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978-0-521-69861-0 - Racial Diversity and Social Capital: Equality and Community in America

Rodney E. Hero

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Racial Diversity and Social Capital

Race and racial diversity are important aspects of America and have been shown to substantially affect social relations and the political system. At the same time, greater civic association and a general sense of community, which are embodied in the concept of social capital, are said to have tremendous beneficial effects and to profoundly influence American society. This study connects and critically assesses two bodies of research that have come to different conclusions on these issues. Is America's legacy of racial inequality the "evil twin" of the benefits of social capital? When the author analyzes social outcomes for racial minorities in addition to other dimensions of American politics, the impact of racial diversity consistently outweighs that of social capital.

Rodney E. Hero is the Packey J. Dee III Professor of American Democracy in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Latinos and the U.S. Political System* (1992), which received the Ralph J. Bunche Award of the American Political Science Association, and *Faces of Inequality* (1998), winner of the APSA's Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award. Professor Hero is also co-author of *Multi-Ethnic Moments: The Politics of Urban Education Reform* (2006).

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521875516

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First published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Hero, Rodney E., 1953–

Racial diversity and social capital : equality and community in America /

Rodney E. Hero.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-87551-6 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-87551-X (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-69861-0 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-69861-8 (pbk.)

1. United States – Social conditions – 1980– 2. Pluralism (Social sciences) – United States. 3. Minorities – United States. 4. Social capital (Sociology) – United States. 5. Social participation – United States. 6. Equality – United States. 7. Race awareness – United States. I. Title.

HN59.2.H474 2007

305.800973 – dc22 2006036857

ISBN 978-0521-87551-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0521-69861-0 paperback

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Preface

In this study I endeavor to shed light on issues that I feel are genuinely significant from the standpoint of (empirical) democratic theory and that also have great normative importance. Essentially, I attempt to reckon with matters of equality, particularly racial (in)equality, as considered and compared through the lenses of two theories that purport to explain some substantial part of equality in America. The *racial diversity* thesis, which focuses on race as tapped by the size of minority populations, and the general sense of “community,” as embodied in the concept and as a measure of *social capital*, are used to assess a range of social and political phenomena in the American states

As I try to make clear throughout, the goal is to carefully assess and juxtapose the two theoretical perspectives; it is not to undertake a critique of social capital as such. Readers may nonetheless view this book as (primarily) a critique of social capital, but that would be a misreading of this effort. Critiques tend to be thought of as a kind of “looking back at” and retrospective analysis of scholarly theories and assertions, as reactions against or responses to previously existing arguments. In the process of systematically considering analytical perspectives, some element of a critique of social capital is implicit and perhaps inevitable, but that is not the main thrust of my efforts. When examining the

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racial diversity and social capital theses we should bear in mind that the former preceded the latter (Hero 1992; Hero and Tolbert 1996; Hero 1998), certainly as the social capital thesis was fully elaborated in the case of American politics (see Putnam 2000). Social capital research overlooked racial diversity in general and did not acknowledge specific renderings of the racial diversity thesis. In important respects, “which came first” – and whether Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* ignored the racial diversity thesis – is beside the point.

What *is* crucial is what the two analytical perspectives can tell us about fundamental political questions. As will be seen, I suggest that race and community are interrelated and interact to some extent; thus the two theories have some overlap. But I also stress they are decidedly different interpretations. I find that a sense of community (as summarized in the social capital index; Putnam 2000) is not generally associated with greater relative racial equality and, indeed, may occasionally be linked to worse outcomes. Additionally, its ability to explain other political phenomena is much more limited than one might expect in light of the claims of social capital theorists. On the other hand, racial diversity is shown to have consistent and substantial impacts.

Social theories should be judged not by their origins or traditions, or by how intuitively appealing they seem, but rather by what they actually achieve in their range and depth of explanatory capacity; they should be examined and evaluated on the basis of their substantive merits. Similarly, theories should be assessed not only by their accuracy but also by their adequacy and appropriateness – that is, not only by whether they are “correct” but also by how complete and how well they address the specific issues in question.

Leading interpretations have been shown to be limited in their capacity to address the racial dimensions that have been a major and enduring feature of American politics. Pluralism was questioned on the basis of its class biases; as Schattschneider (1960) famously remarked, “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent” (see also

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Stone 1980). And later scholarship directly demonstrated pluralism's shortcomings regarding race and minority groups' voices, delineating the concept of "two-tiered pluralism" by explaining the essentially structural nature of racial politics and how standard pluralism was in fact even more racially contingent than had previously been recognized (Hero 1992). Another highly influential theory of American state politics, "political culture" (Elazar 1972, 1984), was examined relative to racial and white ethnic diversity and was shown to be substantially an artifact of such diversity (Hero 1998). In this book I develop and apply arguments that are directly informed by the two-tiered pluralism thesis and that also parallel (but go well beyond) previous considerations of political culture and racial diversity. These arguments are then juxtaposed to those of social capital theorists.

Pluralism is an *interest*-based argument, whereas social capital and political culture arguments emphasize largely nonmaterial *ideas* about social networks and interactions. These concern the levels of trust and civic association (social capital) and the orientation and prevalence of certain substantive ideas (political culture) in politics. Pluralism's emphasis on group activities – and social capital's emphasis on civic association and cooperation – appears to understate social structure and formal *institutions* of politics in different ways and to different degrees, which seems especially consequential for how issues of race are approached and the conclusions ultimately drawn. In contrast, diversity arguments contend that the racial dimensions of American politics *include* structural and institutional elements along with interests and ideas (Hero 1992, ch. 10; Hero 1998, ch. 8; Clarke et al. 2006; King and Smith 2005). Additionally, the racial diversity thesis brings attention to ideas not emphasized in social capital studies and links those ideas to racial dimensions of American belief systems.

