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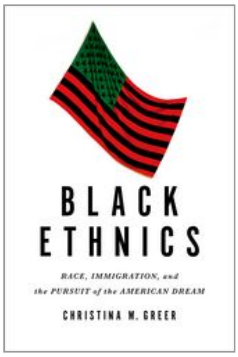

Black Ethnics: Race, Immigration, and the Pursuit of the American Dream
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Introduction

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter begins the conversation surrounding diverse black ethnic groups in the United States. It introduces the upcoming chapters and discusses why it is important and necessary to observe the opinions and behaviors of black American, Afro-Caribbean, and African groups in the twenty-first century. This chapter dissects the interplay between race and ethnicity for blacks in the United States and how the negotiations with these dual identities affect participation, partisanship, policy attitudes, and feelings toward the American Dream. This chapter also begins a dialogue regarding the different “understandings” of the American Dream by black ethnics by presenting the initial questions surrounding participation, partisanship, perception, and policy questions.

Keywords: Blacks, Ethnics, Group Identity, Identity, Political Attitudes

> *I maintain I have been a Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no The Negro here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and*

> *capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My people!*
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942

I entered a university in the mid-1990s in a New England town just outside Boston and discovered I was part of the largest “black class” in the history of the university. I was ecstatic to be among the 60 black students out of roughly 1,200. Before classes began, the school offered the black students a chance to meet one another on a weekend at Cape Cod; to talk about the “racism” we might face in Boston, both on campus and within the community; and to underline the importance of maintaining competitive grades.

One exercise we did that weekend has remained in my memory for over a decade and has informed the roots and genesis of this project: The facilitators asked us to close our eyes and raise our hands if our parents had cautioned us against getting “wrapped up” with the “black kids.” As I opened my eyes from what I thought was a relatively odd question, I realized that all but the six black Americans had raised their hands. I was so excited to be with black students for the first time in my academic life that I had never stopped to analyze the nuances that linked and often divided the black populations surrounding me.

(p.2) After my experience that weekend it did not come as a surprise when members of the Black Student Union lobbied for the name of the organization to be changed to the Pan-African Alliance. What *was* somewhat surprising was the defection of most of the black students from the newly named organization to form two newer groups, the Caribbean Club and the African Student Organization. However, those same students who had “defected” still remained involved in the activities and issues surrounding the Pan-African Alliance. In essence, they established a dual membership in the black organization and the organization that addressed their specific ethnic and cultural needs and wants.

I began to notice that many of the black kids were not “just blacks” or “JBs” like me, a term quickly used by other native-born black Americans and friends when I could come up with no country other than the United States for my racial ancestry. I began to wonder what blacks shared besides color. Many of our experiences were similar while on campus—feelings of isolation in a notoriously segregated city, our interactions with certain professors who saw black students merely as tokens of affirmative action, and the random and sometimes troublesome interactions with campus police, to name a few. In

addition, many of the nonblack students saw the entire black population at the university as “just black.” Therefore, as much as we were often divided by our cultural, historical, and ethnic differences when interacting on campus, we were also linked by our shared color, a sense of racial solidarity, and the amorphous feelings of what it means to be black, not only in Boston, but in America.

Black ethnic interactions on campus were further complicated by the occasional instances of white students and professors who made distinctions between black ethnic groups by implying that the work ethics and educational pursuits of the children of black immigrants were completely separate and much more evolved than those of the children of native-born blacks. These instances created a multifaceted racial paradigm that, on the one hand, situated all black students outside the dominant “in-group” on campus, and, on the other hand, placed the children of black immigrants more closely situated to the dominant white group on campus.[1]

This complex tension between shared racial identity and cultural ethnic distinction has been a staple within the larger black community for decades and has often gone unnoticed and undocumented by social scientists, scholars of race, and community leaders. This particular struggle between unified identity and cultural and ethnic distinction affects intraracial relationships among blacks and also exposes a different picture of modern-day race relations involving white and other nonblack members of society. Race has become a more complicated phenomenon, and with the influx of millions of immigrants from across the globe, the study of race has evolved: it has become an amalgamation of historical contexts, modern-day experiences, and projections of group dynamics. Many (p.3) Americans have been affected by the changing composition of race in neighborhoods, the labor force, the educational system, and the political arena. One need only look at the ever-changing composition of New York City to notice the influx of immigrants into the public, private, and undocumented workforces and the increase in multilingual elementary and secondary schools.

