

2014

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Recommended Citation

Huyser, Kimberly R.; Jillian Medeiros Pérez; Vickie Ybarra; Julia Marin Hellwege; and Lisa Sanchez. "Differential Influence of the Great Recession on Political Participation among Race and Ethnic Groups." *Huyser, Kimberly R.; Pérez, Jillian Medeiros; Ybarra, Vickie; Hellwege, Julia Marin; Sanchez, Lisa. Forthcoming. Differential Influence of the Great Recession on Political Participation among Race and Ethnic Groups. Social Science Quarterly* (2014). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp/15

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Pre-publication version. For published version, see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291540-6237> and search under title.

Citation: Huyser, Kimberly R.; Pérez, Jillian Medeiros; Ybarra, Vickie; Hellwege, Julia Marin; Sanchez, Lisa. Forthcoming. "Differential Influence of the Great Recession on Political Participation among Race and Ethnic Groups." Social Science Quarterly

**Differential Influence of the Great Recession on Political
Participation among Race and Ethnic Groups**

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Abstract

Objective. Our study seeks to understand the role of perceived economic stress of the Great Recession on political participation among blacks, whites and Latinos. *Methods.* We use the 2012 Collaborative Multi-Racial Political Study and negative binomial regression to examine the impact of financial hardship on black, Hispanic, and white political participation. *Results.* We find that political participation among whites is unaffected by the Great Recession and is largely motivated by political interest. Blacks are mobilized by financial hardship even after controlling for political enthusiasm and linked fate. Hispanics have the lowest level of political participation. *Conclusion.* Overall, we conclude that the Great Recession did affect political behavior but differently across race and ethnic groups; specifically, Hispanics were least likely to politically engage if they experienced negative consequences of the Great Recession.

Keywords: Great Recession; Political Engagement; African American/Black; Hispanic; Latino; Personal Economic Stress; Linked Fate

Introduction

The recent economic downturn of 2008-2009, the Great Recession, had a profound impact on the lives of many Americans. With unemployment rates reaching as high as 16% for some subgroups and the number of homes lost to foreclosure reaching about 5 million, it is easy to suggest the immense impact the recession had on millions of Americans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010; Bocian *et al.*, 2012). While the Great Recession significantly impacted the economic prospects for many Americans, the outcomes were disproportionately felt by communities of color and immigrants across the country (Jones, 2009; Reece and Gambhir, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2011). Disproportionate increases in unemployment among blacks and Hispanics (Applied Research Center, 2009; Rivera *et al.*, 2009; Weller, Fields, and Agbede, 2011) against the backdrop of lower overall savings and accumulated wealth left many families of color struggling in their daily lives (Berndt and James, 2009).

Moreover, the economic recession had a marked impact on how the electorate views government and political institutions, with approval ratings for Congress reaching all-time lows driven largely by the perceived inability of the federal government to

reverse the downward spiral of the economy (Gallup, 2013). Public attitudes toward government and political institutions are critical, as these psychological attitudes impact outcomes such as interest in politics and political participation.

The focus of our study is to understand the role of perceived economic stress of the Great Recession on political participation across race and ethnic groups; we link our respondents' financial hardship during the Great Recession to their political participation. We use the 2012 Collaborative Multi-Racial Political Study to examine our primary hypothesis that financial hardship of the Great Recession will influence the political participation of race and ethnic groups differently according to available resources.

Resources and Political Engagement

The Great Recession provides an opportunity to further understand the long-standing relationship between resources and political engagement. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the importance of resources for an engaged civic life and the availability of resources for political engagement (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). Individuals with greater resources, both material and psychological, are better able engage in the political sphere (Garcia Bedolla and Michelson, 2012). Multiple types of resources impact an individual's level of political

engagement (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995), the foremost of which is socio-economic status (Logan, Darrah, and Oh, 2012; Verba *et al.*, 1993; Leighley and Nagler 1992a, 1992b; Leighley, 1990; Nie *et al.*, 1988; Nagel, 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Verba and Nie, 1972). While educational attainment and income are salient resources for political participation, scholars have found that other resources such as interest and attitudes about government (Aldrich, 1993; Teixeira, 1992; Conway, 1991, Abramson and Aldrich, 1982), residential stability (Estrada-Correa & Johnson, 2011) and group consciousness (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Shingles, 1981) also affect political participation. Though a significant body of research underpins the resource model, several expansion opportunities still exist, a task to which we now turn.

