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# Race, Class, and Support for Egalitarian Statism Among the African American Middle Class

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*This study uses data from the 1990 and 1987 years of the General Social Survey to assess the effects of minority status and position in the class structure in explaining middle class African Americans' support for opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based egalitarian statist policies. Findings do not provide confirmation for prior research that has found that racial effects are predominant, but has considered a more narrow range of policies and not assessed interaction effects. First, neither additive nor interactive effects of race and social class explain support for government policies that are premised on providing people with skills to compete in the labor market. Second, interaction effects are salient for government policies that are intended to guarantee socioeconomic outcomes. Specifically, the joint effects of race and social class explain levels of support that are intermediate between the relatively pro-interventionist views of working class racial peers and the more anti-statist stance of white middle class counterparts. The race/class dynamics are interpreted as a product of the extent to which the two policy types conform to the dominant principles of American stratification ideology. In addition, implications of the findings for understanding the kinds of policies likely to be enacted and racial inequality in the policy implementation process are discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research that shed additional light on the race/class basis of opinions about egalitarian statism are offered.*

As the African American population has become increasingly heterogeneous and differentiated sociologists—in the last decade or so—have begun to examine how minority status and privileged position in the American class structure account for attitudes about socioeconomic inequality in America (for a review see Hochschild 1995). In this regard, one developing line of

studies has assessed the relative effects of race and social class in explaining the commitment of relatively privileged African Americans to "egalitarian statism" (Kluegel and Majetu 1995), namely, preferences that the government play a role in redistributing economic resources to regulate socioeconomic inequality. Significantly, this line of research assesses the operation of two factors which have been demonstrated to affect orientations toward policies to alleviate socioeconomic inequality in diametrically opposed ways. In particular, incumbency in the middle class is associated with fiscally conservative views (Kluegel and Smith 1986, 1981), while the harsh legacy of discrimination in the U.S. associated with minority group status is conducive to maintaining race-based, activist sentiments about the role of government in regulating economic inequality (Sigelman and Welsh 1991; Jaynes and Williams 1989).

To date, studies of the race and class bases of support for egalitarian statism among the "new black middle class" (Landry 1987) have focused most heavily on policies that have become value-laden in recent political discourse such as race-based preferences and quotas in hiring associated with "affirmative action" (Welsh and Foster 1987; Welsh and Combs 1985), and spending on "welfare" (Jackman 1994; Gilliam and Whitby 1989; Parent and Stekler 1985; Seltzer and Smith 1985), as well as more general questions concerning the adequacy of present spending levels to assist African Americans and the poor (Tuch et. al 1997; Allen et al. 1989). Typically, these studies have proceeded by assessing the additive effects of race and social class in explaining levels of support for anti-poverty policies relative to the African American working and white middle classes. Overall, they have reached consistent results: the effects of race are paramount at upper-levels of the African American class structure. In particular, across gender and age categories and in all regions of the United States minority status best explains levels of support for state spending to reduce inequality that are closer to the relatively pro-interventionist views of working class racial peers than the more anti-statist stance of white middle class counterparts.

However, several shortcomings in existing studies have limited our understanding of the race and class underpinnings of support for egalitarian statism among relatively, privileged

African Americans. In particular, studies have focused almost exclusively on "outcome-based" policies, those such as affirmative action and welfare that are premised on assuring socioeconomic outcomes. Conspicuously absent in existing research have been analyses of commitment to "opportunity-enhancing" policies, a second type that is based on providing opportunities to be economically self-sufficient.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the two policy types represent alternative strategies regarding the appropriate role of the government in eradicating economic inequality. In this regard, whether anti-poverty policy should be premised on promoting economic opportunities or ensuring economic statuses has been the source of heated debates among policy experts, legislators, and social scientists for several decades (Wilson 1996, 1987; Mead 1986; Murray 1984). Further, the almost exclusive reliance on a "main effects" (Gilliam and Whitby 1989) approach in existing studies has precluded identifying the influence of race/class interactions. In fact, the prevalence of joint race/class effects are reasonably inferred from several studies in which levels of support for egalitarian statist policies among relatively privileged African Americans are intermediate between those of similarly situated whites and working class African Americans (Tuch et al. 1997; Welsh and Foster 1987; Seltzer and Smith 1985).<sup>2</sup>

This study addresses these shortcoming in prior research. In particular, it uses nationally representative data to assess the additive and interactive effects of minority status and position in the class structure in explaining the commitment of middle class African Americans to both opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based egalitarian statist policies.

#### RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS: ADDITIVE AND INTERACTION EFFECTS

The predominance of class effects in explaining commitment to egalitarian statism is premised on the notion that in the post-1965 civil rights era African Americans has begun to undergo the same successful patterns of structural incorporation into the middle class experienced by other racial and ethnic groups in American history (Sowell 1980; Evans 1992; Davis and Watson 1982). In particular, new patterns of structural incorporation in

recent decades which are a product of factors ranging from the dismantling of segregation across major institutional spheres in American society (Jaynes and Williams 1989) and increasingly liberal white racial attitudes (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985) has led to a decline in the significance of race in determining the "life chance" opportunities of African Americans (Wilson 1996, 1987, 1978) and heightened investment in politically conservative, class-based ideology. Accordingly, the predominance of social class should signal that relatively privileged African Americans are ideologically aligned with similarly situated whites: class effects should structure levels of support for egalitarian statism which are below those of the working class. Overall, evidence of the unprecedented stability and continuity of middle class status among African Americans has increased the stake in the economic status quo is found on several fronts. For example, in recent decades patterns of intergenerational occupational mobility among African Americans have come to closely resemble those of whites: they are increasingly able to transmit their status onto their children (Hout 1984; Featherman and Hauser 1978). Further, patterns of occupational attainment among the African American middle class have forged ideological alliances across racial lines. Specifically, the growing representation of the African American middle class in "primary" sector firms has made their employment relatively stable, remunerative, and has indoctrinated them into an occupational culture that puts a premium on conservative values related to "corporate conformity" (Evans 1992; Davis and Watson 1982).

A second explanation—race—is rooted in the notion of the uniqueness of the "black experience" that continues to mark African Americans as an "unmeltable" (Novak 1975) group. Significantly, dynamics surrounding racial discrimination account for the primacy of race effects that structure uniform and relatively high levels of support for egalitarian statism at all levels of the African American class structure. In particular, this perspective emphasizes that African Americans—irrespective of class status—are engaged in competitive processes with whites: they become sensitized to issues of rampant and unaddressed racial and socioeconomic inequality as they encounter discrimination in vying for valued resources such as jobs and access to desirable

residential neighborhoods (Hwang, Fitzpatrick, and Helms 1998; Waldinger 1996). In fact, evidence of discrimination suffered by African Americans at all class levels in recent years constitutes “textbook” structural conditions for the development of race-specific patterns of support for egalitarian statism. For example, studies have found that African Americans have been continually restricted to an inferior range of neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993, 1987), are marginalized in segregated, “race-conscious” jobs slots in both the public and private sectors that are removed from mainstream intra firm career-ladders (Collins 1997, 1993; Moore 1981), and are confronted with unequal treatment in a range of public accommodations including restaurants, stores, and hotels (Feagin 1991).

In addition, race-based sentiments toward egalitarian statism among privileged African Americans may be fueled by the effects of self-interest. For example, predispositions toward maintaining liberal attitudes toward government regulation of inequality may result from its historic role in assisting African Americans overcome discrimination in the labor market (Butler 1991; Collins 1993). In fact, a personal benefit among relatively privileged African Americans has derived from government efforts to address racial inequality: the growth of the black middle class in the civil rights era has been traced directly to the expansion of the public sector (Landry 1987; Collins 1997, 1983). Further, among the African American middle class a more indirect but salient form of self-interest may derive from government efforts to ameliorate inequality—members of one’s family or friends may benefit.