Consider this interaction of native-born black Americans struggling to cope with the emergence of “new blacks” in the United States. In the beginning stages of this project, I often described the research as “a study to unravel the similarities and differences of native-born black Americans and their black ethnic counterparts. Essentially, why do black Americans and Afro-Caribbean and African immigrants sometimes fail to get along, and what political understandings can we garner from this information in order to form a more cohesive racial

coalition?”[2] On hearing this brief summary, almost all black Americans from various regions in the United States gave me a puzzled look and quickly pressed me to explain what is *new* about this project. Someone would inevitably say, “Everyone knows we don’t always get along. And we know how *they* can be.” This blatant yet somewhat coded response from my conversations with native-born black Americans became so common that I began to fear that I had not stumbled on a new and innovative way to analyze race and ethnicity and explain the dynamic black population in the United States. However, I did know that the academic literature, and more specifically the political science literature, had not fully addressed the evolving racial and ethnic relations among blacks in the United States.

Why has the field of political science, and social science more generally, failed to quantitatively assess black populations? Recent surveys have assessed Latino populations and disaggregated Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, and Cuban populations to uncover distinctions within the larger Hispanic population in the United States (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; de la Garza and Cortina 2008). There is, in addition, a new and expanding literature that quantitatively addresses the ethic, political, and ideological diversity within this country’s Asian American populations (Junn et al. 2011; Wong 2010; Lee, Ramakrishnan, and Ramirez 2006; Wong 2006). The absence of black disaggregation thus elicits a larger set of questions pertaining to solidified racial group formation, bloc voting, and generalized self-identification. Perhaps researchers have not seen the need to put financial resources toward disaggregating black populations; but could there be a more positive version of the story, one highlighting the benefits of a larger group solidarity that focuses on shared racial identities without disaggregating potentially divisive differences?

This book explores and seeks to provide a framework for understanding how blacks in the United States negotiate dual identities of race and ethnicity. It also provides a context for the policy issues that could potentially strengthen the political needs of blacks living in cities and urban centers. As black leaders (p.4) continue to represent increasingly diverse constituencies, diversity among black candidates continues to increase as well. For example, many elected officials in Brooklyn, New York, and Miami, Florida, are finding that the historically “black districts” they represent are actually black and Afro-Caribbean districts with constituencies that need and want differing forms of representation and social services. Similarly, elected officials

in Washington, DC, and Atlanta, Georgia, are finding ways to address the needs and wants of their growing number of African constituents.

In many ways, increasingly dynamic black populations have been a difficult phenomenon for political scientists to accept.[3] Scholars have been remiss in their neglect of black ethnic diversity within their models, quantitative data collection, and overall discussion of "African Americans." In contrast, sociologists and economists have provided several theories that attempt to explain black ethnic earnings potentials, assimilation difficulties, acculturation practices across generations, intergroup conflict, and feelings of incorporation in a racialized American society (Djamba 1999; Dodoo 1997; Model 1995; Butcher 1994; Waters 1994, 1999a; Kasinitz 1992; Foner 1987).

So who is African American in the twenty-first century, and how are we defining this individual? Gone are the days of blacks as a monolithic group. Black groups in the United States have expanded well beyond the civil rights generation narrative, where everyone is a descendant of US slavery, the South, and the black Baptist tradition. This lack of a new definition of "black" has been perpetrated by scholars of race, urban politics, and public opinion. If we are to take a snapshot of the steadily increasing and diversifying black population, which has over 5 million foreign-born blacks from throughout the Caribbean and across the continent of Africa and encompasses immigrant political refugee statuses, education visas, and economic pursuits, why not now? Given the interactions of the "new" blacks versus the "old" blacks, or, as some scholars have argued, the "good" blacks versus the "bad" blacks (Rogers 2006), one must ask what the future holds for these groups as they continue to compete for resources, negotiate descriptive and substantive representation, and battle an increasingly solidified "modifier problem"—that is, being "black American" rather than just "American."