The Retrospective Resource Model

According to traditional resource theory, as an individual's resources decline, so too does his/her political participation. Through the lens of the economic recession, we expand upon the traditional resource model through considering resource accumulation changes based on outside forces such as the Great Recession and argue the changes will modify levels of political participation. One way of determining economic stress and resource change is through individual retrospective

evaluation of personal economic status—retrospection as the process of looking backwards to assess resources in a comparative and cross-sectional manner (e.g. pre-Recession and post-Recession). Traditional resource theory implies that there are a plurality of resources that affect participation. Political participants acknowledge that resources, such as income, are subject to change, and in turn, act in accordance with those changes in the political sphere.

During the Great Recession, the nation saw high foreclosure rates (Estrada-Correa and Johnson, 2012; Ramirez, 2007; Cho and Gimpel, 2009). Moreover, many families moved locally to find affordable housing. Residential mobility along with high foreclosure rates is associated with reduced political participation and consequences for social connectivity (Fesselmeyer, Le, and Ying, 2013; Stoll, 2013; Allen, 2011; Highton, 2000 Estrada-Correa and Johnson, 2012; but see Gimpel 2009). We expect that an individual's level of participation is not only determined by current income, but upon how financially stable the individual feels s/he is, in comparison to the past.

The Retrospective Resource Model and Race/Ethnicity

Against the backdrop of our Retrospective Resource Model, we consider the effects of the Great Recession on racial and

ethnic political participation disparities. Given the fluidity of resource accumulation following the Great Recession, effect of resource change on racial and ethnic groups and implications for political participation is less than clear. The Great Recession affected communities of color most adversely. For example, racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately felt the social disruption from home loss (Fesselmeier, Le and Ying, 2013; Bocian, Li and Ernst, 2008). Compared to white home loan borrowers, black and Latino home loan borrowers were 76% and 71% more likely to experience foreclosure between 2007 and 2009 (Bocian *et al.*, 2012). In studies of residential mobility prior to the recession, higher residential mobility has been found to contribute to relatively lower voter turnout rates among Latinos (Ramirez, 2007).

Prior to the Great Recession, racial and ethnic minority groups already displayed disproportionate shares of financial stress as compared to white Americans. In addition, we know that prior to the Great Recession whites demonstrated higher levels of political engagement than blacks and Latinos, and Latinos had the lowest level of political engagement (Ramakrishnan, 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001; Leighley, 2001; Uhlaner, Cain and Kiewiet, 1989). When the economic recession hit, many blacks and Latinos lacked financial safety-nets, and given their

already stressed financial situation, they were unable to “hang-on” through the storm. Hence this is why we saw that the Great Recession had a disproportionate impact on minority holdings: Hispanic median household wealth fell 66% between 2005 and 2009 compared to a 53% fall for black households, compared to only 16% for white households (Cheney-Rice 2014). Moreover, housing accounts for 49% of black wealth compared to 28% wealth for the average white household. Thus, when we see that people of color lost their homes at a higher rate than whites during the recession (Bocian *et al.*, 2012) and that their wealth was linked to home ownership, then we see why people of color had more financial stress during the Great Recession. Therefore, the impact of the Great Recession on resources among racial and ethnic minority groups will not be of equal magnitude and in turn its impact on political participation will not be of equal magnitude either.

However, research has uncovered protective resources among blacks: group consciousness and linked fate (Dawson, 1994). The black community has a long history of organizing to overcome threats against the community as a whole (Shingles, 1981). Blacks, more so than other groups, tend to have a sense of belonging with other members of their community and tend to believe that what happens to others in your group will also

affect the individual (Dawson, 1994; Hardy-Fanta, 1993). Given these protective forces, we expect that in times of hardship (e.g. financial stress due to the Great Recession) the black community will be more likely to mobilize rather than disengage, leading us to our first hypothesis:

H1. Blacks with a stronger linked fate will be mobilized to engage politically by financial hardship suffered in the past 12 months.

Conversely, while Latinos' political participation has increased over time, their rates of participation have been consistently lower than all other racial and ethnic minority groups (Uhlener and Garcia, 1998; Wong, 2000). This is not surprising given that Latinos tend to have lower socio-economic status than whites, but also lack the high levels of group consciousness of the black community (Sanchez and Masuoka, 2010). Given that Latinos were disproportionately affected by the Great Recession and they lack strong protective resources such as group consciousness and linked fate, we expect that they are likely to disengage politically.

H2. Latinos will decrease their political participation if they experience a bad financial situation in the past 12 months.

