

Being Free in Obama's America: Racial Differences in Perceptions of Constraints on Political Action

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Abstract: Many studies of interracial differences in rates of political participation pay too little attention to African Americans' perceptions of whether they can freely participate in politics. Survey evidence collected over the last several decades has consistently shown that black Americans perceive much less political freedom available to them than do white Americans. The gap in perceived freedom has narrowed somewhat in recent years but remains large. Following the empowerment hypothesis of Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam, black perceptions of freedom increased with the election of Barack Obama to the American presidency. But perhaps unexpectedly, the empowerment bonus has not persisted, especially among conservative and fundamentalist blacks. Because African Americans do not perceive that their government would permit various types of political action, it is likely that substantial interracial differences exist in non-voting types of political participation, especially political action directed against governmental authority.

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Like many things of value in the contemporary United States, participation in politics is unequally distributed among racial groups.¹ For instance, the political right that the U.S. Supreme Court established in its *Citizens United* decision – the right to spend without limits in an effort to influence election outcomes – does not affect all groups, racial and otherwise, equally. But more mundane forms of political participation also exhibit large inequalities. As Zoltan Hajnal and Jessica Trounstine summarize, “Study after study of American elections has found that individuals with ample resources vote much more regularly than those with few resources – the poor, racial and ethnic minorities and the less educated.”² Many other, non-voting forms of political participation also exhibit stark differences in the rates at which different groups engage in such activities.

Because participation levels are unequal, the fruits of politics may not flow equally to all groups.

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A rich but varied literature has emerged documenting substantial class-based bias in the public policies adopted by government at both the national and state level; the literature indicates general agreement that the working class and the poor are the least well represented.³ Because social class is closely related to race, one might also infer that public policies are often tinged with the preferences of white Americans. Thus, substantial public policy inequalities may emerge from inequalities in rates of political participation.

While interracial differences in levels of political participation are commonly noted by researchers, they are not as simple as might be supposed. Black Americans tend to participate at equal or even higher levels than white Americans when it comes to voting, at least in presidential elections.⁴ (Some evidence indicates that participation rates are lower in subnational elections.⁵) However, political participation involves far more than just voting; indeed, voting may be one of the least efficacious ways to participate in American politics. Many believe that non-electoral rates of participation are considerably lower among racial minorities.⁶ It is unquestionably more difficult to research participation in state and local elections and in non-voting forms of participation than it is to examine presidential voting patterns, but the limited evidence available suggests lower participation rates by African Americans.

Extant research has developed reasonably comprehensive models of the factors affecting levels of individual political participation. The conventional explanations for differences in levels of political participation have to do with (1) individual attributes, (2) institutional structures, and (3) cultural values and norms. Individual attributes are typically characterized as involving “resources and roots”; that is, resources such as political knowledge

and social class enhance participation,⁷ as does “connectedness” to a local community.⁸ Institutional structures involve the “rules of the game,” including laws affecting the ease of voting and disclosure laws for political contributions.⁹ Cultural values and norms – the principal focus of this essay – are represented in the literature by senses of political efficacy and empowerment,¹⁰ as well as perceptions that political participation is possible¹¹ and that it is encouraged and desirable.¹²

A large body of research addresses the role of individual attributes in shaping political participation.¹³ However, as I have noted, this research generally concludes that African Americans vote as frequently as whites, even if scholars are less certain about the precise roles of resources and roots in accounting for interracial differences in other forms of political action.

Perhaps more promising as an explanation of unequal participation rates is the differential impact of institutions and cultures on racial minorities. For instance, a recent analysis by John Logan and his colleagues examined the hypothesis that the political behavior of blacks in the United States is influenced by environmental and contextual factors. They discovered that voting regulations, especially voter identification requirements, have a strong negative effect on black voting, decreasing the voting rate by 18 percent among African Americans.¹⁴

Other, more positive environmental and contextual factors may also be at work. In a widely cited paper, Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam discovered that the election of an African American to a local political position (mayor) seemed to lead to more trusting and efficacious attitudes among black citizens, in turn creating heightened levels of electoral participation.¹⁵ In their recent follow-up analysis, John Logan and colleagues found similar results; they concluded: “The effect of

James L.
Gibson

having more than five co-ethnic public officials in the metropolitan area is positive and very strong for blacks, resulting in an increase of *more than 30 percent* in registration and *more than 40 percent* in voting.”¹⁶ This empowerment effect is among the strongest influences on rates of political participation among black Americans.¹⁷

Beyond empowerment, other cultural norms and expectations may influence rates of political participation. One finding that is often overlooked concerns interracial differences in perceptions of available political freedom. At least in the 1980s, interracial differences were quite substantial, with blacks perceiving much less political freedom available across a variety of behaviors and contexts.¹⁸ And context matters for perceptions of freedom: black Americans living in communities that were more politically tolerant were more likely to perceive freedom as available to them. Perhaps ironically, even tolerance of racists (those who assert that blacks are genetically inferior) enhanced black political freedom, most likely because communities tolerant of racists were also tolerant of many forms of minority political opinion.