Ultimately, this book argues that racial diversity continues to shape American politics, including its civic inclinations, in ways that often perpetuate negative social and political patterns as well as racial inequality. In some circumstances the size of

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minority populations may mitigate but not entirely neutralize the extent of minority inequality. Racial diversity generally surpasses social capital as a discernible influence in several arenas of American politics. Moreover, I show that social capital falls well short of prior claims about its salutary benefits for equality, especially racial equality. Instead, social capital in the aggregate has few beneficial (and some detrimental) consequences for relative racial equality.

Despite these remarks (which are further developed in the book), I must also say something that may sound peculiar: I do wish that the social capital thesis were true and broadly applicable in its suggestion that higher social capital leads to greater equality and, by extension, to greater racial equality. The corollary is that I wish the racial diversity thesis were (empirically) false – that racial diversity no longer explained important social outcomes, political processes, or policies. In short, I would be delighted if the theory I advance were wrong, because the implications of my being wrong would be outcomes that are patently desirable from a normative standpoint. However, the evidence in this book strongly suggests otherwise. The weight of the evidence falls heavily in support of the racial diversity thesis and decidedly against the social capital thesis.

Comprehending how race has shaped and continues to shape sense of community, and vice versa, warrants considerable intellectual attention as well as appropriate civic practices and public policies. I therefore conclude that our time and efforts as scholars, and as a society, are more fruitfully directed at understanding community and inequality from a racial perspective than from emphasizing other perspectives that are inattentive to race.

I should offer a brief note about certain words and concepts. The reader will see that I use the word(s) “racial,” “ethnic,” “minorities,” and “racial/ethnic” frequently in the book. For present purposes, I use these words essentially interchangeably; at the same time I fully recognize, of course, that each concept may have different meanings to different people in social relations and public discourse – as well as in analyses undertaken

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by scholars within and across scholarly disciplines. There are somewhat different understandings and often contentiousness about the meaning(s) and application(s) of the words. I acknowledge that complexity by using the various terms as they seem most appropriate and clear in specific instances, though I can hardly begin to address (much less settle) the issues connected with the various understandings. Instead, I sometimes use the terms separately (though their meanings may overlap) and sometimes use them together. That said, the group most commonly and directly considered in assessing the many questions addressed is blacks/African Americans, although Hispanics/Latinos are also discussed on several occasions.

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Acknowledgments

A large number of friends, family, colleagues, and fellow scholars have played significant roles in the development of this book, and many of them in more than one way. I appreciate all their encouragement, inspiration, and good will – more than I can say.

Caroline J. Tolbert, a co-author with me on various papers on the racial diversity thesis, co-authored Chapter 5 of this book; she also provided many useful comments and suggestions on several parts of the project. Rob Preuhs contributed a great deal through his thoughtful comments on a range of ideas concerning the topics covered here and a host of related issues; he also provided data analysis and collection that strengthened the book's empirical base.

I have also learned much from conversations with Ken Meier, Rene Rocha, and Dan Hawes as well as from their research on racial diversity and social capital, part of which is drawn on directly in this book. I have likewise gained important insights on the topics from discussions with and research of Eric Uslaner and Kim Hill.

I appreciate the comments and observations of those who attended a presentation (in April 2002) at the Center for American Political Studies (CAPS) in Harvard's Department of Government; they include Theda Skocpol, Robert Putnam, Jennifer

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Hochschild, and Sidney Verba. The paper I presented there was one of my early analyses of racial diversity and its relationship to social capital.

The University of Notre Dame has been most generous in supporting all my scholarly and teaching endeavors. I am thankful to all my colleagues in the Department of Political Science there. Those whose interest and ideas most directly intersect with the subject of this book, and with whom I discussed it and from whom I benefited, are Al Tillery, John Griffin, Ben Radcliff, and Tony Messina. Some all-too-brief conversations with sociologist Robert Fishman also helped. The resources provided by the Packey J. Dee III Professorship in American Democracy have fostered my scholarly efforts immensely over the last five years. Considerable support from the Institute for Latino Studies was also helpful.

I'm especially grateful to Susan Clarke and to Larry Dodd for strongly urging me to pursue this project, as well as for their friendship, advice, and wisdom over many years. Mara Sidney has been similarly supportive.

I have also been stimulated by and have learned a great deal from my collaborators on other projects. In addition to a number of those previously mentioned, Luis Fraga, John Garcia, Michael Jones-Correa, Valerie Martinez-Ebers, and Gary Segura – my co-investigators on the Latino National Survey (LNS) – have become close scholarly companions and friends.

I also express deep gratitude to social sciences editor Eric Crahan at Cambridge University Press for his support and guidance as well as to copy editor Matt Darnell for his wonderfully careful and thorough work on the manuscript.

Finally, I express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to those who are closest to me: my wife, Kathy, my daughter, Lindsay, and my step-children, Chris and Jen, as well as my mother, father, and sister. I'm so very fortunate, and most thankful, for the inspiration they provide.