Contents

1 The Unique Story of the Suburban African American, 1

2 How Suburban African Americans Fit into Our Social Science Theories, 30

3 Suburban African Americans and Social Networks, 76

4 Suburban African American Ideology and Perception of the Cultural Community, 101

5 The Suburban Political Environment and Its Effects on the Participation of Suburban African Americans, 123

6 Conclusion, 140

Appendix, 147

Notes, 181

Bibliography, 187

Index, 195
African Americans
in White Suburbia
1. The Unique Story of the Suburban African American

To say that African Americans have had a tumultuous history in the United States would be an understatement. Even before the founding of the republic, being black meant your labor was not your own and your body could be assaulted with impunity. Even with the end of chattel slavery, mainstream society (the government and individuals) denied blacks access to the political and social structure of the country by both law and practice. It may be just as much of an understatement to say blacks have not made tremendous social and economic progress in the centuries that followed. This book will tell the story of one particular subset of that group—suburban African Americans.

Suburban African Americans find themselves caught between the two worlds of high socioeconomic status (SES) and low race status. Above-average income has afforded the opportunity to move to the suburbs; however, there has been a history of hostility and exclusion based on race that is not lost on the learned. Educational accomplishments have opened occupational opportunities in the most prestigious firms and businesses, yet their new coworkers have neither the same upbringings and interests, nor the same political ideologies and preferences. Suburban African Americans have abundant political resources to influence government, but lack available political choices and candidates who speak to their racial ideology.

However, there are places more welcoming, with people of similar cultures and upbringings, and political elites working toward the type of racial changes they desire. In the traditional municipality, these places are just a short drive away, in the historic African American neighborhood. The question asked in this book is how does this suburban environment, especially the racial makeup of one’s neighborhood and social networks, affect the political behaviors of suburban African Americans who have strong racial identifications and policy preferences aimed at aiding the racial group writ large?

In the following chapters I will show that being one of the few blacks in the neighborhood and workplace makes suburban African Americans feel the discomfort of minority status more acutely. This, in turn, makes them more likely to view their social interactions in these situations as disagreeable and
even hostile to their racial identity. As a result, they seek out more agreeable networks that reinforce their racial identity.\(^2\)

Suburban African Americans can easily find these networks in the majority-black institutions of the historic inner city. Cultivated and refined over centuries, these institutions, such as black churches or civil rights organizations like the NAACP, have dedicated themselves to uplifting the collective group in the face of discrimination. Exposure to these norms will move suburban African Americans toward group-based behaviors even if those behaviors go against their material self-interest. Thus, they will even hold opinions more racially radical\(^3\) than their urban coethnics. This is because their suburban residence and constant minority status will heighten the salience of their racial identity and its role in their political behavior decisions.

Differences among African Americans and whites based on environment lead to the motivating research question of this study. How does the metro suburban environment, with its racial disparities and close geographic proximity to majority black institutions and neighborhoods, shape the political behaviors of the African Americans who live there? In some ways, suburban neighborhoods are no different from other environments in that they impact behavior by shaping the informal and formal opportunities to engage in politics. Informally, the people who constitute one’s neighborhood (and relatedly, one’s workplace), and their demographics, will affect the universe of information to which the individual will have ready access. Social environments cut the cost of acquiring information, which might be conveyed through a conversation at a dinner party or the bumper sticker affixed to a neighbor’s vehicle. Instead of having to seek out information and interpretation from multiple outlets, the embedded network inhabitant will have information brought to them by other network members. Additionally, networks filter this information for consonance. For the most part, people’s networks are comprised of people with whom they have something in common. (However, not every network has the same level of agreement and inhabitants are not always able to choose network partners with impunity, as the review of the literature will show.) Therefore, social network theory suggests that information of interest to an individual should also be of interest to most of the group. This affinity for network members makes proffered information more credible and suggests that the individual will shape his or her (political) behaviors toward the prevailing norm of the network.
Formally, one’s neighbors are also fellow political constituents. Those political ties determine the policies of political jurisdictions and the actions of electoral candidates. Higher income and education levels in suburban neighborhoods suggest that these areas will be more Republican. This setting may be great for African American residents on economic issues like taxes. However, it means that on social issues, like race, there is a chance that even the Democratic candidate’s stance will be more conservative. The people with whom suburban African Americans share racial ideologies may be in a different political jurisdiction for the majority of electoral contests. Yet, just because suburban African Americans cannot vote their interests does not mean they cannot still work to advance them. They could participate by donating money or volunteering to help elect a coethnic running for mayor of the city. In chapter 5 the findings show this to be the case: suburban African Americans engage in more alternative political behaviors than suburban whites and urban African Americans.

Viewed as a collective, African Americans have made large socioeconomic gains that have translated into more residential mobility and occupational prestige, especially in contrast to the political and social environment of the 1960s and 1970s. Gone is the time when state-sanctioned segregation relegated blacks to less prestigious majority neighborhoods in the central city. Yet, present-day suburban African Americans can easily find themselves as one of only a few blacks in their neighborhood. For African Americans who identify closely with their race and culture, this isolation can have a psychological and political effect. Minority status may make one less likely to post the only Democrat sign on the block for fear of exclusion from a social setting. The suburbs are a place that has historically been hostile not only to African Americans’ residence, but even to their mere presence in the neighborhood. Moreover, suburban neighborhood institutions like churches and volunteer organizations will be much less likely to focus their efforts on racial and ethnic minority issues and populations. Fortunately, for the suburban African American these racially focused networks and institutions are just a short drive away.