The empowerment findings, the findings on perceptions of political freedom, and the finding that electoral institutions affect rates of political participation suggest that rates of political participation for African Americans are particularly sensitive to environmental and contextual factors; indeed, participation may be more strongly affected by these factors than by resources and roots. Black Americans seem to perceive important external constraints on their ability to engage in political action and therefore are fairly easily dissuaded from participating by institutional barriers and impediments – but there are also means by which African Americans can gain a sense of empower-

ment that would enhance their political participation.¹⁹

Research on black perceptions of political freedom is now dated, with most of the evidence drawn from a 1987 survey. Although change in interracial relations has not been uniformly positive in the last few decades,²⁰ one might suspect that black Americans no longer perceive strong constraints on their political freedom. Indeed, from the empowerment findings, one might also hypothesize that the election of Barack Obama to the American presidency has extinguished any interracial differences in perceived freedom to participate.

The purpose of this essay is to investigate subjective political freedom among black Americans. This is not the freedom of laws and constitutions, but is instead the belief that one can freely choose to participate in various forms of political activity. Using data from earlier studies, I consider how perceptions of freedom have changed over the long term. More important, I test the empowerment hypothesis by comparing survey evidence from before Obama’s election (2005–2008) with comparable data from after his inauguration (2009–2011). Finally, in light of the growing diversity among blacks, I consider how political freedom is distributed across various subgroups, looking at ideological and social-class differences in particular. While Obama’s ascension did elevate black perceptions of political freedom, I conclude that the effect was short-lived; soon after his election, strong black/white differences in perceptions of freedom reemerged. These differences have important implications for contemporary American politics.

The analysis in this paper is based primarily on nationally representative surveys conducted between 2005 and 2011.²¹ Two specific design features of the surveys

should be noted. First, the 2005 survey was conducted face to face; the remaining surveys were conducted over the telephone. Second, the telephone survey samples in 2010 and 2011 combined a typical random digit dial subsample with a cell phone subsample. I suspect that the latter feature is of little consequence. However, as the data will show, the 2005 findings often stand out.

Do black and white Americans perceive the same levels of political freedom? To answer this first question, the surveys included the simple freedom questions first asked by sociologist Samuel Stouffer in his 1954 survey.²² Table 1 reports the results.

Black Americans are significantly more likely than whites to perceive limits on political freedom. While 14.8 percent of whites assert that hardly anyone feels free to speak their mind, 22.1 percent of blacks hold this view; this interracial difference is highly statistically significant. Blacks are only slightly (but significantly) more likely than whites to say that they feel less free to speak their minds than in the past (34.3 percent versus 30.0 percent), although this interracial difference is perhaps muted by the comparative phrase “as you used to” in the question wording. Generally, however, African Americans perceive less political freedom available to them than do whites.

Table 1 also reports the answers to a question about what sorts of political activities the government would allow. Here we see more dramatic interracial differences in perceived freedom. For example, 67.7 percent of whites assert that the government would allow them to make a speech in public, whereas only 45.7 percent of African Americans hold this view.²³ Across the three specific political activities given in the question, interracial differences are large and highly statistically significant. These results replicate the findings of earlier studies:

black Americans today perceive much greater constraints on their political freedom than do white Americans.²⁴

James L.
Gibson

A comparison of these findings to older data on perceived freedom may be enlightening. Comparing the data in the third section of Table 1 with my report on the same items from a 1987 survey reveals that both black and white Americans perceive fewer constraints on their freedom today, but that the change has been somewhat greater among blacks.²⁵ For instance, in 1987, 63.7 percent of the black respondents thought that the government would not allow them to organize meetings; in these contemporary surveys, this figure drops to 50.5 percent. The percentage of whites viewing government constraints on their ability to organize meetings dropped from 39.5 percent to 32.3 percent. These data seem to confirm the conclusion that perceptions of available political freedom are indeed sensitive to external environmental, contextual, and temporal constraints, and that black/white differences have not been extinguished in the last few decades.

Have black perceptions of freedom changed from the time prior to the election of Obama to the time after? That is, do we see any evidence of the *empowerment hypothesis* at work since Obama’s election? Because the surveys reported in Table 1 were conducted over the period from 2005 to 2011, temporal trends can be investigated.²⁶

Figure 1 reports the percentages of blacks and whites who claimed that they feel as free as they used to. Among whites, the differences across the six surveys are statistically significant, but they are small in magnitude ($\eta = 0.07$) and are driven mainly by the relatively high level of freedom observed in 2005 as well as the dip in perceived freedom in 2011.²⁷

Table 1
Differences between Blacks and Whites in Perceptions of Political Freedom