Above and beyond black immigration to the United States are the shared ultimate goals and dreams of blacks trying to succeed in the American labor market. Given the economic, neighborhood, and occupational competition experienced within the native-born and foreign-born black communities, one would expect ethnic distinctions to supersede a racial identity, and if this happened, intraracial strife would be an inevitable by-product. Yet despite the sometimes negative perceptions of other black ethnic groups, which would suggest tension, a lack of shared identity, and an overall distrust fueling negative feelings toward the (p.5) perceived in- or out-group, once in the United

States black ethnic groups in fact share a racial identity that extends across ethnicity, generation, and almost all other demographics.

Of course, this shared sense of racial identification among blacks may be solidified by a continued sense of race and racism that has not been erased, even in a “postracial” era.[4] This shared identity, which remains regardless of circumstance (Dawson 1994), is complicated by external and competing factors, yet a sense of racial unity persists in addition to varying groups’ solidified ethnic identities. In this book I begin to dissect the interplay between race and ethnicity for blacks in the United States and look at how the negotiations with these dual identities affect participation, partisanship, policy attitudes, and feelings toward the American Dream. The American Dream is the promise of economic, political, and social advancement within the polity and the equitable delivery of these goods to all members, regardless of race or other circumstance (Hochschild 1995). The extent to which individuals and groups subscribe to and invest in the American Dream directly affects their levels of participation, policy stances, and attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups. This book begins a dialogue regarding the different conceptions of the American Dream by black ethnics.

This book explores some of the reasons black ethnics subscribe to the promises of the polity at different levels, as directly related to integration, assimilation, and expectations of black ethnic groups, both new and old. The simultaneous acceptance of a shared racial identity and preservation of a distinct ethnic identity is the essential element in better understanding coalition building, representation, policy stances, and political participation of blacks as a pathway to the American Dream in twenty-first-century American politics.

Black Ethnicity: Political Participation, Partisanship, and Policy Choices

The logic of this study rests on the assumption that race and ethnicity affect one’s attitudes, actions, and abilities to form coalitions that aid black ethnic populations in New York City. There are three primary questions examined in this book. First, due to the varying experiences of immigrants from differing countries, generations, and national origin groups, and the unique histories of countries of origin, scholars contend that political participation is the most important question with respect to understanding immigration (Ramakrishnan 2005). One can more accurately interpret the effects of immigrant status by better understanding the political socialization of new citizens (Tam Cho 1999), the types of political participation newly arrived immigrants undertake (Santoro and Segura 2011), and the obstacles that newly

naturalized persons face in exercising the (p.6) vote (DeSipio 1996). By utilizing national data sources in conjunction with an original survey from the Social Services Employees Union (SSEU) Local 371 labor population, I have been able to observe the effects of union membership on electoral activities.

Second, are there significant pan-ethnic identities among ethnic groups classified as “black,” once residing in the United States? If one is to assume that a certain level of pan-ethnicity exists among black ethnic groups in the United States, it raises the question of whether this “groupness” can thereby be used as a potential political resource.[5] In research on Latino pan-ethnic identity, scholars have found that Latinos express significant identification with their national-origin group (Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; de la Garza et al. 1992). However, pan-ethnicity becomes more relevant when individuals reside in relative proximity to one another (Padilla 1984), with shared histories of political and economic exclusion. Gary Segura and Helena Alves Rodrigues (2006: 378) contend that “residential segregation, social distrust, political exclusion, poor-performing public schools and associated rates of educational attainment, poverty, and a variety of social ills affect both immigrants and African-Americans alike.” The racial segregation of blacks is evident, particularly in New York City, and more specifically in particular neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs in New York City (Rogers 2006; Kasinitz 1992).[6] Group consciousness for blacks involves a latent solidarity for some issues, and a blatant solidarity for others. Thus, racial group consciousness is contingent on the context and should be thought about in a structural as well as constructed sense.