In comparison to blacks and Latinos, whites were not as adversely affected by the Great Recession. Therefore, we argue

that whites begin with a diverse set of resources, and as a result their participation will be less likely to decrease. In addition to retaining a greater number of resources during the recession, whites also have political socialization skills and therefore are likely to continue established habitual participation patterns. Therefore, we do not expect a significant effect of the recession on whites' political behavior:

H3. Whites will not see any impact of the recession on their political activity.

Data and Methods

Data and Sample. We make use of the 2,322 respondents who reported having voted in the 2012 general election from the 2012 Collaborative Multi-Racial Political Study (CMPS)¹. The survey was comprised of people who self-identified as non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic white, and Latino. The survey was conducted between November 16, 2012 and November 26, 2012 in both English and Spanish by the GfK Group (GfK, formerly Knowledge Networks). The survey has critical questions gauging the impact of the Great Recession, thus was well suited for our needs. See the Technical Appendix for further elaboration on the CMPS data,

¹ Since 92.7% of the sample reported voting in the 2012 general election, we restrict our sample to voters.

sample, and measures. It can be downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1928/24763>.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Our dependent variable is a count variable of the number of political activities reported by the respondent and asks the respondent to report up to twelve different political activities and provides a comprehensive approach to measuring political engagement (please see the Technical Appendix). Importantly, the questions that make up this scale are comparable to those used in Brady, Verba and Schlozman's (1995) Citizen Participation study in which the authors used a broad definition of political participation including electoral and community activities. Our dependent variable is different from that of Brady et al. (1995) in that we do not include voting in our dependent variable since voters make up all respondents in our study.

Key Independent Variables. Our key independent variables fall into two categories: structural and personal financial stressor indicators and race/ethnic categories. *Structural Financial Stressors.* State financial stressors include the respondent's home-state Average Annual Unemployment Rate specific to race/ethnicity of respondent. We also include Cushing's three tiers of state job loss/gains during the

recession: states that gained during recession, states that lost more jobs than expected and states in which job loss was less than expected (Cushing, 2011).

Personal Financial Stressors. We include a question that asked respondents to assess their current financial situation relative to that of 4 years ago (which would have been 2008, just as the recession began) and is coded as experiencing a worse financial situation than four years ago or not. Since this question occurred at the time of the recession, this links respondents' personal finance stress to the Great Recession. Second, we include a question that asked respondents if they were more or less enthusiastic to participate politically given their experience with the recession. Finally, we include a variable citing the number of "bad" financial consequences that each respondent experienced due to the recession (please see the Technical Appendix: <http://hdl.handle.net/1928/24763>).

Race and Ethnic Variables. We utilize three dichotomous variables for non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white respondents. In addition to membership in a race/ethnic group, we also include an indicator of linked fate (please see the Technical Appendix: <http://hdl.handle.net/1928/24763>).

Other Independent Variables. In addition to our key independent variables, we include several control variables; please see the Technical Appendix for these variables.

Analytic Plan

After exploring the bivariate relationships between personal financial indicators and income, we conduct a series of multivariate analyses. Due to evidence of significant overdispersion in the sample as a whole ($G^2=583.89$, $p<.0001$), we employ negative binomial regression with clustering at the state level to predict individual-level respondent political participation in 2012 (Cameron and Trividi, 1998; Long and Freese, 2006; Tseloni, 1999). We also make use of survey weights in each of the models, the post-stratification adjustment was applied based on demographic distributions from the most recent Current Population Survey. Table A in the Technical Appendix (<http://hdl.handle.net/1928/24763>) contains summary descriptive statistics for all variables.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Results

Table 1 displays the bivariate relationships between the personal financial stressor variables and family income level. Here we find generally that respondents with lower family income report experiencing personal financial stressors at a higher

rate, and those with higher family income report experiencing personal financial stressors at a lower rate. For example, at 34.51%, a significantly greater portion of respondents with family income between 100-200% of FPL report a worse financial situation than do the other income categories. Conversely, a significantly smaller portion of respondents with the highest income level, above 400% of FPL, report a worse financial situation. Thus, this gives support to our Retrospective Resource Model; people with less financial resources such as people of color, were more likely to bear the financial stress of the Great Recession.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Model 1: Political Participation Effects Across Race and Ethnic Groups

