is the emphasis of an intersectional study, the tendency is to narrowly concentrate on electoral activity (voting or office holding) as the only relevant form of political action. Thus, when we turn our attention to the political lives of African American women in the post–civil rights era, data on the voting behavior and office holding of black women is the most readily available. As such, this section focuses primarily on those

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two forms of political activity. In addition, we also pay some attention to other forms of political participation, drawing from primary analysis of data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES). As a complement to the data on participation, we also consider differences in political attitudes between black women and black men, as well as those between black women and white women. Overall, this analysis supports the findings of the existing research on voting and office holding: that there are significant differences in levels of political participation between both black men and women as well between black and white women.

Voting

Following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, we would expect the proportion of African American women taking part in electoral participation to increase dramatically. Prior to this legislative change, it has been estimated that less than 40 percent of African American women would have been eligible to vote (Matthews and Prothro 1966). As Lansing (1977) notes, however, that while in the 1950s, black women's voting rate was 10 to 20 percent lower than black men, it is they who have seen the greatest increases throughout the 1960s and 1970s, leading them to vote at roughly the same rate as black men. Based on data from the 1972 presidential election, she notes:

> it is clear that black women, in comparison to black men and both white sexes, held the lowest levels of political efficacy and the lowest levels of trust in the federal government, and viewed sex discrimination as sharply affecting them. Yet the voting records of black women over the past decade show that the rate of increase in voting by black women has been greater than that of any other sex/race group in the population. (Lansing 1977: 379)

Prestage draws a similar conclusion about the post-VRA period: “Overall, it would seem reasonable to generalize that once legal and cultural barriers to Black voting were removed, Black women registered and began to vote in a rather energetic manner, with Black women trailing Black men to a lesser degree than is the case for white women” (Prestage 1980: 242). Soon, black women would overtake black men and vote at a much higher rate.

Drawing on sample data from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, shown in table 19.1, we can see that while African Americans still vote at a lower rate than whites, and were subject to the overall decline in voter turnout during the 1960s and 1970s, African American women have consistently voted in greater proportions than African American men. By 2004, African American women voted at a rate 8 percentage points higher than African American men. By comparison, white women voted at a rate 2.4 percentage points higher than white men. While women vote at a higher rate across racial lines, African American women surpassed the voting rate of men nearly a full decade before white women did.

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Table 19.1 Reported Vote in Presidential Election by Race and Sex, 1964–2004 (in %)

	Black	**White**				
	Male	**Female**	**M–F**	**Male**	**Female**	**M–F**
1964	59.1	58	1.1	73.4	68.2	5.2
1968	58.2	57.1	1.1	71.2	67.2	4
1972	52.1	52.1	0	65.6	63.4	2.2
1976	47.2	49.9	−2.7	61.5	60.5	1
1980	47.5	52.8	−5.3	60.9	60.9	0
1984	51.7	59.2	−7.5	60.8	62	−1.2
1988	48.2	54.2	−6	58.3	59.8	−1.5
1992	50.8	56.7	−5.9	62.6	64.5	−1.9
1996	46.6	53.9	−7.3	54.8	57.2	−2.4
2000	50	57.3	−7.3	59.2	61.6	−2.4
2004	51.8	59.8	−8	64.5	66.9	−2.4

Source: Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports P23-131, P30-322, P20-370, P20-405, P20-440, P20-466, P20-504, P20-542.

During the period immediately following the passage of the VRA, it was the youngest cohort of black women, those in the North, and those with the greatest amount of education who exhibited the greatest increases in turnout. Older cohorts did not exhibit the same rapid growth in voting. For example, Lansing notes, "A black woman reared in the South who was sixty years old in 1973 probably was not allowed to vote until she was in her thirties, and quite possibly not until she was over fifty" (Lansing 1977: 382). She argues that the political socialization of black women was far easier for younger voters whose first chance to vote was far more likely to occur earlier in life. Interestingly, African American women with the least amount of education vote at a higher rate than white women with little formal schooling. Black women with low levels of education vote less than their male counterparts, but only by 2 to 4 percentage points. White women with little formal education, however, not only voted less than black women in 1968, but they lagged behind white men by as much as 15 percentage points (Lansing 1977: 387). Age, however, seems to have the strongest effect in the early post-VRA period. In 1964, African American women between 21–24 years old out-voted black men of the same age by 10 percentage points (49 percent to 39 percent, respectively). White women of the same age, on the other hand, voted one point less than white men of the same age (52 percent and 53 percent, respectively) (Lansing 1977: 383).