Finally, when observing attitudes toward policy issues such as government spending, will black populations exhibit significant ethnic distinctions? By distinguishing between “public” issues versus “racial” issues, a clearer understanding of attitudes toward government spending is addressed. Questions pertaining to policy issues also shed light on attitudes among black ethnic groups and expressions of overall feelings of political incorporation and effectiveness.

Black ethnic participatory tendencies, intraracial perceptions, and policy stances directly affect the potential for coalition building as well as scholars’ understandings of the attitudes of the diverse group of blacks in the American polity. The questions pertaining to participation, perception, and policy are driven by the larger overarching themes of incorporation, opportunities in the United States, and, ultimately, coalition formation. This book builds on literature that explores immigration, group public opinion and participation, the tensions that

exist between diverse populations, and the intersection of race and ethnicity for black populations in America. If Dawson (1994) is correct in stating that an overarching linked fate among black populations exists and that black populations use a collective identity as a shortcut for information in the political realm, to what extent will black immigrants adhere to this concept? If, as (p.7) Bobo et al. (2001) contend, blacks evaluate issues in relation to how they affect the collective interests of all black citizens, where does this theory place newly arrived voluntary black immigrants and black ethnics who are adjusting to life as "black Americans," not just "Americans"? The salience of racial identity for native-born blacks and the new understanding of the *necessity* of a racial identity for black immigrants create varying levels of the social and political importance of "blackness" and differing degrees of collective obstacles and pursuits (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Uhlaner 1989).

Book Overview

The duality of race and ethnicity for foreign-born black populations, in particular, complicates previous theories of in-group and out-group status in that their foreign-born status has allowed foreign-born black ethnics to situate themselves as elevated minorities and move more closely to the dominant in-group. My argument pertaining to diverse black identities and the elevated minority statuses that exist in the United States is expanded and developed over the next five chapters. In this work, black ethnic diversity and ethnic elevated minority status are defined as the dominant in-group treatment of foreign-born blacks, which is distinct from that of native-born blacks. Foreign-born blacks are often perceived by whites and even black Americans as different and "special"—as harder-working and more productive citizens than their black American counterparts. The distinction between foreign-born and native-born blacks by nonblack groups affects the ways in which they interpret and subscribe to the promises of the American Dream.

In chapter 1, I lay out my theory of elevated minority status and linked fate of black ethnics—an extension of Dawson's (1994) black utility heuristic—in order to better understand elevated minority status as an ethnic utility heuristic that incorporates segmented assimilation, political attitudes, and political behaviors of black ethnic immigrants in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. I utilize previous scholarship from sociologists, economists, and political scientists who have advanced the fields of racial and ethnic politics. My analysis links the research to Asian American studies, Latino politics, urban politics, social identity, and public opinion that have not previously been integrated in a comprehensive analysis pertaining to black diversity. How future scholarship disaggregates the diversity of blacks in America in subsequent works is just one element of the research; therefore, I also focus on how these integrated theories have implications for all "minority" groups[7] living in the United States, and how they use amorphous concepts of race and detailed ethnic identifications as building blocks for larger conversations pertaining to policy, political resources, (p.8) representation, and benefits. The analyses set forth in this chapter extend the discussion of race and ethnicity to blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans and lay out larger theories to support the measures used in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 2 provides US census data in conjunction with SSEU Local 371 demographic data to better explain the significance of a union population for this particular project. This chapter also explains survey design and implementation and the sample population. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address how race and ethnicity for blacks affect political

participation, intraracial attitudes toward the American Dream, and policy attitudes. They explain how the duality creates overarching intraracial tensions as well as feelings of solidarity, while also showing the shifting significance of race and ethnicity for different groups and at different times. I address the questions of how political participation and partisanship are displayed, whether intraracial coalition building is possible with the widespread range of feelings toward other black ethnic groups, and how attitudes toward racialized and nonracialized government policies are articulated by the different black ethnic groups. Each chapter then provides evidence that there is a cohesive racial identity that is as significant as one's distinct ethnic identity, despite political participation and personal feelings toward other black ethnic groups and contrasting policy stances.