Table 2 - Model 1 is a negative binomial regression model that employs our full sample of respondents. We find that Hispanic respondents have the lowest level of political participation ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, black respondents do not differ statistically in their level of participation from white respondents. Respondents who report holding a Bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to engage in political activities than those who have not completed high school ($p < 0.05$). Finally,

across all race/ethnic groups, reporting a negative financial situation is associated with a higher number of political acts.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Model 2: Political Participation Effects for Black Respondents

Table 3 provides the negative binomial regression results for the independent effects of economic threats for each race and ethnic group: black, Latino and white. Model 2 reports the results for black respondents and all statistically significant variables in this model have a positive, or mobilizing, impact on the political participation rates of black respondents. With particular regard to our indicators of Great Recession economic threat, black respondents experience surges in rates of participation when they experience increased financial stress through (1) high state black unemployment rates ($p < .05$), (2) negative financial situations ($p < .001$), and (3) personal enthusiasm for political participation given financial stress ($p < .05$). The other independent variables that positively influence black political participation are having a level of group consciousness, a high school diploma or more and reporting a high level of political interest in the 2012 Presidential Election.

Model 3: Political Participation Effects for Hispanic Respondents

Continued on Table 3 - Model 3, the Great Recession economic indicators are statistically significant for Hispanic respondent's participation rates. First, Hispanic respondents who report a worse financial situation from four years ago, experience an increase of political participation compared with those who do not report a worse financial situation. However, Hispanics who report negative financial situations such as foreclosure or bankruptcy experience a decrease in political participation and become demobilized from the political process. Finally, Hispanic respondents who report a high level of political interest in the 2012 Presidential Election report engaging in more political activities.

Model 4: Political Participation Effects for White Respondents

In terms of our key independent variables, white respondents are unaffected by four of the six economic indicator variables on Table 3 - Model 4. Only the economic indicator of state job loss less than expected is statistically significant at the less than .05 level of confidence with the variable having a positive effect on political participation. In sum, white respondents' political participation appears to be largely

unaffected by Great Recession economic threats. Similar to the other race and ethnic groups, whites who report a high level of political interest in the 2012 Presidential Election report more political activities.

Conclusion

Since June 2009, 39% of individual Americans rate their self-assessed financial situation as "only fair" (DeSilver, 2014). We propose understanding the role of economic stress on political participation through examining a retrospective (pre- and post-Recession) evaluation of individual economic status. The 2012 Collaborative Multi-Racial Political Study provided the opportunity for us to extend the traditional resource model and test whether retrospective evaluation of resources provides insight into changes in political participation. Our findings suggest that individuals who perceive a change in economic status do respond differently in their political participation. One cannot assume that a decrease in resources will result in a decrease in political participation.

As expected, we find that financial stress mobilizes black political participation and a high level of linked fate seems to have a protective role. We should note that black political engagement remains high even after controlling for Great

Recession indicators, socioeconomic status, and political enthusiasm; this suggests that even during tough times blacks remain politically active.

Also as expected, we see that Latinos participate less than other groups and that personal economic stress or bad consequences of the Great Recession decreases political participation. This is an important finding especially since Hispanics already participate in lower levels compared to whites and blacks. Even less political participation among Hispanics may lead to harmful democratic affects such as, political parties devoting even fewer resources to mobilizing Hispanics, and a possible decrease in descriptive representation. Finally, we find support that whites are largely politically unaffected by Recession-related economic stress and that political interest plays a major component in predicting white political behavior.

Overall, we find that these different communities responded differently politically to financial stress. Using an extended resource models allows us to examine not only one's material and psychological resources but also how their retrospective feelings about financial stressors affects their political participation. While Latinos and blacks were hardest hit by the recession, blacks had the protective resource of linked fate which cushioned the financial stress and helped them maintain

participation in the political sphere. Since Latinos lack the resource of linked fate (Sanchez and Masuoka 2010), coupled with their preceding low levels of political participation and high levels of financial stress, it is not surprising that we find they had low levels of political participation. Finally, since whites have pre-existing high levels of political socialization and participation, combined with the fact that they were not hard hit by the Great Recession, this led to their political participation being relatively unaffected. This study shows that we are not a monolithic nation and we cannot expect communities to react to financial stressors in the same manner. As economic inequity increases in the U.S. it is even more critical to continue to examine financial stress and how it affects communities differently. We find for Latinos, it can be dangerous, as financial stress is leading to low levels of political participation. In a democratic society we all want to strive for equality in participation. Here we are seeing that financial stress can lead to increased inequity in political participation, and if this inequity persists it may further threaten our ideal of an egalitarian democracy.