That minorities of any stripe will seek out reinforcing networks has a long lineage in the literature, as chapter 2 will show. However, these previous studies have not focused specifically on suburban African Americans. This is a subgroup with strong norms of group solidarity. However, they have a socioeconomic separation from others in the group and a geographic separation
from the historic group-based institutions that have cultivated the culture since emancipation. Examining these citizens provides a set of unique circumstances that will surely augment our understanding of the relationship between environment and participation. The implications of researching this population are obvious and important. America is shifting geographically, and more African Americans are moving to the suburbs. At the same time, many contemporary issues cleave along racial lines. If these suburban African Americans identify more with their class than race, as some scholars have suggested, the amount of attention the mainstream pays to racial issues may lessen.

My assumption for this project is that suburban African Americans will not find the networks in which they spend the most time—their neighborhoods and workplaces—conducive to their racial identity and therefore will not look to them for normative signals or information shortcuts. Instead, they will seek out networks in the central city, such as a black church or a historic African American civil rights organization, or even a barbershop. They will also choose participatory behaviors that can better aid their group and reinforce their racial identity, even if they come at a higher resource cost when compared to simple voting.

THE RACIAL STATE OF THE AMERICAN METRO-SUBURBS

According to William Frey of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program and his analysis of the decennial censuses from 1990–2010, the percentage of African Americans living in the suburbs has risen steadily. In 1990 the share of blacks in large metro areas living in the suburbs was 37 percent; it increased to 44 percent in 2000, and 51 percent in 2010 (Frey 2011). Frey says that blacks contributed the majority of suburban population growth in fourteen of the largest metro areas (though this compares to thirty-six areas for whites and forty-nine areas for Latinos). He attributes this shift in African American neighborhood residence to a phenomenon termed “black flight” (Frey 2011, 6), which has connotations similar to “white flight” but describes slightly different concepts and underlying motivations. As opposed to fleeing racial integration and declining property values, Frey attributes black suburbanization, in part, to “the group’s economic progress in recent decades, particularly [among] younger blacks” (Frey 2011, 10). However, Frey suggests that this increase in African American suburban residence may not necessarily lead to less
The Unique Story of the Suburban African American

segregated neighborhoods, as the whites who formerly lived in the suburbs are now moving even farther out into the “exurbs” (Frey 2011).

The Frey article provides a nice aggregate snapshot of African Americans in the suburbs before the individual level analysis in the following chapters. However, a point needs to be made about the romanticized idea of the suburbs versus the post-2010 census reality. While most people would picture tree-lined streets, two-car garages, kids on bikes, and white picket fences, the 2010 census showed that contemporary suburbs have gotten poorer as they have gotten more racially diverse. Some of this change is attributed to population sorting due to the revitalization (or gentrification) of some major central cities. A 2010 Brookings Institution study by Stephen Raphael and Michael Stoll attributes most of the change to “job sprawl,” or the movement of jobs from the central business district to the suburbs (Raphael and Stoll 2010).

African American suburbanization is heavily contingent on income. According to Raphael and Stoll, poor blacks have the lowest suburbanization rate of all racial and ethnic groups. While African Americans as a whole increase their suburbanization as jobs become more decentralized, this decentralization does not statistically increase the likelihood that poor blacks will move to the suburbs. Therefore, as the suburbs as a whole have gotten poorer, the suburban African American population has maintained a higher SES. Again, much of this has to do with higher income whites fleeing even farther to the exurbs. This is also why suburban African Americans are more likely to live in neighborhoods below their income and education levels.

The trend of lower income people moving to the suburbs seems to have missed poor blacks. All of this suggests that suburban African Americans are truly in a unique position compared to all of their neighbors throughout the metro area. They are racially different from their fellow suburban whites and socioeconomically different from their urban coethnics. This begs the question as to which group (neighbors or coethnics) they will most closely resemble. I find that racial identity wins the day.

THE STATE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND POLITICAL RESOURCES

In 2010, more than half of all blacks lived in the suburbs, up 14 percent from 1990 (Frey 2011). This residential mobility has unsurprisingly mirrored the
precipitous rise in SES for African Americans over the same twenty-plus-year period. Utilizing data from the Current Population Survey for every fifth year between 1990 and 2010, I analyze the gains African Americans have made in terms of income, education, and occupational prestige. The upward trend is clear. From 1990 to 2010, the African American high school graduation rate jumped 18 percent (from 66.2 percent to 84.2 percent), more than twice the increase for all races combined over the same period. This equates to a five-year average increase of 4.5 percent, larger than the same measure for both whites, Latinos, and all races combined7 (see figure 1.1). Gains in African American college graduation have been more modest, an overall increase of 8.6 percent over the same time period.

Increases in individual median income follow the same pattern. African Americans had the largest income gain of any race from 1990–2010 at $4,706 ($17,589 to $22,295), compared to a gain of $3,070 for all races ($24,495 to $27,565). African Americans also had the largest average gain per five-year period of any race at $1,176.50, compared to $767.50 for all races ($1,021.50 for whites and just $730.75 for Latinos) (see figure 1.2). While relative gains have been larger, in every year studied African Americans had lower education attainment and median individual income than both whites and the aggregation of all races.

There is some evidence that these income and education gains have translated into higher occupational prestige. In 2013, blacks made up 11.2 percent of the information workforce, 14 percent of education and health, and 16.4
percent of public administration, a larger share than any other racial or ethnic minority. They also comprised 9.7 percent of the finance and insurance sector, 9.4 percent of professional and business services, and 14.2 percent of management, administrative, and waste services. All of these numbers were up from just three years prior (and also on par with or larger than their representation in the population). While it is not possible to compare the workforce changes from prior decades, there is a clear correlation between SES and occupational prestige. Therefore, I believe it is a safe assumption that the movement into higher prestige, office-based jobs has followed a similar trajectory as suburban residence, given the income and education gains presented above.