Welch and Secret (1981) confirm that following post-1965 voting rates increased dramatically for black men and women, but they argue that black women had not reached the levels of parity between black men and women that Lansing reported in the late 1970s, nor that are reflected in the Census CPS data (see Figure 19.1). Based on survey data from 1960, 1968, and 1976, they find black women voting at lower levels than black men throughout this period. Amongst whites, men out-vote women, but by a much smaller margin (in 1960, a 7-point differential for whites compared to a 23-point differential for blacks; in 1976, whites still have a 7-point differential compared to

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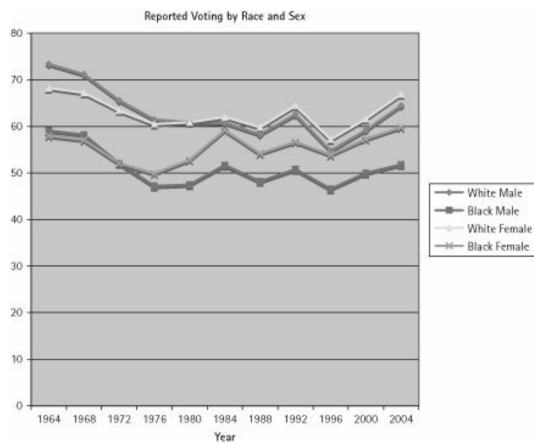
slightly larger 26-point differential for blacks). The size of this gap diminishes considerably when controlling for structural variables (e.g., income, education, occupation, and age), but in their data, black women never vote at an equal or higher rate than their male counterparts. Black women, they find, do reach parity with white women in voting turnout by 1976 while actually passing them in terms of registration (Welch and Secret 1981: 12).



Click to view larger

Figure 19.1 Reported vote in presidential election by race and sex, 1964–2004 (in %)

Source: Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports P23-131, P30-322, P20-370, P20-405, P20-440, P20-466, P20-504, P20-542.

The gender gap in voting between black men and women persists even after adding controls for region. Looking at the differences between white and black women, by region, between 1960 and 1976 underscores the importance of the VRA for black women. In 1960, northern white women out-voted white men by 6 percentage points while northern black women trailed them by 12 points. In the South, however, white women trailed white men 17 points while black women trailed by 48 percentage points. By 1970, white and black women in the North trailed white men by 5 and 8 points, respectively. In the South, where the greatest changes had taken place as a result of the VRA, black women actually appear to have out-voted white men by 1 point and white women by 3 points. Only black men had higher rates of voting. In terms of registration in the South, black men and women both registered to vote at similar rates, both exceeding the registration rates of white men or women by roughly 10 percentage points (Welch and Secret 1981: 13).

As reported in table 19.2, data from the 2004 presidential election shows that black women vote at a rate nearly 10 percentage points higher than black men. The gap widens slightly to nearly an 11-point difference for black women aged 25–44. Younger white women also voted at a higher rate than white men in 2004, but not as large as their black counterparts. The voting gender gap closes gradually and then eventually reverses for both blacks and whites over 65.

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Table 19.2 Reported Vote in 2004 Presidential Election by Race, Sex, and Age Cohort (in %)						
	Black	**White**				
	Male	**Female**	**M–F**	**Male**	**Female**	**M–F**
Total 18 years and over	51.8	59.8	−8.0	64.5	66.9	−2.4
18 to 24 years	39.0	48.7	−9.7	45.9	51.1	−5.2
25 to 44 years	48.0	58.9	−10.9	59.3	63.9	−4.6
45 to 64 years	59.2	65.3	−6.1	70.9	73.1	−2.2
65 to 74 years	68.2	64.9	3.3	76.1	73.2	2.9
75 years and over	62.4	60.2	2.2	74.3	66.8	7.5

Source: Bureau of Census, available at ⟨http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/cps2004.html⟩.

Even more notably, recent data from the 2008 presidential election is the strongest indicator yet of the electoral veracity of African American women. According to statistics from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, in the 2008, black woman had the highest voter turn out, “among all racial, ethnic and gender groups” for the first time in American history, as nearly 69 percent of eligible black female voters casted their ballots in the historic election of the first African American to the nation's highest office (Lopez and Taylor 2009). Further still, the regional patterns highlighted earlier continue to persist, as the 2008 surge in black voter turnout was most pronounced in the South.