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TABLE 1.
Relationship between Personal Financial Stressors and Household Income

	% Reporting worse financial situation than 4 years ago	Mean negative financial situations	% More enthusiastic given financial situation
Income <100% FPL	32.13	2.022***	37.38
Income 100-200% FPL	34.51*	2.056***	35.10
Income 200%-300% FPL	31.22	1.834**	35.36
Income 300%-400% FPL	33.55	1.613	42.90**
Income >400% FPL	24.95*	1.387***	34.10
All	29.41	1.668	36.05

p<.05; **p<.01; *p<.001*
Respondents in each income category tested against all other respondents as a single group.
Chi2 test used for first and third columns, ttest used for middle column.

TABLE 2.
Model 1: Political Participation
Negative Binomial Regression

	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error
State Unemployment Rate 2011 (all)	-0.011	0.032
State's Job Loss Less than Expected	0.188	0.152
State's Job Loss More than Expected	-0.041	0.108
Residential Stability-Time at Current Address	-0.004	0.006
Worse Financial Situation than 4 yrs. Ago	-0.139	0.154
Negative Financial Situations	0.088**	0.041
Enthusiasm Political Engagement Given Financial Situation	0.361**	0.152
Black	-0.143	0.148
Hispanic	-0.279**	0.098
High Group Consciousness	0.045	0.091
Age	0.018***	0.004
High School Diploma	0.111	0.334
Some College	0.509	0.348
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	0.763*	0.381
Household Income 100%-199% FPL	-0.651**	0.269
Household Income 200%-299% FPL	-0.228	0.290
Household Income 300%-399% FPL	-0.163	0.305
Household Income >=400% FPL	0.007	0.257
High Trust in Government	0.031	0.119
Political Interest in 2012 Presidential Election	1.150***	0.107
Constant	-2.202***	0.503
Number of Observations	2322	
Log Pseudolikelihood	-2680.74	
Prob > chi2	0.000***	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The dependent variable is the number of political activities that each respondent engaged in. Clustered by state, with robust standard errors.

TABLE 3.
Political Participation by Race/Ethnicity
Negative Binomial Regression

	Model 2: Black	Model 3: Hispanic	Model 4: White
State Unemployment Rate 2011 (by race/ethnicity)	0.059* (0.027)	0.015 (0.045)	-0.063 (0.036)
State's Job Loss Less than Expected	-0.280 (0.209)	0.180 (0.198)	0.367* (0.164)
State's Job Loss More than Expected	-0.257 (0.169)	0.031 (0.171)	0.080 (0.115)
Residential Stability-Time at Current Address	0.016 (0.009)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.005)
Worse Financial Situation than 4 yrs. Ago	0.254 (0.235)	0.525*** (0.129)	-0.255 (0.213)
Negative Financial Situations	0.321*** (0.062)	-0.076* (0.035)	0.034 (0.056)
Enthusiasm Political Engagement Given Financial Situation	0.388* (0.180)	0.806*** (0.128)	0.345 (0.180)
High Group Consciousness	0.427* (0.176)	0.002 (0.198)	-0.084 (0.116)
Age	0.015 (0.008)	0.019** (0.006)	0.020*** (0.005)
High School Diploma	0.849* (0.400)	0.719 (0.394)	-0.337 (0.404)
Some College	1.024* (0.424)	0.781* (0.367)	0.170 (0.467)
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	1.251** (0.421)	1.216** (0.413)	0.379 (0.523)
Household Income 100%-199% FPL	-0.204 (0.540)	0.246 (0.331)	-1.012* (0.416)
Household Income 200%-299% FPL	0.122 (0.541)	-0.360 (0.295)	-0.337 (0.373)
Household Income 300%-399% FPL	-0.120 (0.520)	0.002 (0.277)	-0.246 (0.414)
Household Income >=400% FPL	0.195 (0.429)	-0.127 (0.330)	-0.060 (0.352)
High Trust in Government	0.204 (0.198)	-0.130 (0.166)	-0.022 (0.155)
Political Interest in 2012 Presidential Election	0.951*** (0.196)	1.092*** (0.172)	1.177*** (0.119)
Constant	-4.78*** (0.906)	-3.41*** (0.796)	-1.37* (0.615)
Number of Observations	717	815	788
Log Pseudolikelihood	-716.66	-708.38	-929.73
Prob > chi2	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The dependent variable is the number of political activities that each respondent engaged in. Clustered by state, with robust standard errors.