Shared black group racial identity in the United States does exist, alongside and in addition to ethnic identity and individual level concerns and self-interests. I provide analysis about the ethnically diverse black population that not only serves as a political example of the range of participatory behaviors, expectations from the polity, and policy attitudes but also highlights how these important issues can be transferred to other nonblack ethnic groups and contribute to ongoing debates surrounding identity politics, immigration, urban politics, and the future of labor movements. In these chapters, I use transcripts of interviews conducted with the leadership of the SSEU Local 371. The interviews provide an additional layer of individual understandings of the interplay between race and ethnicity for blacks, and how these complex negotiations affect larger coalition building within a social justice–driven union. Each chapter provides a different example of how racial and ethnic duality can engender larger understandings of pluralism, thus bringing together several theories pertaining to identity, ethnocentrism, and complex and continued racial segregation.

Chapter 3 provides an analysis of voter turnout by black union members. In this chapter, high union participatory trends become quite apparent—particularly due to the SSEU's political history and union leadership in New York City politics. In addition to evaluating black union members' participatory trends, this chapter assesses and compares the overall participatory tendencies of black groups using national data sources: the Social Services Employees Union Survey (SSEUS), the National Election Study (NES), and the New American Exit Poll (p.9) (NAEP). Participation rates of blacks are also compared to those of nonblack union members within the original SSEUS as well as with nonblack populations from national data sets. This added layer of analysis is critical to extrapolating a larger story of interracial and

intraracial participatory similarities and differences among labor populations, and the US population, more generally. Utilizing multiple data sources illuminates the extensive variation that exists in participation rates at the local and national levels, and also highlights the differences between union population turnout rates and participatory tendencies compared to those of the larger US population.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed account of the feelings and perceptions of foreign-born and native-born black union members using the SSEU Local 371 Survey. This chapter argues that black intraracial differences, even subtle ones, elicit attitudes and opinions that greatly influence the US political system. It also includes a qualitative analysis of the genesis of many of these perceptions and feelings of black groups living and working in New York City, and how these opinions affect black perceptions of the American Dream. I find that although there are distinct attitudes among black ethnics regarding modes of success and achievement efforts, there is a significant black racial identity present among native-born and foreign-born populations once in the United States.

Chapter 5 describes the extent to which racial and/or ethnic identity affect policy stances and compares the responses from the SSEU labor members with national data. Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), the NES, and the SSEUS, the chapter provides evidence that the importance and impact of racial and ethnic identity affects political attitudes and policy beliefs dealing with social spending issues and broader immigration debates. I show that black ethnic groups within SSEU Local 371 exhibited similar attitudes toward government spending issues promoted by the union. There was even an element of racial cohesion regarding issues not promoted by the union leadership. However, black ethnics displayed compellingly distinct differences in opinion toward race-related spending issues. The results indicate that ethnicity does affect policy attitudes, but the evidence also describes a complex overlapping of identities—union, racial, and specific ethnic—when analyzing government spending issues.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the contributions of this project to the field of political science and the theoretical literature on race, immigration, and labor. It also offers concluding remarks regarding black ethnicity and the future of black political representation and collective participatory engagement. In addition, this chapter also addresses the study’s implications for the current immigration debates. In particular, it considers the growing complexities of racial classification, and informs more general policy recommendations for future studies of race and (p.10) ethnicity in the United States. I find

empirical evidence and support for Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka's (2008: 734) theoretical argument that "the structuring of racial political identity is a complex interaction between policies of the state, political economy, and the stereotypes that result to create incentives for people categorized by race to either adopt or turn away from a group based on identity."

To be clear, this project is not about determining which black ethnic group works hardest, nor is it about which black group is most likely to succeed. It does aim, however, to present the complexity of race and ethnicity for both native-born and foreign-born blacks living in America and to ascertain the possibilities for political coalitions in specific policy areas. This project confirms the importance of a multilayered identity for foreign-born and native-born blacks and examines how racial and ethnic identity directly affects foreign-born blacks' concepts of group racial identity. This work also shows how Afro-Caribbean and African black populations impact black Americans and their perceptions of race, ethnic identity, a collective future, and fulfillment of the American Dream.