Office Holding

The post-VRA era saw not only dramatic increases in voting by African American women but also large increases in the number of African American women officeholders. From 1969 to 1973, the number of black women in public office increased 160 percent, from 131 to 337 (Bryce and Warrick 1977). This increase meant that 12 percent of all black elected officials were women. By 1977, this share had risen to 18 percent (Prestage 1980). The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies has continued to track black elected officials nationally, reporting a steady absolute increase in the number of black women in office and as a continually expanding share of all black elected officeholders (as shown in table 19.3). By 1989, a quarter of black officeholders were women. By 2001, the share had increased to 35 percent nationally. From 1998 to 2001, all increases in the overall number of black officeholders have been from women (Bositis 2001).

Table 19.3 Black Elected Officials, by Year and Gender, 1970–2001				
Year	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Percentage of Total**
1970	1,469	1,309	160	10.9
1971	1,860	1,635	225	12.1
1972	2,264	2,111	153	6.8
1973	2,621	2,276	345	13.2
1974	2,991	2,575	416	13.9

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1974	2,991	2,575	416	13.9
1975	3,503	2,973	530	15.1
1976	3,979	3,295	684	17.2
1977	4,311	3,529	782	18.1
1978	4,503	3,660	843	18.7
1979	4,607	3,725	882	19.1
1980	4,912	3,936	976	19.9
1981	5,038	4,017	1,021	20.3
1982	5,160	4,079	1,081	20.9
1983	5,606	4,383	1,223	21.8
1984	5,700	4,441	1,259	22.1
1985	6,056	4,697	1,359	22.4
1986	6,424	4,942	1,482	23.1
1987	6,681	5,117	1,564	23.4
1988	6,829	5,204	1,625	23.8
1989	7,226	5,412	1,814	25.1
1990	7,370	5,420	1,950	26.5
1991	7,480	5,427	2,053	27.4
1992	7,552	5,431	2,121	28.1
1993	8,015	5,683	2,332	29.1
1994	8,162	5,694	2,468	30.2
1995	8,419	5,782	2,637	31.3
1996	8,579	5,830	2,749	32
1997	8,656	5,847	2,809	32.5
1998	8,868	5,944	2,924	33
1999	8,936	5,939	2,997	33.5
2000	9,040	5,921	3,119	34.5

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2000	9,040	5,921	3,119	34.5
2001	9,101	5,881	3,220	35.4

Source: Bositis 2001: 17, table 4.

Initially, the largest number of black women in office was found in the South with nearly 50 percent of black female officeholders in southern states in the late 1960s (Bryce and Warrick 1977). This geographical dispersion changed quickly throughout the 1970s. By 2001, southern states continued to have large numbers of black women in office with Mississippi leading the nation at 272. But as a share of elected officials, it is Midwestern and urban states such as Illinois, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia that have a sizable number of blacks in office, of whom over 40 percent are women (Bositis 2001: 18).

Writing in 1977, Bryce and Warrick report that 44 percent of elected black women are in education-related offices, compared to 27 percent of black men in office. Office holding amongst black women tends to be concentrated at the local level, with a majority of those in education serving on local school boards. This trend in education has continued to hold. In 2001, 44 percent of all black elected officials in education were women (Bositis 2001: 6). Following education, they are next most likely to be in office at the municipal level (31 percent of black female officeholders compared to 41 percent of black male officeholders). They note with great concern that, “Like black men, black women are least visible at the county and federal levels” (Bryce and Warrick 1977: 396–97).

While substantial gains have been made at the national level, African American women are still greatly underrepresented in the highest levels of government. As of 2005, only twelve of the eighty-one women in Congress were African American, all of whom were in the U.S. House of representatives, as there have been no African American women in the U.S. Senate since Carol Moseley Braun (the only woman of color to ever serve in the Senate from 1993 to 1999). In fact, there are only eight additional African American women to have ever served in the House of Representatives—the first was Shirley Chisholm of New York, who was elected as late as 1968 (“CAWP: Women of Color in Elective Office” 2005). Black women lag behind black men as well. In 2001, of all black elected officials at the federal level, only 38.5 percent were women (Bositis 2001: 6).

Black women are also only a small fraction of women serving at the state level. Of the 1,666 women in state legislatures in 2005 (22.6 percent of all state legislators), 221 of them are African American (roughly 13 percent of women legislators, only 3 percent of all state legislators). No African American woman has ever served as the governor of a state, while there have been twenty-seven white female governors since Nellie Ross of Wyoming and Miriam Ferguson of Texas succeeded their husbands in office in 1925 (the first women governor elected in her own right was not until 1975, Ella Grasso of Connecticut). Currently, there are eight white women serving as governors.

