THE HISTORY AND PROGRESS OF BLACK CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

This paper offers a broad overview of Black citizenship within the United States, concentrating on the major shifts in Black life that have transpired since the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. We examine several critical aspects of Black citizenship including economic status, education, criminal justice and mass incarceration, and political participation. Our report reveals that Black progress toward equal citizenship is inconsistent at best; at worst, it is stagnant and at times, regressive. As such, we conclude that dramatic solutions beyond traditional reformist approaches are needed in order to realize genuine citizenship and equal rights for Black people within the United States. In closing, we briefly highlight a specific example of a strategic approach to advancing substantive social and political change.

Keywords: African Americans, race, citizenship, economics, education, criminal justice, black politics

INTRODUCTION

The recent history of African Americans and citizenship is a fraught and tense one, made all the more so given that black people have been fighting for freedom and equal rights, for centuries. As a consequence of arriving in North America as enslaved laborers, African Americans have, through subsequent history, existed either at the margins of citizenship (and the rights and privileges that are conferred by said citizenship), or have been excluded entirely, with stark consequences.[1]

Black people have resisted and challenged their marginalization since their arrival, helping to remake legal definitions of citizenship and democracy in the process, and helping to usher in significant reforms at watershed moments in time as witnessed during the Reconstruction era or the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement, for example. The latter period, stretching from the 1950s through the 1960s revealed a particularly potent combination of Black resistance, legal shifts, and legislative reforms that dramatically reshaped American democracy for African Americans and expanded the boundaries of citizenship to better include Black people. And by all objective measures, African Americans have experienced

considerable progress in the last sixty years, desegregating exclusive sites of power across society (most notably, the White House in 2008).

But the notion of a progressive momentum of history is a superficial observation, obscuring the fragility of Black progress and citizenship since the 1960s. As African Americans have progressed, they have continued to face marginalization and consequent denial of their citizenship (Anderson 2016). The great tragedy is that the nation mistakenly points to surface-level markers of progress and the absence of explicit racial violence as proof that African Americans have full equality; this in turn ignores the significance of historical and institutional discrimination and reinforces the erroneous belief that Black people, and Black people alone, are responsible for continuing racial and economic inequality.

In 1968, when the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released its bombshell 708-page "Kerner Commission" report, detailing the near-universal ways in which African Americans had been systematically and structurally excluded from true citizenship, it was as if, for a fragile moment, the United States was on the cusp of a transformative revolution. That moment soon passed as the president and Congress ignored nearly all of the commission's recommendations (Zelizer 2016). That and other similar decisions, as well as the political shift away from a structural-solution approach to equality, was consequential, with long-lasting effects on the status of Black citizenship in the United States. This paper examines some of those transformations and effects, exploring the shifts in Black life that have transpired since the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Two critical aspects of Black citizenship—economic status and political participation—will be the focus of this discussion, although the interplay with property, criminal justice and mass incarceration, and education will be brought in as well.

Importantly, progress around Black citizenship in the United States has been neither linear nor all-encompassing in the post-Civil Rights Movement era; overall trends that have been observed are far from consistent. While some areas have demonstrated improvement (like educational achievement, high school and college completion, and unemployment), these changes do not tell the complete story and should not serve as a final indication of comprehensive or total improvement.

ECONOMICS AND THE WEALTH GAP

In the United States, property ownership has long been linked to notions of citizenship and wealth. In this respect, African Americans have been "left behind" since the dismantling of Reconstruction in 1877, and the subsequent and systemic exclusion of Black citizens from the same economic institutions that their enslaved labor had helped create. In some cases, federal policies and laws enacted during the 1960s were designed to address these inequalities (i.e. the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the launch of the War on Poverty, the Fair Housing Act in 1968 and the Philadelphia Plan and Affirmative Action in 1969). However, those solutions have provided mixed results.[2] In 1967, a third of Black families lived below the poverty line. By 2000, that number had dropped to nineteen percent. By 2010, that figure had risen to twenty-four percent; as of 2017, census data indicates that the number of African Americans living under the poverty line is roughly twenty-one percent—more than double the number of Whites living in poverty. The number of African Americans living under the poverty line correlates closely with the whims of the American economy; in short, when a recession hits or the economy slows, Black people are the first to feel it (U.S. Census Bureau 2018).