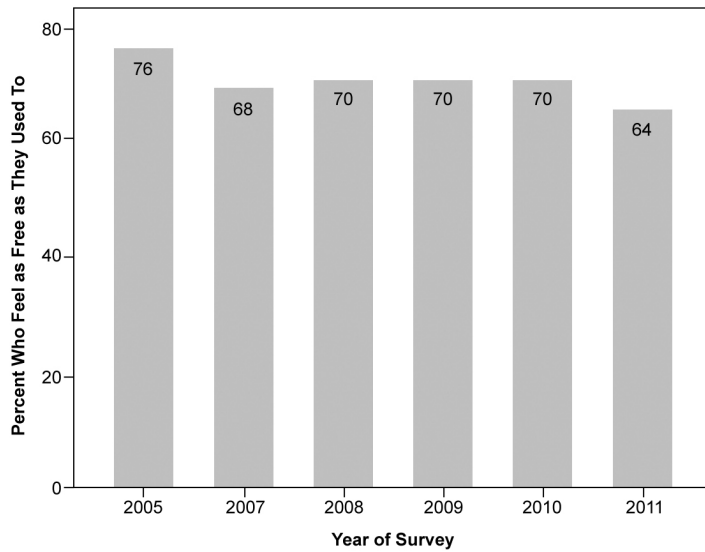
	Whites	Blacks	$p(\chi^2)$	Gamma
<i>Perceived Freedom of Others</i>				
All feel free	33.7%	27.5%		
Some feel free	51.4%	50.4%		
Hardly any feel free	14.8%	22.1%		
Total	100% (3,528)	100% (575)	<0.001	0.17
<i>My Own Freedom</i>				
As free as used to be	70.0%	65.7%		
Not as free as used to be	30.0%	34.3%		
Total	100% (3,531)	100% (578)	0.041	0.10
<i>Whether Government Would Allow Me To*</i>				
Make a speech – allow	67.7%	45.7%		
Uncertain; don't know	1.3%	2.2%		
Make a speech – not allow	31.0%	52.1%		
Total	100% (3,589)	100% (584)	<0.000	0.37
Organize meetings – allow	65.1%	47.2%		
Uncertain; don't know	2.6%	2.4%		
Organize meetings – not allow	32.3%	50.5%		
Total	100% (3,588)	100% (583)	<0.000	0.33
Hold demonstrations – allow	73.5%	54.2%		
Uncertain; don't know	2.2%	2.7%		
Hold demonstrations – not allow	24.3%	43.1%		
Total	100% (3,589)	100% (583)	<0.000	0.32

*The test results reported are based on the five-point response sets, which ranged from “definitely allow” to “definitely not allow.” $p(\chi^2)$ = probability associated with a chi-square test. Gamma = degree of association between race and the freedom responses. The freedom questions read: Which of these views is closest to your own? 1) All people in this country feel as free to say what they think as they used to; 2) Some people do not feel as free to say what they think as they used to; 3) Hardly anybody feels as free to say what they think as they used to. What about you personally? Do you or don't you feel as free to speak your mind as you used to? 1) Yes, I do feel as free; 2) No, I feel less free. Suppose you felt very strongly that something the government was doing was very wrong and you wanted to do something about it. Do you think the government would definitely allow, probably allow, probably not allow, or definitely not allow you to a) make a speech in public criticizing the actions of the government; b) organize public meetings to oppose the government; c) organize protest marches and demonstrations to oppose the actions of the government? Source: Table created by author based on data from Freedom and Tolerance Surveys, 2005–2011.

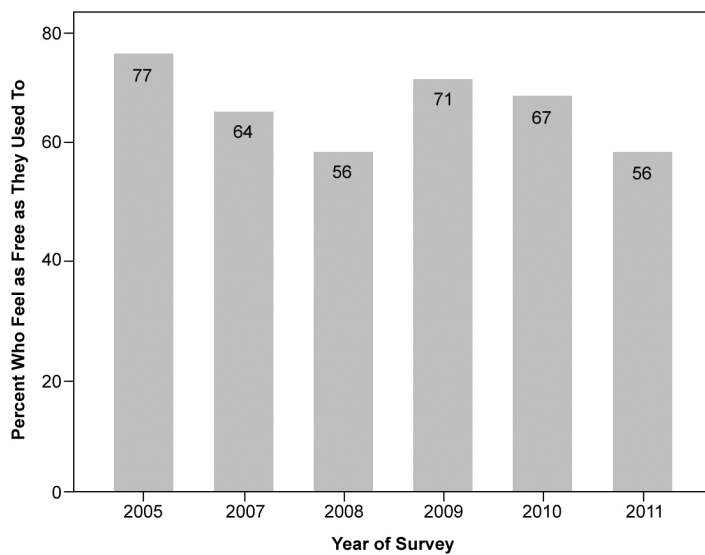
Figure 1
Interracial Differences in Feeling Free to Speak One's Mind

James L.
Gibson

White Americans



Black Americans



The year 2006 is not included in the survey data because no survey was conducted in 2006.
Source: Figure created by author based on data from Freedom and Tolerance Surveys, 2005 – 2011.

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For blacks, the relationship is statistically significant and considerably stronger ($\eta = 0.16$), and a suggestive pattern can be found in the data. Like whites, blacks expressed a somewhat higher level of perceived freedom in the 2005 survey. More important, however, is the rather substantial spike in perceived political freedom in the first survey after Obama's inauguration in 2009. Yet since then, black perceptions of freedom have reverted to pre-Obama levels. This trend is based on a small number of surveys and a small number of black respondents within each survey. But if the data are to be believed, there was some effect of the Obama presidency on black perceptions of political freedom, though it was short-lived.

Figure 1 also reveals a rather marked decline in black perceptions of freedom in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election.²⁸ This trend may reflect heightened racial tensions associated with Obama's campaign, as anti-black sentiment found a somewhat legitimate outlet via partisan politics. The same may be true of the 2011 findings, as partisan attacks on Obama reached a crescendo. These data strongly suggest that environmental and contextual influences on perceptions of available political freedom are substantial.