Black women fare slightly better in terms of mayoral office. Of the 100 largest cities in the United States, there are only twelve mayors who are women; only one, Shirley Franklin of Atlanta, Georgia, is African American. There have been only a total of four African American women mayors of the 100 largest cities (“CAWP: Women of Color in Elective Office” 2005). Of those cities with populations over 100,000, in 2002, there were thirty black mayors; only one (Ms. Franklin of Atlanta) was a woman (Bositis 2001: 21).

According to some researchers, it is surprising that black women, while clearly underrepresented as officeholders, are as successful electorally as they are. The “Double Disadvantage” thesis states that black women are in a position of political disadvantage not only as women but also as African Americans. Unlike white women, black women are potentially faced with tradeoffs between racial and gender allegiances. Yet black women have been more successful than white women during the 1970s and 1980s in being elected to office (Darcy and Hadley 1988). From 1976 to 1985, black women, as a percentage of black public officials, were 4–8 points higher than white women as a percentage of white public officials (Darcy and Hadley 1988). “If black elected officials are viewed as one group and whites another,” argue Darcy and Hadley, “then, contrary to expectation, women consistently form a *larger* proportion among black elected officials than white women do among white elected officials at all levels of public office. One must conclude that, while black women clearly are disadvantaged both by their gender and race, black women were able to overcome political disadvantage within the black community more quickly than white women in the white community” (Darcy and Hadley 1988: 634).

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Darcy and Hadley (1988) argue that background socioeconomic variables themselves have little direct effect on the success of white versus black women candidates. What matters, they argue, are the higher levels of political ambition that black candidates possess. Black female candidates make better use of resources available to them than white female candidates: “the performance of the most innovative campaign and organizational tasks seems to place black women in a context that reinforces their own political interests; similar experience among white women does not have the same influence” (Perkins 1986: 36–37).

There does not seem to be an explanation of a racially guided preference for women candidates. Black voters are generally no more supportive of female candidates than are white voters (Sigelman and Welch 1984; Darcy and Hadley 1988). Given the intersection of race and gender, there are additionally conflicting forces at work in terms of district design. While there is evidence that multimember districts disadvantage black candidates, the same design has been found to assist female candidates (Darcy and Hadley 1988).

Campaign Activity

Compared to voting and elected office, it is less clear if other traditional forms of political activity such as discussing politics with friends and family, attending political meetings, helping in political campaigns, or contacting public officials are also characterized by a gender gap between African American men and women. Based on survey data from New Orleans gathered in 1969 and 1970, no significant differences in levels of participation were found in the aggregate between African American men and women (Pierce, Avery, and Carey 1973). Along income and education lines, however, significant and sizable gaps do emerge. The wealthiest blacks in Pierce et al.'s sample had a 17-point gender gap in favor of black men on measures of traditional political participation and a 20-point gap in the favor of men on measures of protest participation.[1] Among poor African Americans, in the sample, the direction of the gap was reversed, but not with nearly as large a gap. For black men and women making less than $4,000 per year, women took part in traditional political participation 5 percentage points more than men. For protest participation, black women in the same income bracket took part 9 percentage points more than their male counterparts (Pierce, Avery, and Carey 1973: 426). Education, however, seems to function in an opposite way. Lower educated blacks saw greater levels of participation in both protest and traditional activity amongst black men. This gap reverses direction amongst higher educated blacks, with women participating more often.

Welch and Secret (1981) find black men participating in campaign activity at higher rates than women in the aggregate from 1960 to 1976, with a dramatic increase in the gap by 1976 (from a 7 to 26 point differential between those years). This growing gap persists in their analysis even when adding structural controls. It is notable, however, that when controlling for region, while the gap between black men and women does not diminish, southern blacks have higher levels of campaign activity than their white counterparts, irrespective of gender.

The presence of a slight gender gap between black men and women is apparent in data from the 1996 NBES. Table 19.4 shows the participation differentials between men and women on eleven different measures of political participation. As expected, black women report voting at higher levels than men in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections by 6 and 7 points, respectively (which are much higher than the CPS data given above, which is possibly an artifact of overreporting or sample bias). But on other participation measures, there is either little difference or men participate at higher levels. Men report attending protests or demonstrations nearly 7 points higher, giving money to political parties 5 points higher, attending campaign meetings 4 points higher, trying to persuade other people's votes 7 points higher, and giving money to campaigns 4 points higher.