With more disposable income and earning potential, it is not a surprise that racial and ethnic minorities in general, and African Americans in particular, have sought the “greener pastures” of the metropolitan suburbs. The suburban environment is one with less crime, better-funded schools, and higher property values. However, there are political consequences from such a move. Suburban African Americans will now be around neighbors and coworkers who may not share their views on partisan or particularly racialized subjects (Oliver 2010), will endure physical and possibly emotional separations from

Source: Current Population Survey for selected years.
Chapter 1

the historic coethnic community (Haynes 2001), and will be represented by governmental regimes that may be oppositional, if not downright hostile, to their most important political issues.

One of the aims of this project is to assess the consequences of these SES gains as they translate into residential mobility. This book will fit into a nascent yet rich scholarship on suburban African Americans and their political behavior. It will contribute to this line of research by examining national quantitative surveys capable of comparing the individual responses of the target group, suburban African Americans, to their white suburbanite neighbors and their urban coethnics. I also propose that our understanding of African American participation can become clearer and more complete if we study how environment, particularly neighborhood type, influences social interactions. This includes how neighborhood affects one’s choices of discussion partners, the available supply of politically relevant information, and the racial makeup of social networks as well as how all of those factors influence which types of institutions and participatory behaviors will produce the highest utility.

THE SUBURBAN VERSUS URBAN ENVIRONMENT

A look at the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS) shows just how different life is in suburban versus urban neighborhoods. The largest education disparities come at the bottom of the spectrum. Almost 20 percent of urbanites over twenty-five years old have not completed high school compared to a little over 10 percent of suburbanites, even though high school graduation rates (26.1 percent suburban to 25 percent urban) and college graduation rates (21.3 percent suburban to 19.4 percent urban) are very similar. The major discrepancies come on income and house value, where the suburbs are clearly more affluent. Median income is more than $27,000 higher in the suburbs ($71,178 suburban; $43,680 urban), and the median home value is $41,472 higher ($225,937 suburban; $184,465 urban). Suburbs also have more residential stability, as 69.3 percent of suburban homes are owner occupied, compared to just 42.5 percent of urban homes.

When we disaggregate the numbers by race, we see the familiar pattern of suburban African Americans surpassing their urban coethnics but still falling behind their white neighbors. First, population proportions show that suburban African Americans are clearly in the minority of the three, only registering
15 percent of their neighborhood, while their urban coethnics make up a third of the city (33.7 percent) and whites are almost three-fourths of the suburbs (72.4 percent). Since suburban African Americans only make up 11.2 percent of the 4 million people in the average metropolitan statistical area (MSA), and blacks of any neighborhood type only make up 20 percent of the total MSA, most of the people suburban African Americans encounter will not be coethnics. There are important implications of this minority racial status. A suburban African American’s random encounters will be overwhelmingly white, or at least multiracial. Whether it is at work, when interacting with neighbors, or even at the grocery store, the question is whether these people actually believe in, and want, the same things from government. If the answer is “no,” this can be discomforting (McClurg 2006). In subsequent chapters, the data will show that there are wide disparities between what suburban African Americans and suburban whites feel on most racialized issues.

Our target group is in a similar middle position vis-à-vis their neighbors and coethnics when it comes to financial resources. While suburban African American median income cannot be measured, statistics on poverty rates show that one in five suburban blacks lives in poverty (20.2 percent), compared to 31 percent of urban African Americans and just 7.4 percent of suburban whites (see figure 1.3).

The preceding data show that the suburbs are clearly a unique environment. Suburban African American residents are caught in an interesting sandwich, one that is also mirrored geographically, between the demographics of the urban versus exurban neighborhoods. Increases in socioeconomic status and a lessening of racial barriers to residential mobility have opened up suburban living to a population for whom it was previously restricted. Yet that mobility has had consequences, including moving from an area with a rich cultural history and proximity to race-based institutions to jurisdictions where they are in the clear minority racially and politically. The question going forward is how does this minority status combine with things like racial ideology to influence suburban African American political behavior?

The extant research is clear that racial identity is a primary determinant of African American political behavior. However, we would benefit from a better understanding of the effects of social network racial makeup. The data will show that the surrounding environment truly influences these voters, at times leading them to espouse more racialized opinions and behaviors than similarly situated whites and urban African Americans.
Chapter 1

The Geography of the Modern American Metropolis

The Philadelphia area is the picture of a typical American metropolis, both demographically and geographically. Its bustling urban core with a rich history dating back centuries is surrounded by affluent suburbs and the idyllic lifestyle they symbolize. Unfortunately, this idealized environment also holds a legacy of wide economic disparities, self-interested political competition, and racial conflict. In looking at the top twenty-five MSAs used for this chapter, Philadelphia is demographically representative of the average. It also has a particular geography that shows the differences between political and social jurisdictions and the relative ease of traveling to the majority black neighborhood with its racially reinforcing norms. As such, examining this typical area in depth will provide more context on the environments that are influencing individual behavior, a theme developed in subsequent chapters.

The Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington MSA has on average over 3.8 million residents. Within that number, a little less than 1 million live in Philadelphia, its major central city. The remaining 71 percent live in the surrounding suburbs. The MSA is unique in that it actually covers parts of four

Figure 1.3. Poverty Status by Race and Neighborhood, 2012

states—Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland—each with very different histories and governmental structures. Here we have the perfect contrast between a collective social identity—the Delaware Valley—and the many distinct political jurisdictions that determine a resident’s political choices. The entire area is also typical socioeconomically. Only 8 percent of Delaware Valley residents over twenty-five years old have failed to graduate high school, while more than 22 percent have earned a bachelor’s degree. Occupationally, the area is thriving. Forty-two percent of residents work in either a professional or management position (25.1 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively), and the unemployment rate is under 10 percent. The median income of the area is also quite high at around $85,000 and almost three-fourths of the houses are owner-occupied (72.8 percent), with a median home value of $327,900. With a slightly lower median income and house value, this would be the type of area in which most suburban African Americans live.