I also consider whether perceptions of governmental constraints on political freedom exhibit this same temporal pattern.²⁹ As Figure 2 shows, among white Americans, a significant difference exists across time, but again, the relationship is weak ($\eta = 0.08$). Among African Americans, the same pattern emerges as in Figure 1: perceptions of freedom rise immediately after the election of Obama but then quickly recede to pre-election levels ($\eta = 0.16$). Electing an African American to the presidency raised black perceptions of political freedom, but only for a fairly short period. By 2011, perceptions of freedom among blacks were at the same level

as in 2005. Yet the data do not reveal a dip in perceived freedom prior to the election in late Fall 2008. Comparing the findings in Figures 1 and 2 seems to indicate that the constraints on black political freedom in 2008 were more cultural in nature (and hence more stable) and were not specifically attributable to governmental institutions.

These data provide an important amendment to the empowerment hypothesis. Following earlier research, I find that perceptions of available political freedom seem to be boosted among this minority group when a co-ethnic is elected to a salient political office. This effect, however, is ephemeral. Empowerment waxes, but then wanes. Cross-sectional research such as that by Franklin Gilliam and Karen Kaufmann could not, by design, find that the effect of empowerment deteriorates over time.³⁰

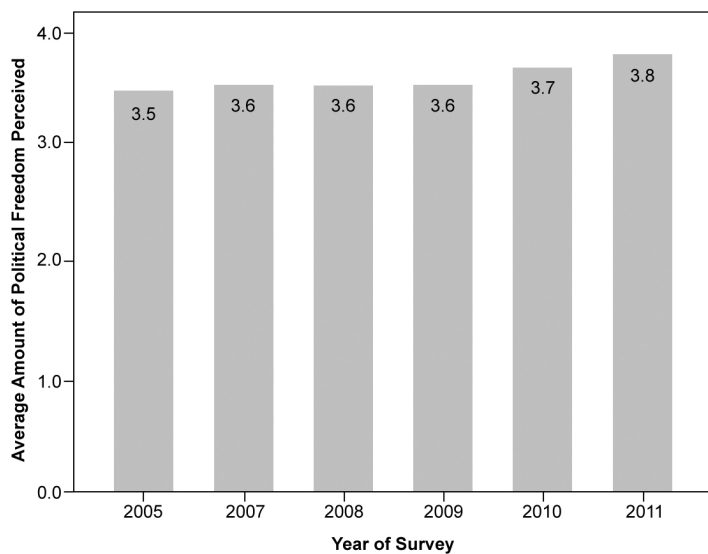
As Lawrence Bobo has noted, one of the salient characteristics of the racial divide in the contemporary United States is the growing heterogeneity within the black population.³¹ My data on black perceptions of freedom support Bobo's observation: on many of the measures, blacks separate roughly between half who perceive constraints on their freedom and half who do not. This raises the question of whether there are systematic differences among blacks in how political freedom is perceived. One hypothesis is that perceptions of freedom reflect one's social class, as much or even more than one's race. Perceptions of freedom might also reflect other demographic characteristics. To be certain that these data point to true racial differences, we must consider the correlates of perceptions of political freedom. Table 2 reports the results.

By far, the most powerful predictor of levels of perceived freedom is education: those with more education are consider-

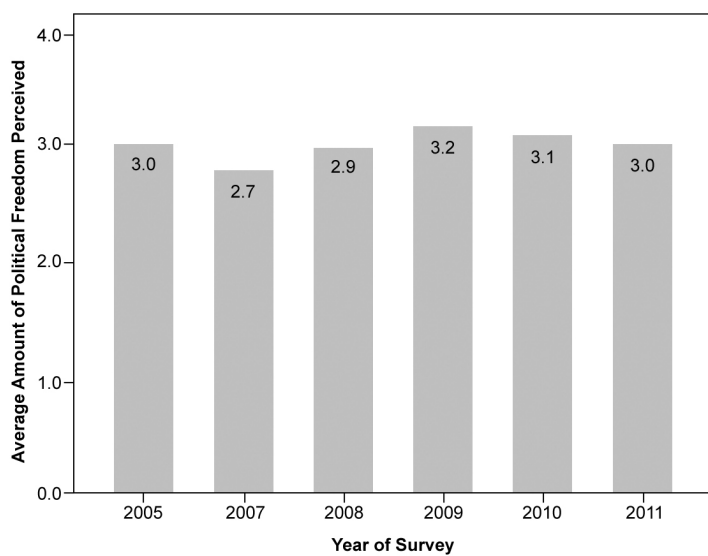
Figure 2
Interracial Differences in Perceived Governmental Constraints on Political Freedom

James L.
Gibson

White Americans



Black Americans



The year 2006 is not included in the survey data because no survey was conducted in 2006.
Source: Figure created by author based on data from Freedom and Tolerance Surveys, 2005 – 2011.