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Table 19.4 Political Participation Measures by Sex for African Americans (in %)

	Female	Male	M–F
Voted in 1992 presidential election	75.83	69.52	−6.31*
Voted in 1996 presidential election	78.94	71.88	−7.06*
Picketed or took part in a sit-in or boycott	11.54	10.36	−1.18
Contacted public official	35.9	36.01	0.11
Signed a petition	52.29	53.87	1.58
Attended a protest meeting or a demonstration	15.78	22.58	6.8*
Gave money to political group	2.2	2.92	0.72
Gave money to political party	6.96	11.9	4.94*
Attended any campaign meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners	12.09	16.03	3.94
Campaigned for a black candidate	9.52	11.25	1.73
Talked to any people and tried to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates	33.88	41.16	7.28*
Register people to vote	19.05	18.65	−0.4
Give money	8.81	13.14	4.33

Source: NBES 1996.

*are significant at the 0.05 level.

Political Attitudes

As our knowledge of the electoral activities of African American women has grown, our insight into their political attitudes has expanded as well. With the increasing availability of public opinion data and national and local surveys, some researchers have used this data to examine the distinct attitudes of black women as well as their attitudes in comparison to those of other women of color and white women (Robinson 1987; Marshall 1990; Wilcox 1990; Mansbridge and Tate 1992; Lynxwiler and Gay 1996; Montoya 1996; Gay and Tate 1998). As we might expect, much of the writing in this area has been limited to those subject areas and questions found on most national political surveys. Questions of efficacy, policy preferences, party allegiance, and even more ideological questions such as one's feelings toward the concept of feminism, have and continue to be explored with a particular focus on how the attitudes of black women differ either from black men or from white women.

For example, Yvette Alex-Assensoh and Karin Stanford (1997), using data from a small survey of residents in severely impoverished neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio, provide a very interesting examination of the political lives of poor African American women. In their essay entitled, “Gender, Participation and the Black Urban Underclass,” the authors examine differences in the political attitudes and behavior of African American men and women who live in areas of concentrated poverty. Similar to the findings of Prestage and others, the authors

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discover that while few differences exist in the expressed political attitudes of black women and men, significant differences are identifiable in their levels of political participation. Specifically, the authors found that “black men and women harbor similar impressions of and attitudes about the political system. …[However,] the similarities in political attitudes and outlook do not translate into similar levels of political participation. Overwhelmingly, black women participate in more types of activities and participate more frequently than their black male counterparts” (Alex-Assensoh and Stanford 1997: 408). Only in the area of civil disobedience did the black men in this study exhibit higher rates of approval for this form of participation than did black women.

Other researchers like Gay and Tate (1998) have looked specifically at the role of gender consciousness in shaping public opinion (Fulenwider 1981; Wilcox 1997; Simien 2004). And while the authors found some difference between black men and women, the power of racial and ethnic consciousness was consistently pervasive. Thus, while a gender gap is evident in certain topic areas, a significant race and ethnicity gap also exists, in particular, between white women and African American women. Gay and Tate explain the complexity that underlies such findings.

> Even if race remains the dominant political screen for black women, our results still soundly repudiate the popular view that gender is irrelevant for black women. The core theoretic essence of our findings is that the patterns that characterize the political attitudes and behavior of black women, and of groups that belong to more than one social category, are extremely complex. On non-gendered policy matters and issues, racial solidarity promotes a liberal perspective. Yet, with complicated issues and events that pit race against gender and gender against race, gender remains politically relevant for black women, in this case working against collective pressures to support the interests of blacks over those of women. (Gay and Tate 1998: 182)

Finally, one last group of studies in this category are those that specifically and exclusively explore differences in attitudes between white women and black women. These works have produced important, and often unexpected, results. Research documenting African American women's greater support of the ERA and legalized abortion, when religiosity is controlled for, are but two examples. And while all of these studies have been helpful in expanding our comprehension of black women and their political behavior, it has been the work of authors such as Gay and Tate that move us toward a more complex understanding of the factors driving public opinion among African American women that hold the most promise.