As is the case for the suburbs as a whole, Philadelphia’s suburbs are overwhelmingly white. The black population is dwarfed by almost six times the white population, 13.1 percent to 77.3 percent. A map of Philadelphia shows the extent of the racial segregation. The darker shades indicate larger concentrations of African Americans, an area that is sandwiched between the city center and the western suburbs (see figure 1.4). They are actually the largest group in Philadelphia proper (43.1 percent) but make up only 20.9 percent of the MSA. Figure 1.5 shows that the same pattern persists in terms of median income, which is not a coincidence.

The political constraint of suburban geography and its disconnect from how people live their social lives represent a major aspect of my theory. For example, if you were one of the 1,252 African Americans who lived in the 19010 zip code of Bryn Mawr (5.8 percent), there is a chance you were represented by Republican Patrick Meehan (PA-07) while other members of your same zip code were represented by Democrat Chaka Fattah (PA-02)!

If a suburban African American is a Democrat and chooses to buy a house on the wrong side of the zip code, they might be much less enthusiastic about voting in the congressional district than coethnics with whom they may share a neighborhood grocery store. However, their SES levels suggest they have the resources and political efficacy that push for some form of participation. I hypothesize that those voters will focus their attention toward participation that yields a higher utility than voting in the local races, particularly alternatives that can help out the racial group.
Figure 1.4. Black Population Map of Philadelphia MSA Census Tracts

Source: Map compiled by author. Population data from the 2010 Census.

Figure 1.5. Median Income Map of Philadelphia MSA Census Tracts

Source: Map compiled by author. Population data from the 2010 Census.
One can see the formal political effects of suburban residence in the Philadelphia MSA. The area is covered by four states, eleven counties, and twelve congressional districts. Two residents that attend the same downtown Philadelphia yoga studio may actually have two different governors. If they happen to be from New Jersey and Delaware, the differences between their governors (Chris Christie R-NJ and Jack Markell D-DE) in party, policy, and even temperament will be large. Yet, the distance between their neighborhoods is anything but, as it is less than thirty-five miles from Wilmington, Delaware, to Camden, New Jersey, through Philadelphia. Information passed socially at the yoga studio will have the same content but divergent effects on the participatory calculus. The same piece of positive Democrat-centric information may make a Delawarean Democrat more likely to work for the statewide party, while her Democrat yoga partner from Camden may view New Jersey gubernatorial politics as a waste of effort and instead travel the five miles across the river into Philadelphia to campaign for a Democratic candidate there. At the same time, the eighty-one black suburbanites (1.8 percent) in Philadelphia’s Lower Merion suburb, with a median income of $180,579, only have to travel eight miles to get to the Philadelphia NAACP chapter offices. These are the stimuli that push and pull suburban African Americans to behave in such a peculiar way. The places where they spend the most time, and have to vote, are not supportive of their racial identity, so they are pushed toward more racially reinforcing political behaviors. Luckily for most, there is a reinforcing, majority black environment with historic institutions and norms that can pull them into ideological comfort.

THE RACIALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN SUBURB

Historically, the mainstream has used the suburbs to perpetuate and crystallize the American racial hierarchy, but recently it may portend the country’s journey toward a multicultural society. Originally conceived as a way to improve the lifestyles of veterans returning from World War II, and greatly aided by the new interstate highway system, the suburbs seemed like the perfect place to realize the American dream. Yet for African Americans the dream remained closed off and little was done to improve access to the symbols of this accomplishment.
Young GIs and other whites brought their ideas about racial and social integration with them to these suburban enclaves of rising social and economic status. While one should not expect an intolerant racial worldview to recede simply based on a residential relocation, the suburbanization of America is firmly rooted in governmental and personal feelings about race. This ideology, particularly the beliefs that civil society and its benefits need not be evenly distributed based on race and that racial segregation of private individuals was beyond the purview of the state, has had long-standing residential, social, and political consequences.

Government programs formalized ideas about residential racial diversity and the social desirability of minorities through departments like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC). The government charged the FHA with evaluating government-subsidized loans for people wishing to become homeowners. Like all lenders, the government wanted to at least break even on its investments. This meant lending to people who would be able to pay back the loans, a possibility that was much more likely if the homes retained their value.

The government established a framework for evaluation in an effort to forecast which areas of the country were most likely to retain their property values. One criterion was the racial and ethnic mix of the neighborhood. The agency considered neighborhoods with more minorities riskier (as it did consider lending to minorities generally). The government designated these places in red on the FHA maps, hence the term “redlining.” Figure 1.6 shows the redlining map of Philadelphia in 1937. A comparison with the 2010 Philadelphia map looks eerily similar. The darker areas—designated undesirable for lending—almost exactly mirror the census tracts with majority black populations today. While arguably understandable in financial terms—the areas dominated by minorities had older dwellings, more multifamily structures, and higher crime rates—the result was unfortunate: people now conflated race with lower property values. Neighborhood racial integration could actually lower a person’s net worth. This put individual buyers and sellers in a difficult position where racial intolerance and/or financial prudence would lead to the same behaviors—it was in the self-interest of both types of people to keep minorities out of their neighborhood.

In an oft-recounted scenario referred to as “blockbusting,” an all-white middle-class urban neighborhood with moderate home values gets its first black family and opportunistic real estate agents take notice. Playing on the
Figure 1.6. 1937 Philadelphia Redlining Map

racial fears of residents, and the governmental signal that integration is fiscally detrimental, the agents approach the next-door neighbors of the black family and offer to buy their house at 100 percent of its current value. The neighbors accept the offer. The agents then sell the house to another black family at a modest profit. They then go to the next house and say, “You see there are two black families now, this neighborhood is ‘changing.’ You know that blacks bring filth, crime, and loud music with them. Sell your house now before your property value drops!” The agents then offer to buy the house at 80 percent of its value, turn around and sell it to another black family for 100 percent of the value, making a larger profit, then repeat the cycle. On the seller’s side, things like steering (where agents push racial and ethnic minorities toward certain neighborhoods) or restricted housing covenants (where sellers agree not to sell to certain races) further made sure the inner-city segregation carried over into the burgeoning suburbs.