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Table 2
Predictors of Perceptions of Political Freedom among African Americans, 2005 – 2011

	b	s.e.	β	r
Level of education	0.19	0.03	0.31**	0.32
Home ownership	-0.02	0.10	-0.01	0.05
Age	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.04
Gender	0.13	0.09	0.06	0.07
Party identification	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.04
Ideological identification	0.07	0.02	0.13*	0.21
Born again?	-0.27	0.10	-0.11*	-0.15
Religiosity	-0.06	0.03	-0.07	-0.13
Intercept	1.53	0.27		
Standard Deviation – Dependent Variable	1.19			
Standard Error	1.09			
R ²			0.16**	
N	567			

The dependent variable for this analysis is a continuous variable that ranges from 1 to 5. Significance of standardized regression coefficients (β , R²): * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$. Source: Table created by author based on data from Freedom and Tolerance Surveys, 2005 – 2011.

ably more likely to judge that more freedom is available to them. Poorly educated black Americans do not believe that they have the freedom to participate fully in politics. Looking beyond education, my measure of social class (home ownership) bears no relationship to freedom.

Two other significant predictors of perceived freedom bear mentioning. Liberal African Americans feel freer, as do those who are not “born again.” Put differently, levels of perceived political freedom are lowest among blacks who identify as conservatives and who consider themselves “born again.” To be clear, these results are not necessarily a function of blacks with these attributes being distinct minorities within the black community. Fully 39.1 percent of the respondents rate them-

selves as at least somewhat conservative; 55.6 percent regard themselves as “born again.” With these data it is impossible to determine exactly why conservative and black fundamentalists see constraints on their freedom. However, the lack of freedom seems to reflect something about the attitudes and beliefs that black Americans hold.

I have considered how these respondent attributes interact with the election of President Obama. By adding a dummy variable indicating whether the survey was conducted before or after Obama’s election as well as interaction terms for each of the variables shown in Table 2, I find that the influence of ideological self-identification on perceived freedom is different before and after the election.

Before Obama's election, no relationship exists: $b = -0.01$, which is not statistically significant. After the election, the coefficient balloons to 0.17 , which is highly statistically significant. Thus, conservative blacks and liberal blacks perceived equivalent levels of freedom prior to the election. After, conservative blacks felt markedly less free than liberal blacks.

Although the diminishing numbers of cases make analysis a bit shaky, it appears that the empowerment effects of the Obama victory continued to be felt by moderate and liberal blacks, but not by conservative blacks. Figure 3 reports these relationships.

I reiterate that the numbers of cases are small for this complicated analysis. Nonetheless, it appears that whatever the effect of empowerment may be, it is at least in part an empowerment of ideology, not of race. Indeed, note that the correlations between ideological self-identifications and perceptions of freedom are -0.13 , 0.07 , 0.17 , 0.13 , 0.51 , and 0.57 , for 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, respectively. This dramatic change in the interconnection of ideology and perceived freedom among black Americans seems to overwhelm any possible effects of racial empowerment. Instead, it seems to imply a strong ideological component to minority group empowerment.

Research on political participation typically looks first to the attributes of individuals – their resources and roots – as predictors of high levels of participation. Political scientists usually assume that if people do not engage in political action, it is because they are not resourceful enough to do so, or because their levels of resources are insufficiently powerful to overcome institutional impediments to participation (for example, voter registration regulations). Simple models of individual resources paired against barriers

to political action carry the day when it comes to understanding why some participate in politics and others do not. *James L. Gibson*

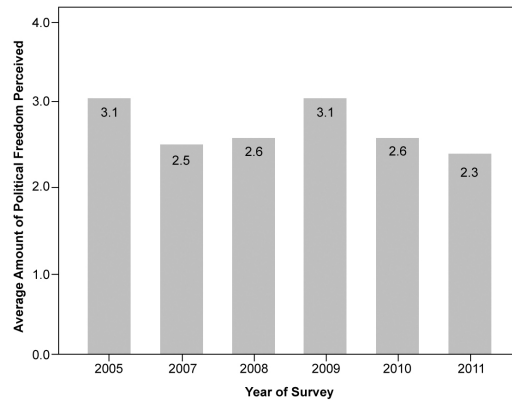
A somewhat different approach to understanding variability in degrees of political involvement focuses instead on individual perceptions of the availability of freedom to participate in one form or another. Rather than asking whether citizens are sufficiently knowledgeable to participate, this approach asks whether citizens perceive relatively cost-free opportunities to engage in political action. Earlier research has shown that objective characteristics of the environment, such as restrictive voting laws, influence the participatory behavior of African Americans. My research points to beliefs about available freedom, and especially interracial differences in such beliefs, as an important influence on rates of political participation. For many Americans, perceived freedom to act seems to be a necessary condition for political participation.