We highlight the work of Gay and Tate because far too often left unexamined in these traditional public opinion analyses are the multiple reasons why black women differ from both black men and white women in their opinions on topics like feminism, abortion and welfare. The unique processes of attitudinal development among African American women have largely gone unexplored, ignoring how their specific intersectional existence—namely as the targets of racist and/or sexist and/or classist and/or heterosexist oppression—has the ability to not only alter their vote in the next election but also more significantly how they think about, relate to, identify with or resist the political system.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have attempted to employ an intersectional approach to understanding the political participation of African American women. As noted earlier, an intersectional framework allows the researcher to highlight both what black women do politically, how their actions vary with class or sexuality or nationality differences and the larger historical, political, economic, and social context in which these women exist. An intersectional approach asks scholars to account for the multiple institutions and systems that structure the life options of African American women when attempting to describe and explain their decision making and behavior, in this case, in the political realm. It is our belief that an intersectional approach to examining the political behavior of African American women provides a more complex analysis of the impact of systematic exclusion and marginalization, as well as the role of individual agency and community resources.

In the future, researchers interested in African American politics generally, and black women's participation more specifically, must not only use an intersectional framework, they must also broaden their definition of what is political. We make mention of this issue because, increasingly, as black women experience greater success in the realm of electoral politics and office holding, energy and material resources will undoubtedly be directed toward

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the study of their inclusion. One need only point to the attention garnered by Condoleezza Rice as an example. Partly, this trend will develop in response to the fact that as more women populate public office, research on their activities becomes easier. Further, the mass media in its search for the quick and easy story will focus on this phenomenon, creating commercialized slogans like “the year of the woman.” Moreover, conservative elites will use the increasing number of women of color in public office as justification for their calls for the abolition of policies thought to “advantage” both women and people of color. And with public recognition and discourse being increasingly focused on the political careers of women of color, researchers may also find more willingness on the part of foundations to fund research in this area. So, while attention to those gaining official positions is undoubtedly warranted, we worry that the local and community-based political activity, daily struggles, and attempts at empowerment undertaken by the masses of black women will be largely neglected. Thus, a redefinition not only of what is political, but what is politically important, seems in order. This means that while traditional acts of political participation and the election of black women and women of color to public positions should continue to draw our attention, we must also prioritize research which examines the efforts of African American women working locally to intervene politically in those institutions and systems perceived as structuring their lives.

Finally, future research on the political participation of African American women must continue to build on our basic knowledge of these political actors. Undoubtedly, this may seem mundane to those unfamiliar with this field. The reality, however, is that we are still in a state of catch-up, designing research agendas to probe questions already asked of other groups. So for example, we must identify ways to facilitate the ongoing work of those who engage in case studies and historical analyses of African American women.

This type of historic and case study analysis has great value, if only for the legacy of struggle it documents. We must, however, also pay attention to the real world applicability of this work. Scholars involved in such projects might be advised to spend more time detailing the specific means through which black women have previously found their way into political organizing and mobilization, as well as addressing the question of how such activities are relevant to current organizing efforts. Are there identifiable routes through which African American women have continuously become politicized and active in political organizations? How in the past have black women acquired the resources necessary for their political work? There are a plethora of such basic questions where knowledge of the ways African American women have historically set out to better their condition and the lives of other community members would be helpful.

At the same time that we want to maintain our interest in the historical political activity of black women, we need desperately to expand what we know about the world views, policy preferences, and general political activity of black women today. In some instances this data can be generated most easily through national or local surveys that seek to measure the opinions and actions of respondents across numerous domains. This work, however, calls for a reassessment of what we include in our surveys. In the future we should seek not only to measure the national voting behavior and party identification of respondents but also local or community-based acts of participation, where African American women are known to concentrate most of their political energy. Clearly, the literature has already established that it is most often through local activity, personal interests, and social interactions that black women become politicized. So questions which explore the connection between participation and leadership in local churches, parent teacher associations, or other civic activity and social capital sources may prove to be more important in understanding the political behavior of African American women than questions focused on formal political activity. Further, survey questions designed to measure the policy preferences of respondents should be restructured to include more topics that disproportionately impact on women, in particular black women. Policy questions on welfare reform, HIV and AIDS, increasing rates of incarceration among black women, reproductive choices, and the prevalence of racism and sexism in economic and social institutions must be a part of our new research agenda. With a renewed focus on the intersectional politics of African American women we can provide new empirical and theoretical insights to all those interested in the study of American politics.

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Notes:

(1.) Traditional participation is defined in Pierce et al. (1973) as voting, registering to vote, discussing politics, attending political meetings, helping in political campaigns, or contacting public officials. Protest participation is defined as talking protest, boycotting, marching, picketing, and sitting-in.

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