Since the 1970s, the racial wealth gap between Black and White families has only grown *worse*, compounding historical problems of inequality. In 2016, for instance, the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) published a twenty-five-year study on Black families' access to wealth; the institution found that homeownership, income and employment, inheritance, and college education, among other factors, all contributed to widening the Black-White wealth gap. Though none of these variables are causal in nature, IASP nonetheless noted that the largest factor in the disparity of wealth is the number of years of homeownership (making up twenty-seven percent of the gap) (Shapiro et al., 2013). Indeed, the long-standing effects of residential segregation "underpin many of the challenges African-American families face in buying homes and increasing equity" (Shapiro et al., 2013, p. 2). In short, the "ghosts" and consequences of historical discriminatory practices such as redlining continue to live on in the present, despite state and federal governments' best attempts to use public policy to address inequality. The present-day situation also represents a terrible paradox of sorts: even though the acquisition of homes and property has been held aloft as a hallmark of economic progress for African Americans, property accumulation is also the mechanism through which the Black-White wealth gap increases (Shapiro et al., 2013). Black homeowners, for example, are more likely to be financially vulnerable to the volatilities of the housing market and foreclosures because they are more likely to have "high-risk mortgages." The financial crisis of 2008 epitomizes this vulnerability: White household wealth declined twelve percent, while declining twenty-one percent for Black families (Shapiro et al., 2013).[3]

Income disparities also play a large role in the economic stagnation of African Americans, accounting for twenty percent of the difference in the Black-White wealth gap (Shapiro et al., 2013). Like property, present-day income inequalities are rooted in the legacies and continuing practices of racial discrimination. African Americans are more likely to experience discrimination in hiring practices, wages and salary, promotions, and job benefits; they are also more likely to work in industries that lack comprehensive retirement plans, health benefits, and administrative organization and support, all of which impact the ability of African Americans to acquire savings and assets (Shapiro et al., 2013). African Americans also experience higher unemployment rates compared to those of Whites and face increased job insecurity. Since the 1960s, Black unemployment has consistently been *double* that of White employment; African Americans are also more likely than Whites to be among the first laid off during internal job eliminations and in nationwide recessions. The unemployment rate also reveals nothing about African Americans difficulties with underemployment, low wages, lack of social mobility, and career trajectory (DeSilver 2013). Many studies also note that African Americans cannot rely on an inheritance to add to their household wealth. When the IASP study looked at the generational patterns of inheritance across twenty-five years, White people were five times more likely to inherit wealth than Black people. Of the pool of people who inherited money at all, Whites received approximately ten times more than African Americans (Shapiro et al., 2013).

EDUCATION

Education is an area that has long reflected the tensions and inequalities inherent to American citizenship and race. Perhaps no other case better illuminates this than the 1954 landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*. And yet, more

than sixty years later, education in the United States is still distinctly "separate and unequal" for students based on race and class. On its own, (fair and equal) education is an important facet of Black citizenship; it's even more critical when we acknowledge the way in which it is linked to so many other aspects of Black life and citizenship. For instance, African American men face "enormously dim prospects when they fail to complete high school," including poor job prospects and dramatically increased odds of incarceration (Western and Petit, 2010, p. 8).