Black Americans are much less likely than whites to perceive that their government will allow them to engage in ordinary (but non-voting) forms of political participation. The election of a black American to the U.S. presidency did seem to empower African Americans, causing an increase in levels of perceived freedom. But that increase seems to have been epiphenomenal, with perceived levels of freedom after 2009 soon reverting to their prior level. The boost in empowerment that earlier research has documented may be of little long-term consequence.³²

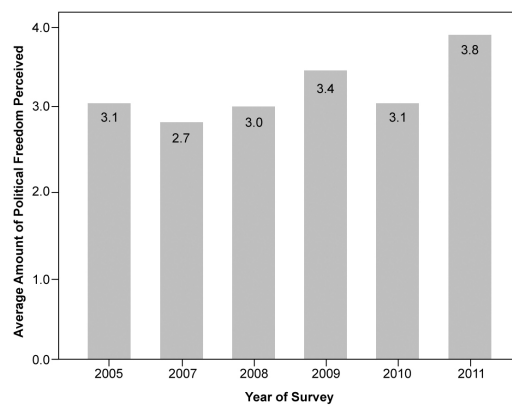
Instead, ideology and religiosity are now fairly strongly connected to perceptions of freedom among black Americans. As I have shown elsewhere, perceptions of freedom among Christian fundamentalists (irrespective of race) are among the most constrained in contemporary American politics.³³ The evidence of my current analysis perhaps points to the devel-

Figure 3 Empowerment Effects across Different Ideological Self-Identifications of African Americans

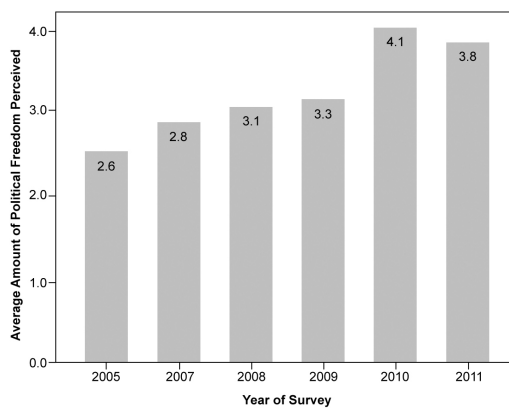
Conservatives



Moderates



Liberals



The year 2006 is not included in the survey data because no survey was conducted in 2006.

Source: Figure created by author based on data from Freedom and Tolerance Surveys, 2005 – 2011.

opment of noticeable fissures within the black community along the lines of religion and ideology.³⁴

There is little need to reiterate that the political freedom I consider in this paper is subjective, not objective. It is the freedom that resides in the minds of citizens, not in laws or constitutions. I offer no judgment as to whether this is a “false consciousness,” especially in the context of continuing battles over who is and is not allowed to participate in American politics. Not everyone in America wants everyone to participate fully in politics. After all, elections turn on whether dif-

ferent segments of the electorate participate at greater or lesser rates. If citizens with opposing viewpoints can be dissuaded, impeded, or intimidated into not participating, elections can be more easily shaped. Given the objective reality of participation wars in contemporary American politics, it is hardly surprising that some would perceive serious constraints on the freedom available to them, and that even the election of a co-ethnic to America’s highest office would have little long-term ability to inoculate against those constraints.

James L.
Gibson

ENDNOTES

Acknowledgments: I am grateful for comments from Chris Wlezien, Frank Gilliam, and Eric L. McDaniel on an earlier version of this essay. The Freedom and Tolerance Surveys were funded by the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis. I greatly appreciate the support provided for this research by Steven S. Smith, Director of the Weidenbaum Center.

- ¹ Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- ² Zoltan Hajnal and Jessica Trounstine, “Where Turnout Matters: The Consequences of Uneven Turnout in City Politics,” *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2) (May 2005): 515.
- ³ For example, Patrick Flavin, “Income Inequality and Policy Representation in the American States,” *American Politics Research* 40 (1) (2012): 29–59; Ellen Rigby and Gerald C. Wright, “Whose Statehouse Democracy? Policy Responsiveness to Poor versus Rich Constituents in Poor versus Rich States,” in *Who Gets Represented?* ed. Peter K. Enns and Christopher Wlezien (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 223–246; Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Martin Gilens, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (5) (2005): 778–796.
- ⁴ See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*; Hajnal and Trounstine, “Where Turnout Matters”; and Jan E. Leighley, *Strength in Numbers: The Political Mobilization of Racial and Ethnic Minorities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- ⁶ For example, Hajnal and Trounstine, “Where Turnout Matters,” 531.
- ⁷ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*.
- ⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Nicholas H. Wolfinger and Raymond E. Wolfinger, “Family Structure and Voter Turnout,” *Social Forces* 86 (4) (2008): 1513–1528.
- ⁹ Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980).