This intentional and unintentional racialization has had dire consequences for the subsequent generations of racial and ethnic minorities in two areas in particular: school funding and wealth accumulation. In most jurisdictions, residents fund public schools through property tax valuations. Therefore, districts with more expensive homes receive more funding and can provide a better education for their students. According to the 2012 ACS, 36 percent of houses in the suburbs were valued between $150,000 and $300,000. Only 27 percent of urban houses were worth as much. In the aforementioned Philadelphia MSA, 46.7 percent of the houses fall in the same range compared to 35.5 percent in the urban city. As a result, for the 2012–2013 school year, the Philadelphia city school district spent $6,318 less per pupil than the adjacent Lower Merion school district ($20,173 to $26,491) (openPAgov.org). The second consequence involves the accumulation of wealth. According to the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, “the number of years of homeownership accounts for 27 percent of the relative wealth growth between white and African American families, the largest portion of the growing wealth gap” (Shapiro, Meschede, Osoro 2013, 2).

This sorting has also affected our political system. With African Americans steered into neighborhoods closer to the inner cities, these areas have become much more Democratic while the whiter suburbs are much more Republican. When one’s constituents are monolithic on policy issues, like taxes or government services, there is less incentive to compromise. For suburban electoral candidates of any party, this means there is little incentive to embrace a racial agenda.
The racialization of the suburbs has entrenched the racial hierarchy and geographic separation in America and affects aspects of peoples’ lives from education to wealth accumulation to even political compromise. Hence, suburban African Americans are living in a previously unwelcoming environment where individual feelings and systemic politics have left them in the minority racially and politically.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURBANITE

African Americans’ suburbanization followed a very different path than that of whites after World War II. The growing economy afforded African Americans job opportunities, like skilled trades, yet they were not able to translate these resources into suburban life outside of the city boundaries (Pattillo-McCoy 2000). Blacks moving into the middle class increasingly came to occupy what scholars refer to as “black belt” suburbs. These neighborhoods were adjacent to the historic inner-city areas but consisted of more single-family housing (Haynes 2001). The residents of those areas were also of a considerably lower income level than those in the white, government-subsidized suburbs (Schneider and Phelan 1993).

Mary Pattillo-McCoy describes this evolution and its consequences in her 2000 book Black Picket Fences about the Chicago black belt suburb of Groveland. Two disparate environments confronted blacks who were able to move into these black belt suburbs. Occupationally, they held top-tier status by having college educations, working in professions, and owning businesses (Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Haynes 2001). They were able to afford their children extracurricular activities, unattainable even for poorer whites, like learning instruments or attending cotillion ceremonies. At the same time, they realized that economic gains did not translate into mainstream access or its privileges. They were still second-class and received harsh, even violent, treatment with impunity (Brooks 2005). This duality was likely more apparent because they still shared many institutions with their coethnics, like black churches and volunteer organizations. Black belt suburban African Americans did not respond to socioeconomic mobility by creating parallel (and more proximate) institutions, as their newly emancipated coethnics had done in the past. Instead, they directed their resources toward those places they had always relied on and
supported, infusing them with new skill sets that would serve the community well when the group needed political mobilization.

Even though they had succeeded by society’s metrics, they were not accepted into the (white) mainstream. Instead, they developed a unique community, essentially with one foot in each environment. One strategy for navigating these two different worlds was “code-switching” (Pattillo-McCoy 2000, 9), where one’s language and mannerisms would change depending on the racial makeup of the environment. An example of the practice is using slang in majority black settings and “proper” grammar in others. Pattillo-McCoy uses this as an example of “the different worlds that whites and blacks inhabit, even African Americans with well-paying jobs or a college degree” (9). This behavioral norm produced a black middle class suburban subculture that was a mixture of “strong cultural traditions [and] economic resources” (9). One of the major points of Black Picket Fences is that these early 1990s African Americans navigated the discordant tugs of class and group ties, but the author concludes that high-status blacks’ commitment to the traditional black agenda had not waned and that they translated this identification into analogous participation.

A year later, Bruce Haynes published Red Lines, Black Spaces (2001). Haynes was essentially studying the same demographic population in a markedly similar geographic environment just four states to the east: the Runyon Heights suburb of Yonkers, New York, just ten miles north of the Bronx borough in New York City. The focus of Haynes’s book was also African Americans in the black belt suburbs. However, Haynes dealt more with the divergence of class and racial interests. He opens the book by providing a definition of community that I believe is still applicable to suburban African American populations—both what they are moving away from and what they are longing for once lost. He says that community implies more than just “place.” The community is also the personal connections between people (in different geographic locations) and the historical ties that bind them. This broader sense of community is “structured, filtered, and interpreted through local institutions . . . [families, churches, schools, political organizations, voluntary civic associations] . . . , forming a multidimensional basis for group consciousness and the articulation of group political interests” (xxvii). He echoes Pattillo-McCoy’s sentiment in that this community is characterized by higher resource levels, yet deprived of an unencumbered locational attainment by segregation and racial animosity.
This dual separation from suburban whites and urban African Americans fostered a unique group consciousness and solidarity. However, the shared racial identity did not preclude class divisions among the middle-class suburbanites and the lower-class blacks from the nearby historic neighborhood. Haynes describes conflicts over political representation. When the suburbanites felt being included in a district with the poorer blacks would dilute their political clout, they opposed things like plans to build lower-income housing in their neighborhood (see also Johnson 2002).