In the immediate aftermath of *Brown*, it took states years to implement desegregation orders. White resistance to *Brown* often manifested in violent backlash and protest; additionally, cities and locales that complied often did so reluctantly, with many creating new ways to avoid integrating school systems (i.e. the explosion of private, charter, and parochial schools across the South) (Kruse 2005; Geismer 2015). By the time southern schools finally desegregated in the 1970s, schools across the country faced their own violent crises of segregation (like the Boston Busing Crisis of the 1970s), much of which continues to this day. The American desegregation process has been slow, complicated, and incomplete—so much so that the American school system remains racially segregated to this day and is among one of the most unequal among developed nations (Darling-Hammond 1998).[4]

Currently, two-thirds of students of color attend predominately minority-population schools. These schools tend to be located in cities, receive less funding than suburban schools, and have far less money to spend on their students. Black students, by and large, do not have the same educational experiences as their White peers. For example, predominately Black and Latino schools often lack modern textbooks, curriculums, lab materials, and technologies. Student-to-faculty ratios are large. Individualized attention is difficult and, in some cases, nearly impossible to offer. Specialized and experienced teachers are scarce. In some extreme instances, such schools do not offer the pre-requisite math and science courses that are necessary for college (Darling-Hammond 1998).

The racial achievement gap (based on standardized test scores) reflects this imbalance, with considerable academic achievement discrepancies existing between Black and White students. According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Black-White achievement gap narrowed considerably during the 1970s and into the 1980s but became stagnant (and in some cases widened) during the 1990s. Since then, the gap has declined, but considerable distance still exists (Stanford CEPA 2014).[5]

It is important to note that in response to their educational second-class citizenship, African Americans sometimes have pursued educational avenues outside the traditional desegregation solutions. In other words, at various points in time, some Black families have pushed for school voucher programs, charter schools, private schools, home-schooling, and more. They have done so since at least the 1960s and 1970s (southern and northern Freedom Schools) and well into the 1980s, 1990s, and present-day—and not without larger controversy.[6] Legislators and politicians consistently have tried to adopt (and in some cases, co-opt) these movements for various reasons and for partisan ends. It is worth stating, however, that these creations and developments are often "last resort" grassroots responses by Black families, marginalized from educational systems—and they come with mixed results, at best (Rooks 2017).

The problems of educational inequities persist beyond primary and secondary schooling. Indeed, college attendance, long thought of as the "great equalizer," further highlights not only continuing education inequalities, but also exposes racial discrepancies when it comes to the Black-White wealth gap—this in spite of the fact that

African American college attendance has steadily increased since 1976 (NCES 2010). But while a correlation exists between a household's economic level(s) and educational access, African Americans still disproportionally experience significant disparities. Part of the issue is that attending college is *expensive*—Black college attendees are facing institutions wherein costs have risen by more than sixty percent in the past two decades (Shapiro et al., 2013). Given that Black students have less wealth, they take on student loans at a higher rate, accumulate significantly higher rates of student loan debt, and drop out of college for financial reasons at a higher rate (Darity et al., 2018; Shapiro et al., 2013). And though college completion rates have increased for all Americans, attaining a college degree appears to have done little to improve the economic citizenship of African Americans. As recent data illustrates, White household heads with a college degree, on average, had $268,000 in wealth; Black households with a comparably educated head of household had only $70,000. Likewise, "White households with heads who reported having completed some college but did not finish their degrees, still possessed substantially more wealth (net worth) than the typical Black household with a head who finished a college degree" (Darity et al., 2018, p. 40) Equally distressing is "the fact that Black households with a head with a college degree were substantially more 'wealth poor' than Whites who never finished their high school diplomas" (Darity et al., 2018, p. 40).

These various economic and educational factors, when taken together, showcase an alarming story of an economically marginalized and "second-class" community that appears to be regressing despite notable outward markers of progress.

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The criminal justice system, policing, and the carceral state have inflicted severe consequences on Black lives and Black citizenship, in large part due to the way in which these interrelated systems target and remove African Americans from full participation in life, society, and all of the rights of citizenship. Most notably (at least for the purposes of this paper), mass incarceration expanded rapidly and at an unprecedented rate in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980, the prison population numbered around 300,000; by 1992, it was close to 800,000. In 2016, 2.2 million people were confined to prisons and jails (Berger 2016; Mauer 2016).