- ¹⁰ Lawrence Bobo and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., "Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment," *American Political Science Review* 84 (2) (June 1990): 377–393.
- ¹¹ James L. Gibson, "The Political Consequences of Intolerance: Cultural Conformity and Political Freedom," *American Political Science Review* 86 (2) (June 1992): 338–356.
- ¹² Adrian D. Pantoja, Ricardo Ramirez, and Gary M. Segura, "Citizens by Choice, Voters by Necessity: Patterns in Political Mobilization by Naturalized Latinos," *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (4) (December 2001): 729–750.
- ¹³ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus*.
- ¹⁴ John R. Logan, Jennifer Darrah, and Sookhee Oh, "The Impact of Race and Ethnicity, Immigration and Political Context on Participation in American Electoral Politics," *Social Forces* 90 (3) (March 2012): 1014. They also discover that "immigrant receptivity" in the local context strongly influences the participation rates of Hispanics. See also Gordon F. De Jong and Quynh-Giang Tran, "Warm Welcome, Cool Welcome: Mapping Receptivity Toward Immigrants in the U.S.," *Population Today* 29 (8) (2001): 1, 4–5; and Jennifer Van Hook, Susan K. Brown, and Frank D. Bean, "For Love or Money? Welfare Reform and Immigrant Naturalization," *Social Forces* 85 (2) (2006): 643–666.
- ¹⁵ Bobo and Gilliam, "Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment."
- ¹⁶ Logan, Darrah, and Oh, "The Impact of Race and Ethnicity, Immigration and Political Context on Participation in American Electoral Politics," 1014; emphasis added.
- ¹⁷ Ebonya Washington, "How Black Candidates Affect Voter Turnout," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121 (3) (2006): 973–998.
- ¹⁸ James L. Gibson, "The Political Freedom of African Americans: A Contextual Analysis of Racial Attitudes, Political Tolerance, and Individual Liberty," *Political Geography* 14 (1995): 571–599.
- ¹⁹ Some research shows that government monitoring of citizens' political activities actually increases political participation: for example, Wendy K. Tam Cho, James G. Gimpel, and Tony Wu, "Clarifying the Role of SES in Political Participation: Policy Threat and Arab American Mobilization," *The Journal of Politics* 68 (4) (November 2006): 977–991; and Brian S. Krueger, "Government Surveillance and Political Participation on the Internet," *Social Science Computer Review* 23 (4) (Winter 2005): 439–452. How, then, can I reconcile the hypothesis that perceptions of constraints on freedom limit political action? Samuel Best and Brian Krueger offer an interesting and plausible answer, focusing on the emotions aroused by government surveillance; see Samuel J. Best and Brian S. Krueger, "Government Monitoring and Political Participation in the United States: The Distinct Roles of Anger and Anxiety," *American Politics Research* 39 (1) (January 2011): 85–117. In response to learning that the government is monitoring one's behavior, two emotions may arise: anger and/or anxiety. These emotions seem to have the opposite consequences for political action. As Best and Krueger show, anger *increases* the likelihood of action; anxiety *decreases* the likelihood. If members of minority groups feel more disempowered to do anything about the monitoring, whereas members of majority groups feel more efficacious, then the dominant emotion among minorities would be the participation-blocking anxiety while the dominant emotion among majorities would be the action-enhancing anger. This conjecture relies on linking majority/minority status to the type of emotion experienced, largely through mechanisms involving personal efficacy. Each of the linkages in this model would profit from further empirical investigation.
- ²⁰ See, for example, Lawrence D. Bobo, "Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today," *Dædalus* 140 (2) (Spring 2011): 11–36.
- ²¹ Methodological details of the Freedom and Tolerance Surveys are discussed at the conclusion of the endnotes, on pages 128–129. Note that no survey was conducted in 2006.

- ²² Samuel C. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955). Stouffer's research is often used as a benchmark for studying changes in political intolerance and perceptions of political freedom; see, for example, James L. Gibson, "Intolerance and Political Repression in the United States: A Half-Century After McCarthyism," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (1) (January 2008): 96–108. However, Stouffer did not report his results by the race of the respondents, so interracial comparisons cannot be made. James L. Gibson
- ²³ One of the findings from Table 1 is that African Americans are only slightly less likely than whites to say that they feel free when asked in general terms; but when asked about specific government restraints on political activities, blacks are dramatically more likely to perceive such restraints. The data suggest that this is because perceptions of restraints translate into holistic judgments at a considerably stronger rate among whites.
- ²⁴ It is perhaps ironic that an earlier study found that perceived political freedom was similar for white Americans and residents of the Soviet Union, with black Americans lagging considerably behind both whites and Soviets in the days of the "Evil Empire"; see James L. Gibson, "Perceived Political Freedom in the Soviet Union," *The Journal of Politics* 55 (4) (November 1993): 936–974.
- ²⁵ Gibson, "The Political Freedom of African Americans," 577.
- ²⁶ Considerable caution must be taken with interpreting my findings when the surveys are broken down by year and by race of the respondent; the numbers of cases are typically of insufficient power to reveal statistically significant differences. These findings must therefore be treated as highly tentative and, to a considerable degree, speculative.
- ²⁷ Recall that the 2005 interview was face to face, whereas the other interviews in the series were via telephone. Face-to-face interviewing generates relatively high social desirability effects, and feeling free is most likely judged to be desirable by most Americans. Therefore, I tend to slightly discount the 2005 findings, attributing part of their differences from the later surveys to survey mode effects.
- ²⁸ Note that the 2008 survey was fielded in the early summer of that year.
- ²⁹ For analytical purposes, a scale of perceived governmental constraints on political freedom would be useful. As it turns out, the three indicators of freedom (as given in the survey question) have desirable psychometric properties. There is strong support for the hypothesis that a unidimensional latent construct underlies the responses to these items. A Common Factor Analysis of the three items produces a strongly unidimensional solution, with the eigenvalue of the second extracted factor of only 0.41, and with nearly equal loadings of each of the items on the first factor. In addition, the three-item set has unusually high reliability for only three indicators (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82). Because the factor score from this analysis is correlated with a simple summated index derived from the three items at 0.999, I will use the index, which is somewhat more intuitively understandable, in the analysis that follows. With such a strong inter-correlation, it matters not at all whether the index or the factor score is used in the analysis. Highly significant racial differences exist on this index, which is not surprising in light of the findings reported in Table 1 for the individual items. On a simple count of the number of activities thought to be allowed by the government, the mean (and standard deviation) is 2.06 (1.14) for whites and 1.47 (1.25) for blacks.
- ³⁰ Gilliam and Kaufmann investigated the longevity of empowerment using longitudinal data on voting; see Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., and Karen M. Kaufmann, "Is There an Empowerment Life Cycle? Long-Term Black Empowerment and Its Influence on Voter Participation," *Urban Affairs Review* 33 (6) (July 1998): 741–766. They find that empowerment effects persist, at least in the three cities that they studied. They note, however, that empowerment may have a "life cycle" in the sense that empowerment raises expectations, which are often unsatisfied, resulting in political alienation. I somewhat resist comparing the election of a black mayor with the election of a black president; and general perceptions of available political freedom are not the same as voting in elections. Moreover, the effects that I observe