This class separation appears to be evidence of “the declining significance of race,” as articulated by William Julius Wilson in his 1978 book of the same name (see also Wilson 2011). Wilson suggested that SES increases by only one segment of the black population would cause middle-class blacks to focus more on class than race. Haynes (and most subsequent research) refutes this postulate with evidence of the suburbanites’ social pursuits. He describes how years earlier a long-standing neighborhood institution, the Nepperhan Community Center, moved to the majority African American area of Yonkers in order to qualify for public funding and serve more African Americans. This move did not prevent the suburbanites from using the center or its services; in fact, it heightened their racial consciousness.

For Nepperhan residents, however, the relocation meant a trip across town to use the facility. But Nepperhaners appear to have accepted a political identification and responsibility that transcended their material self-interest. Locked into a common fate with the working class, Nepperhaners maintained the identification with the tradition of Negro uplift. Just as residents supported the rebuilding of the Nepperhan Community Center on the West side, they later became active participants and leaders in institutions like the NAACP and the YMCA, which served the black population of Yonkers (Haynes 2001, 84).

Here, the suburban African Americans are sacrificing convenience for the ability to aid less fortunate members of their extended community. They appear divided along class lines on some issues, yet in solidarity with coethnics on others. Haynes provides examples where the suburbanites’ civic clubs and social/fraternal organizations would raise funds for scholarships directed at the black inner-city community. These acts laid “the groundwork for local political mobilization. . . . Social organizations gave residents a sense of having an interconnected history and future. . . . Without [which], no central community
identity, racial or otherwise, would have developed” (73). One of the primary aims of this project is to bring quantitative data to this question of when the groups are together and when they split.

Written during the same time, Valerie Johnson’s *Black Power in the Suburbs* (2002) provides insight into how these black suburbanites navigate class differences in their local political environment. The question for Johnson is very similar to that of Haynes; however, Johnson focuses her work on the confluence of spatial geography and racial demography. She compares the lower SES African Americans who live in the black belts, the higher SES blacks living closer to the exurbs, and the whites who have remained in these suburban neighborhoods following the white flight of the 1970s and 1980s. She finds that the white power structure exacerbated and manipulated opposing interests between the different African American classes, hindering political incorporation.

The book is set in Prince George’s County, Maryland, an area east of Washington, D.C. Based on income and education levels, Prince George’s is the most affluent concentration of suburban blacks in the country. More interesting (and perfect for the study of suburban politics) is that this affluence is adjacent to a lower SES black belt on the Maryland and Washington, D.C., border. Both of these black subgroups are struggling for political power against a white establishment whose numbers are dwindling due to white flight yet who maintain control over the majority of municipal offices.

Johnson wonders when class interests will trump racial interests, and more specifically, what types of issues will bring each identity to the fore? In order to exert their collective prerogatives, the author says the African American community must unify. The group will base this unity on their collective identity and group consciousness, which are the primary organizational resources needed to achieve their aims (12). Yet she challenges the idea that the African American community is a monolith, suggesting that terms like “black agenda” or “black community” gloss over the nuances between African Americans of differing SES.17

Johnson finds that more often than not, the more affluent African American community of Prince George’s and those closer to Washington, D.C., are not united. She finds that the lack of unity is in fact highly dependent on the policy in question. When issues are explicitly racial, or focus broadly on civil rights, African Americans are in accord. Questions of class are not as simple. On class considerations, the author suggests that each community is not
opposed to “subordinating” their interests in favor of their coethnics (6); however, community elites must articulate the benefits of doing so. In the instances where the community does not gel, it is the black political leaders who are not in sync.

Through her interviews with elites and voters, Johnson finds that this disunity among elites is often a result of political alliances with the white power structure or pure self-interest and personal gain. Very rarely does this disagreement flow from opposing signals within the rank and file. The words of Albert Wynn, who represented the more affluent black population, crystalizes this disunity and the policies upon which it is based: “the interests of the more affluent African Americans in the county, ‘puts them at odds with the older African American community who are concerned with subsidized housing and job programs’” (100). I will test these questions quantitatively in the chapters to come.

BUILDING ON THE RESEARCH OF SUBURBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

These three books are among the most exemplary and ambitious treatments of the suburban African American experience to date. They are invaluable because of their empirical designs and their temporal place, right on the cusp of the black SES increases described earlier. However, there are places where they fall short. I designed this project to fill in those gaps and go further by introducing new research questions and hypotheses to study this evolving population.

One important weakness is simply the time period. All three of these books describe populations who have changed socioeconomically and geographically since the authors collected their data. In SES terms, the suburban African American population was just emerging from the struggle of the civil rights movement and settling into their new northern and urban environments following the Second Great Migration. They were about to increase their life situations through middle-class jobs concentrated in the manufacturing and government sectors; however, society capped that improvement via the explicit exclusion of blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities from certain neighborhoods. The original survey instrument that will serve as the main data for this project, collected in 2008, is one of the most recent datasets available for
this population. I also ask respondents about their suburban residence, which will be used to analyze feelings about social networks, the coethnic community, and political participation.

Less problematic than the dated nature of the data is its ethnographic format. In fact, it may be the best design for early treatments as it sacrifices generalizability for in-depth description of under-theorized questions. Ethnography is also good at examining variables that do not lend themselves to numerical quantification. For example, Johnson (2002) measures the relationship between SES, African American identity, and types of policies. In addition to discussing the specific policy issues, she also includes other “internal variables,” such as the African American population size and the organizational resources within the community (8). The latter is a very broad concept that does not lend itself to obvious operationalization. Qualitative interviews can alleviate many internal validity problems18 because the researcher can explain complex concepts, answer questions, or provide background information. Additionally, if a subject reveals an interesting (or omitted) variable in a later interview, the interviewer can recontact previous subjects for follow-up questions. The total universe of respondents also shrinks when elites are the source of data, so acquiring respondents based on convenience or ease of access is not as much of a methodological design flaw as a problem of external validity—the representativeness of the data limits the capacity to generalize.