Coupled with the rise of mass incarceration is a prison reform agenda that is punitive, rather than rehabilitative. Conditions inside prisons have worsened throughout the era with overcrowding, and there have been significant cuts in mental and physical health services within prisons (Equal Justice Initiative 2017). Upon release from prison, people face significant barriers to employment, housing, public assistance programs, and food stamps. There are also several additional high costs that formerly-incarcerated people face, such as child support obligations, drug testing fees, parole supervision fees, and drug treatment fees (EJI 2017). The carceral state extends far beyond the physical locations of prison cells—probation and parole are sustained methods of surveillance and control that dictate the lives of people who have recently been released. More people are experiencing this type of social isolation and struggle than ever before—the population under probation and parole essentially tripled between 1980 and 2016. In 2016, 4.65 million people were under probation or parole, and this rate of community corrections supervision has increased as the rate of incarceration grows (Western 2018). A criminal record essentially removes a formerly incarcerated person from society, limiting their opportunities to participate and engage, effectively diminishing

their citizenship status. This loss of citizenship appears to have the gravest impact in the lives of Black men, who are targeted disproportionately by the criminal justice system: One in three Black men born since 2001 have a lifetime likelihood of imprisonment (The Sentencing Project 2018).

The first point of contact that many African Americans have with the criminal justice system is with law enforcement. Arrest rates are highest in high-poverty minority neighborhoods, and incarceration rates are intimately connected to arrest rates (Western 2018). Numerically, 2,415 per 100,000 Black men are incarcerated (TSP 2018). This disparity in incarceration rates extends to Black youth. Though youth incarceration rates peaked in 1999 and have been declining, overall, since then, Black youth still continue to be targeted disproportionately by the criminal justice system as compared to their White peers (TSP 2018). Once African American teenagers enter the criminal justice system, many are tried as adults and sentenced accordingly. The rate of juvenile detention placement for Black youth is 433 per 100,000, whereas it is 86 per 100,000 for White youth (TSP 2018).

The disenfranchisement of incarcerated populations, who are predominantly African Americans and people of color, is a form of citizenship status removal. In forty-eight states, felony conviction results in the termination of voting rights, and a total of 6.1 million people are currently bound by this restriction (TSP 2018). Disenfranchisement based on the extent of one's position in the criminal justice system varies from state to state. In twelve states, disenfranchisement applies to people at every level: whether they are in prison, on parole, on probation, or post-sentence, they are not allowed to vote (TSP 2018). These laws affect African Americans most drastically—7.44% of the Black population is disenfranchised, compared to 2.57% of non-African-American people (TSP 2018).

In addition to explicit voter disenfranchisement that overwhelmingly burdens African Americans, policies have institutionalized ideas surrounding innate Black criminality and social deviance which contributes to the repression of Black citizenship. The "War on Drugs," "Broken Windows," "Stop-and-Frisk," and increasingly punitive sentencing laws are part of a broader sweep of policies that have emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Lynch and Sabol, 1997). People charged with lower-level drug offenses also faced increased incarceration as a result of these sentencing reforms in the 1980 (Lynch and Sabol, 1997). Rather than addressing the systemic roots of such crimes, various institutions at the local, state, and federal level continue to scapegoat, target, and punish Black communities in a manner that limits their citizenship rights (U.S. Department of Justice 2015, 2016).[7]

While such racialized polices may have increased in the 1970s and beyond, they are not new; indeed, both the Kerner Commission report (1968) and the report on the 1992 Los Angeles Riots (1993) argued that such policies were part of a broader and longer history of abuse that defined the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color (National Research Council 2014). With the explosion of new technological advances (i.e. cell phones, social media, etc.), the visibility of this unbalanced interaction has only increased. Consequently, it offers additional evidence that within the context of protection of their rights and privileges, African Americans continue to exist as "second-class citizens" in the United States.