in these data may be in part a function of backlash among white conservatives as they have mobilized to defeat Obama; and given presidential politics, this process may have evolved in a shorter time span than characterizes local politics. However, Gilliam and Kaufmann are certainly right in calling for more research on the dynamics of political empowerment and alienation.

³¹ Bobo, "Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism."

³² I note as well that it is not clear that voter mobilization campaigns necessarily do much to reduce inequities in political participation. See, for example, Kevin Arceneaux and David Nickerson, "Who is Mobilized to Vote? A Re-Analysis of 11 Field Experiments," *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (1) (January 2009): 1–16.

³³ Gibson, "Intolerance and Political Repression in the United States."

³⁴ Although Obama was speaking about white Pennsylvanians at the time, perhaps some in the black community have never gotten over his criticism of working class voters for clinging to their "guns or religion" in times of stress. See http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2008/04/obama_they_clin.html (accessed April 24, 2012).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The 2005 Survey. This survey is based on a nationally representative sample interviewed face to face during Summer 2005. The fieldwork took place from mid-May until mid-July 2005. A total of 1,001 interviews were completed, with a response rate of 40.03 percent (American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR] Response Rate #3). No respondent substitution was allowed; up to six callbacks were executed. The average length of interview was 83.8 minutes (with a standard deviation of 23.9 minutes). The median length of interview was 77 minutes. The difference between the mean and the median is due to a handful of extremely long interviews. The data were subjected to some minor "post-stratification," with the proviso that the weighted numbers of cases must correspond to the actual number of completed interviews. Interviews were offered in both English and Spanish (with the Spanish version of the questionnaire prepared through conventional translation/back-translation procedures). Samples such as this have a margin of error of approximately ± 3.08 percent.

The 2007–2011 Surveys. Each of these surveys was conducted by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas Inc. (SRBI/Abt Associates). In 2007, 2008, and 2009, we used a standard random digit dial (RDD) design; in 2010 and 2011, the RDD sample was supplemented with a cell phone subsample.

2007–2009: These surveys are based on a nationally representative RDD sample. Conducted by SRBI, the surveys utilized computer-assisted telephone interviewing. The initial questionnaires were subjected to a formal test, and, on the basis of the results of the pretests, were significantly revised. Within households, the respondents were selected randomly. The final data sets were subjected to some relatively minor post-stratification and were also weighted to accommodate variability in the size of the respondents' households.

In 2007, the interviews averaged around 25 minutes in length. The AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 43.8 percent, and the AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 29.5 percent (see AAPOR 2004), which is close to the current average for telephone surveys; see Allyson L. Holbrook, Jon A. Krosnick, and Alison Pfent, "The Causes and Consequences of Response Rates in Surveys by the News Media and Government Contractor Survey Research Firms," in *Advances in Telephone Survey Methodology*, ed. James M. Lepkowski et al. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

In 2008, the interviews averaged about 30 minutes. The AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 43.6 percent, and the AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 30.5 percent.

In 2009, the interviews averaged around 37 minutes in length. The AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 43.6 percent, and the AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 30.5 percent.

2010–2011: The 2010 and 2011 surveys used a research design that combines a standard RDD subsample with a cell phone subsample. Samples were drawn from both the landline and cell phone national RDD frames. Persons with residential landlines were not screened out

of the cell-phone sample. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC, according to SRBI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were drawn with equal probabilities from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained one or more residential directory listings. The cell-phone sample was drawn through a systematic sampling from 1000-blocks dedicated to cellular service according to the Telcordia database. For the landline portion of the sample, the respondents were selected randomly within households. James L.
Gibson

In 2010, the interviews averaged around 28 minutes in length. The overall AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 47.6 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 30.9 percent. For the RDD stratum, the AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 49.1 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 30.0 percent. The rates within the cell-phone stratum are slightly lower: the AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 41.6 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 26.6 percent.

In 2011, the interviews averaged around 28 minutes in length. The overall AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 43.7 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 29.6 percent. For the RDD stratum, the AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 43.3 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 30.3 percent. The rates within the cell-phone stratum are similar: the AAPOR Cooperation Rate #3 was 45.5 percent, and the overall AAPOR Response Rate #3 was 27.0 percent.