The nature of the target population makes ethnography especially beneficial in this situation. Simple random national samples will not have robust representations of suburban African Americans. These small samples make statistical modeling particularly data-taxing—a problem I encountered in this project. To attain a critical mass of any type of African American, early national surveys employed geographic cluster sampling and focused on majority black neighborhoods since it was four times more expensive to find blacks in majority white neighborhoods (Jackson 1987; Tate 2004). The qualitative approach makes finding the geographic minorities easier. Researchers can identify them via snowball samples, where they ask respondents to provide the contact information of others like them.19 Finally, for understudied populations, or subfields in the theory-building process, extensive ethnographies can serve as a good starting point for subsequent research by providing data on a number of disparate dimensions that researchers can quantitatively test later.

The major drawback of these types of studies is their lack of external validity. Interviews are generally not statistically generalizable to other populations
with the same characteristics, and the method of administration may be less than systematic. All of the surveys used for this project are nationally representative; therefore, I can extrapolate conclusions to U.S. citizens with the same demographics. Technically, the previous suburban African American studies are only representative of blacks in Chicago’s Southside, the suburbs of New York, and Prince George’s County, Maryland. It is highly likely that those three locales are similar to one another and to other metropolitan areas with sizable black populations, yet not every black metro resident had a statistically measurable chance of selection.

The final qualm with the previous research on suburban African Americans is that it is not explicitly political. The fields of sociology and anthropology have been invaluable for this project and provide many of the citations and assumptions for the theory. While they do address political variables and concepts, their primary aim is not to explain the political behaviors of individuals, the psychological mechanisms that affect them, or how the suburban environment influences both.

That said, there are common threads between these studies and this one, and this project does more to complement and build on earlier studies than to challenge their findings. This study centers on three primary goals in contrast to this literature. First, I will quantitatively test some of the concepts found in the previous qualitative research. Second, the study will update our picture of suburban African Americans to account for the SES gains and locational mobility that influence their political behavior decisions. Lastly, I seek to unpack the effects that social network racial makeup, feelings toward the coethnic institutions and ideologies in the coethnic community, and suburban political jurisdictions have on black political participation. I believe the theory-building nature of this project and the conclusions it draws will provide race and ethnicity scholars, and those studying political behavior generally, new theories and hypotheses for subsequent research on this burgeoning population and other minority populations following similar paths.

DATASETS

Three datasets will provide the empirical analysis: the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES), and the 2004 National Politics Study (NPS). I chose these studies
because they are the most recent and relevant. More recent surveys capture the socioeconomic gains of contemporary African Americans that have been allowed more access to the majority white suburbs. I attribute the unique political behaviors of suburban African Americans to this geographic shift. These datasets are particularly relevant because they deal specifically with suburban residence, social networks, and the black counterpublic spaces. Unfortunately, the numbers of suburban African Americans in each survey is below their representation in the actual electorate, so in some instances statistical analysis does not show statistically significant differences between the groups.

2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)

The CCES was a cooperative effort between the YouGov/Polimetrix polling firm and thirty-one universities and foundations. Each team contributed to the common content module and received fifteen minutes of original instrumentation on one thousand respondents. The content was combined with another module, to include a total of two thousand respondents. The University of Texas content of the CCES was specifically designed to assess the effect of suburban residence on racial opinions, social network interactions, views of the cultural community, and political behavior. Using the CCES presents two potential issues. I mention these not because I have problems with its use, but because the reader should be aware of them when evaluating the conclusions drawn in subsequent chapters. First, the CCES was an Internet survey. Traditionally, this means the respondent pool will have a higher SES and lower minority representation than is found in the population. However, this problem is not unique to the CCES, it is found in all survey designs. Due to an innovative sample matching technique, the CCES boasts response rates on par with more familiar random-digit-dialing telephone methods. For this analysis, suburban African Americans make up 41.6 percent of blacks in the dataset, a number slightly below census estimates, and just 4.4 percent of the entire dataset.21

Second, I designed some of the questions specifically for this project and therefore they have not had the reliability checks of questions repeated for more than sixty years, as with the ANES. A key question is that of suburban residence. As stated earlier, even objective definitions of the suburbs differ.
In the CCES, suburban residence is self-reported (as opposed to the ANES, where it is determined by the interviewer); therefore, the measure may not correspond with the geographic definition employed in the opening chapter. However, the self-reporting may actually be more valid. Individuals on the outskirts of the city who do all of their extracurricular activities outside of the city limits may feel (and therefore behave) like suburbanites, even if the census would not designate them as such.

**2008 American National Election Study (ANES)**

The 2008 ANES will supplement the CCES as it directly addresses the previous two concerns. A collaboration between Stanford University and the University of Michigan, the 2008 ANES included an oversample of blacks and Latinos to explicitly combat the lack of representation in previous designs. A full 25 percent of the 2,322 respondents are black (569). When broken down by neighborhood, 8.2 percent (191) are suburban African Americans. Having more than twice the targeted respondents allows for a more forgiving test of statistical significance. The survey has also been administered for more than sixty years, and many of the same questions were included in each iteration. It will serve as the primary instrument for the multivariate tests to assess the independent effects of suburban racial status on political participation.

**2004 National Politics Study (NPS)**

Conducted by scholars James Jackson, Vincent Hutchings, Ronald Brown, and Cara Wong, the focus of the NPS was on opinions in the larger African diaspora. As such, it oversamples blacks, particularly those of Afro-Caribbean descent. Of the 3,339 telephone-interviewed respondents, 756 are African Americans. Only African American respondents will be used in the comparisons. The survey also includes relevant questions on race and racial policy, including innovative questions about the racial makeup of different social networks. This includes those proximate (neighborhood and workplace) and self-selecting (church). The NPS will be used to test the social network hypotheses.
A NOTE ABOUT COMPARING ONLY AFRICAN AMERICANS AND WHITES

The racial diversification of America has brought new minority groups to the fore of our society, politics, and political science. Latinos have already overtaken African Americans as the country’s largest minority group, and the gap will continue to widen. One can make the case that a work on race and ethnicity that leaves them (and Asian Americans) out is incomplete. While I recognize the validity of such an argument, I reject that claim. While it is true that most of the early work on race and ethnicity focused on the black-white binary, that does not mean scholars of any stripe have conclusively answered the questions. Additionally, the previous studies used whites as the main comparison group, and if this study is to speak to that literature, it should do the same. It is also obvious that the two groups have evolved in their relationships with one another, so a contemporary examination will do much to advance our knowledge on the subject.