VOTING, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Voting, civic engagement, and political representation arguably are the concepts most explicitly linked to notions of citizenship and democracy. For generations, African

Americans, like most citizens, have placed a tremendous amount of faith in the political process as a means of achieving full and equal rights in the United States. Indeed, in the years immediately following the 1960s, African Americans increasingly turned their protests into political action—seeing the ballot box and political office as another potential form of power. And yet, the process has been uneven in its success. As of 2018, African Americans are still underrepresented in political office (at every level) and political staffing positions. From the 1870s through 2019, only ten Black senators and four Black governors have served. The nature of these positions is important to consider when analyzing how politicians prioritize the needs and interests of Black communities (Brown and Atkse, 2016; U.S. Senate, 2019).

Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and the enfranchisement of Black people across the country, African American voter turnout has steadily increased (New York Times 2014). After an immediate boost in the mid-1960s, voter turnout declined, fluctuated precipitously in the 1980s, and has risen steadily through the present day. It was highest in the South in 2008 when Barack Obama announced his first presidential bid (likewise, Jesse Jackson's presidential announcements in the 1980s had a similar effect, throughout the South, during the Democratic primaries). In 2012, the overall Black voter turnout rate surpassed that of any other racial group, including White people. As of 2016, Black women, in particular, are the "backbone" of the modern Democratic Party, representing the demographic group most consistently loyal (Frey 2013). With this in mind, however, Black voter turnout in midterm and off-year elections remains low and stagnant. And in the 2016 Presidential Election, Black voter turnout declined for the first time in twenty years (from 66.6% in 2012 to 59.6% in 2016; most of the drop-off came from Black men). Likewise, the Black millennial turnout decreased from 55% to 49.4% (Krogstad and Lopez, 2017). There are a number of reasons for this decline—the concentrated increase in voter suppression and depression efforts; the first election without the full protection of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and the lack of enthusiasm for the political process and the candidates, among other issues.[8]

Importantly, the drop-off in Black political participation may also be tied to African Americans' increasing frustration with their second-class citizenship, and a belief (particularly among millennials) that the political process is corrupt and ineffective. With that said, however, while some within political movements like Black Lives Matter initially shunned the electoral process, increasingly these organizations have been encouraging followers and affiliates to run for political office, as disruptors and political outsiders (in ways that echo civil rights leaders and Black power activists' shift to electoral politics in the 1970s). Indeed, the majority of African Americans surveyed as of 2016 believe that interest groups and political organizations like the NAACP, the National Urban League (NUL), and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) have been effective in helping African Americans achieve full citizenship and equality. Nearly half of those surveyed also insisted that working to get more Black people elected to political positions was an effective tactic to achieve racial equality (Pew Research Center 2016).

This notion—that more Black elected officials is an effective pathway to full equality—is an old idea. In fact, it was one of the founding principles of the CBC (1969 and 1971). Years earlier, a group of prominent Black civil rights leaders, including A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Dorothy Height, and Andrew Young, issued a statement that argued that the "major tool for correcting the evils" of racism and inequality, lay "in maximum application of political power… political action should be the major point of emphasis of the civil rights movement during 1965" (New York Amsterdam News, 1965). By the 1970s, other Black leaders, including Eddie Williams of the Joint Center for Economic and Political Studies (JCEPS) and Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP, continued to

advocate for a modern political focus on the electoral process and economics (New York Amsterdam News, 1965).

But while this is a thread that has carried through to the present and undergirds the contemporary push to see voting and public policy as the most pragmatic path toward equality, we should also consider the criticism of that approach (that has continuously co-existed at the margins of the mainstream Black political approach). In 1973, Dr. Charles Hurst pushed back on the near-exclusive focus on electoral politics, arguing that it was unwise to believe that the answer to change lay in electing Black people to office. "Simply changing the political label or the identity of a man in office or holding an important position," he wrote in an opinion piece for the *Chicago Defender*, "does little to change the status of oppressed Black America" (Hurst 1973).