Early work in Latino and Asian American politics (by necessity) took the theories borne of this binary environment and tried to apply them to their particular group. However, it soon became apparent that this was inadequate. Simply being a minority was not enough to explain the social relationships with the mainstream, the placement of certain groups, and subgroups, on the racial hierarchy, or their political behaviors. I have aimed this project at a group of people who are increasingly moving into majority white networks. With such movement comes a host of interactions, most of them against the backdrop of systematic discrimination and exclusion that was a remnant of whites having enslaved their ancestors. While I believe these theories are applicable to other minorities generally, the specifics, especially the role of the black counterpublic institutions and the evolution of a black-specific ideology, warrant an in-depth examination. This is in no way to devalue the experiences of suburban Latinos or Asian Americans, just to say that those experiences are different.

On racial questions, blacks and whites are always at the opposite extremes, with Latinos and Asian Americans somewhere in the middle. Countless studies have shown that whites have a much greater affinity toward all other major racial and ethnic groups than they do blacks. In the literature discussed in the next chapter, whites would rather live in white-Asian or white-Latino neighborhoods at much higher rates than white-black ones (Dixon 2006). The
presence of blacks in white neighborhoods even makes some whites dislike their jobs (Brief et al. 2005).

This black-white binary is still very much the reality. By far, most blacks have majority black social networks; however, the next most frequent types all have this binary. Via the 2004 NPS, the next highest racial makeup for African Americans’ friend groups is black-white (17.9 percent, versus 50 percent all black). In the neighborhood, the second highest category is a black-white neighborhood (9.9 percent, versus 56.7 percent all black; 8 percent are in all white neighborhoods). In the workplace, 23.7 percent of African Americans work in majority white settings versus 25.2 percent all black. This project is depicting a certain (peculiar but prevalent) environment. It asks unanswered questions and uses methods never before tested on these populations. As such, I believe it worthy to proceed in this course.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The remainder of the chapters will proceed as follows: Chapter 2 will lay out the theoretical foundation for the hypotheses to be tested in the empirical chapters that follow. The focus will be on the relevant literatures that describe how suburban African Americans come to their participation decisions. The chapter will pay special attention to how African Americans form their racial identity and how identity is cultivated into the idea that political action is the best way to help the group or group consciousness (Miller et al. 1981). It will also show how these group distinctions influence residential segregation and perceptions of other groups. It will proceed to recount the previous research on social networks, particularly how minority status and having disagreeable discussion partners affects political behavior. From there it will discuss the cultural communities of African Americans and how their historic institutions, like the black church, advance group-conscious norms. The chapter will end with the literature on political participation, particularly the costs and benefits associated with different behaviors and how they may be used to reinforce racial identity based on one’s neighborhood.

Chapter 3 will focus on social networks, including how the racial makeup of suburban African Americans’ networks will determine whether they view them as welcoming networks or ones that may be hostile to their racial identities. Using independent sample t-tests (means tests) to compare averages by
race and neighborhood on certain questions and ordered logistic regressions, the data show that African Americans in white neighborhoods have lower trust in various societal institutions when compared to whites in white neighborhoods. They also have very different opinions on racialized issues, like whether blacks have gotten less than they deserve from society and whether blacks face discrimination. Finally, the chapter shows that suburban African Americans do indeed think their personal views are different from those of other people in their neighborhoods and workplaces but more in line with members of their churches.

Chapter 4 will build on chapter 3 and ask where suburban African Americans will find reinforcing networks if they do not feel comfortable in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Using the same tests as the previous chapter, it will examine how often suburban African Americans travel to their cultural community and whether they actively view these areas as places where they should direct their political activity. It will also use the ideological framework of Michael Dawson (2001, 2012) to test how racially radical suburban African Americans are. While suburban African Americans do not use their cultural communities more often than suburban whites and urban African Americans (both of whom presumably live in their cultural communities), they do participate in them at a substantial rate. Suburban African Americans with strong racial identities and those that attend black churches participate more in the community than suburban African Americans with lower identity or who do not attend black churches. As to ideology, I find that suburban African Americans are not at the most racially radical end of the spectrum, but they are quite skeptical of America’s commitment to diversity and racial equality.

Chapter 5 asks whether the feelings about disagreeable social networks and racially reinforcing cultural communities produce a unique strand of political behavior. It begins by affirming one of my central hypotheses about suburban African American political participation—that they do not feel comfortable in their congressional districts and therefore do not participate in them. They do not have any differences in their acquisition of political information with suburban whites and slight differences with urban African Americans. However, suburban African Americans with high racial identity do report more interest in politics, interest in the news, and read the newspaper more often. These rates are higher than those of suburban African Americans with low racial identity and even urban African Americans with high racial identity. As to actual participation, there is no difference between the groups in presidential
voting, but suburban African Americans are less likely to vote in House of Representatives elections. Individual suburban African Americans with high racial identity are even more likely to have voted for president and skipped the House race, even though the amount of effort required to cast such a vote is almost nonexistent since the individual is already in the voting booth. As expected, suburban African Americans are also more likely to engage in alternative political behaviors that they can better target toward their racial group.

Chapter 6 will summarize the findings, suggest possible future avenues for research on suburban African Americans, and discuss the implications of the data for both the study of race and ethnicity and our understanding of race and geography in American society.