It's a controversial position, but it's one worth exploring, given that increased Black political representation hasn't always translated into increased equality or equal citizenship. In some cases, it has even had the opposite effect. In other words, "Black faces in high places" aren't a guarantee of advocacy, equality, or progress. The most obvious example of this is Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. A less obvious but arguably equally discomfiting example can be seen in the case of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015, where Black officials, at every level, were involved in making regressive and harmful decisions (Yamahtta-Taylor 2016).[9]

CONCLUSION

As in 1968, we are at a critical juncture in the fight for Black equality and citizenship. African American progress is inconstant at best, and regressive at worst. We are also dealing with a polarized American public that appears to be growing increasingly resistant to the notion that dramatic solutions are needed to realize genuine citizenship and rights for Black people in the United States.

The issues undermining Black citizenship are interconnected, thus it is nearly impossible to individualize them or separate them out. For instance, "solving" for mass incarceration also involves "solving" for education; "solving" for political participation also involves "solving" for economics and mass incarceration. But where does this leave us? Arguably, one of the most significant lessons of the past sixty years is that many of the policies and approaches the United States and its citizens have employed to address racial inequality have not worked fully. We don't simply need a radical rethinking of justice, but also of public policy and the framing of public policies and institutions. The challenge is not to reform the system, but to change the entire way of doing things *and* change the way that the broader American public thinks about structural inequalities and solutions.

In other words, we must invest in a top-down and a bottom-up approach that re-invests in structural solutions to inequality. Throughout this article, we've briefly pointed out a few of the myriad and profound ways in which African Americans have responded to their continuing exclusion from citizenship and the restrictions of second-class citizenship. In the most successful of these cases, grassroots "bottom-up" African American movements have forced the nation to reshape citizenship and democracy from the top down. Much of this grassroots work has been done through on-the-ground, localized organizing (what Ella Baker called "spade work" in the 1960s) (Payne 2007; Ransby 2003). In spite of the general shift away from protest politics to electoral politics in the post-civil rights era, communities have continued to engage in the grassroots organizing tradition around issues of race, inequality, and the rights of citizens.

There is enormous potential for this kind of grassroots work to produce solutions, especially in conjunction with a top-down approach. The two approaches working in tandem produces effective results (both historically and in the present). In other words, collaborations between organizations that adopt a top-down approach (like the NAACP, the NUL, or the CBC) must invest in substantive partnerships with local and community organizations that employ a grassroots approach to social change (Bester and Jean, 2012). These partnerships must be anti-racist by their very nature, but they must also incorporate the intersection of other issues, including economic inequality. In doing so, such organizations can create frameworks for mass movements that will provide room for creative solutions addressing the universal and specific concerns of Black inequality in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. See Haney-López (2006), Jones (2018), and Wilentz 2006.
2. See Wright Rigueur (2015), Chapters 3 and 4.
3. Foreclosures also have an impact that extends further into the community beyond the piece of property that is being foreclosed—there is a collateral effect, as the property value of surrounding homes declines, the connected housing market becomes more volatile, and nearby areas are affected by high-risk loans.
4. See also Formisano (1991), Rooks (2017).
5. The gap between Black and White students varies greatly from state to state, with Connecticut, Nebraska, and Washington, DC possessing the widest gaps, whereas states with smaller populations of Black people (Hawaii, Idaho, Wyoming, Vermont, New Hampshire, etc.) tend to have the smallest gaps. The South and Rust Belt states tend to have the largest achievement gaps. These scores correlate with each state's racial and socioeconomic disparities (Stanford CEPA 2014).
6. See Rooks (2017), Chapters 4 and 5. See also:
7. See also Muhammad (2010), Alexander (2012), and Forman (2017).
8. See, for example, Cohen et al. (2016).
9. Cathy Cohen has also written about this at length through the concept of "secondary marginalization" (Cohen 1999). As members of a minority group get closer to institutions of power, they often in turn, replicate the same inequalities and hierarchies that they have been fighting against.

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