Finally, the ethclass formulation offers a rationale for maintaining that joint race/class effects should account for levels of support for egalitarian statism among the African American middle class that are intermediate between the pro-interventionist stance of lower class racial peers and the anti-statist posture of white middle class counterparts. The ethclass formulation was most systematically enunciated by Gordon (1964), and asserts that among minority middle classes race and position in the class structure not only have independent effects on ideological orientations but that they also have a shared effect.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the ethclass theory incorporates the countervailing influences of

both economic advantage associated with incumbency in a privileged class position and continuing discrimination that are the bases of respectively, the class and race explanations. Accordingly, minority middle classes experience a "dual consciousness": while influenced by the structural imperatives associated with their position in the class structure, experiences with racial discrimination cause them to perceive their fates as linked to those of their lower class racial peers.

## DATA AND METHODS

Data from the 1990 and 1987 years of the General Social Survey (GSS) are utilized to assess the additive and interactive effects of race and social class in accounting for commitment of the African American middle class toward opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies. Significantly, an adequate assessment requires that analyses compare privileged African Americans with working class African Americans as well as working and middle class whites. The GSS is a full probability sample of English speaking adults (over age 17) living in households in the United States (for a description of the GSS sample design see Davis and Smith 1996). Overall, analyses included 131 African Americans and 775 whites from 1990 and 153 African Americans and 872 whites from 1987. The model used in this study is operationalized as follows:

### *Dependent Variables: Egalitarian Statism*

Two policy items that form the opportunity-enhancement index were taken from the 1990 GSS and they are consistent with the notion that the government's appropriate role is to help the relatively disadvantaged become self-reliant; they assess support for government to create economic opportunities for the poor through the creation of enterprise zones and the awarding of college scholarships. The following two items form the index: "There are several things that the government in Washington might do to deal with the problems of poverty and unemployment. I would like you to tell me if you favor or oppose them."

- (a) *Enterprise Zones*: Giving business and industry special tax breaks for locating in poor and high unemployment areas.

- (b) *College Scholarships*: Providing special college scholarships for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who maintain good grades.

The opportunity-enhancing index is additive and consists of a four-point scale: responses to each of the three items were coded as: (0) strongly oppose or oppose, (1) neither favor nor oppose, (2) favor or strongly favor.

Each of the three policy items that comprise the outcome-based index were taken from the 1987 GSS and they are in accord with the notion that government's role in regulating inequality extends to providing socioeconomic outcomes for the disenfranchised. In particular, the three items guarantee jobs, standards of living, and housing for the impoverished. These items are worded as follows: "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to:"

*Jobs*: Provide a job for everyone who wants one.

*Standard of Living*: Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.

*Housing*: Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it.

The outcome-based index is additive and consists of a nine point scale, summing up the responses for each item which were coded as (0) definitely should not be, (1) probably should not be, (2) probably should be, (3) definitely should be.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Independent Variables: Race and Social Class*

Race is coded as 1 = African American and 0 = white. Social class is a categorical variable (1 = middle, 0 = working) and is based on occupational criteria. Accordingly, the sample is restricted to individuals who were employed at the time of the interview: the current occupation of sample members is coded into one of six 1990 census-based occupational categories. Those whose occupation is in one of three categories—Managerial and Professional, Technical-Sales and Administrative Support, and Service constitute the middle class. Sample members whose current occupation falls in other categories constitute the working class. Utilizing an occupationally-based measure of social class is appropriate in this study: stratification research in the area



of work and personality (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Kohn 1969) has demonstrated a causal link between class-based occupational experiences and the formation of a values such as tolerance, trust, and intellectual flexibility that, in turn, are suspected as impacting of a range of ideological orientations including attitudes toward the permissible role of the welfare state in regulating economic and social arrangements in American society.

*Additional Independent Variables:*

Several other variables are examined as determinants of middle class African Americans' levels of support for opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies. In particular, assessed are the effects of two status variables—earnings (individual earnings in 1990) and education (years)—that are routinely used to measure position in the stratification system but are modestly correlated with occupationally-based conceptions of social class (Wright 1985; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Kalleberg and Griffin 1980). Also examined are how commitment toward egalitarian statism varies by sociodemographic characteristics including gender (dummy variable for female with male as reference), age (years), and region of residence (dummy variables for North, South, West, and Midwest as reference).

## RESULTS

Several procedures are undertaken to compare the commitment of the African American middle class toward opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies with the African American working class and white middle and working classes. The first consists of assessing bivariate relationships between position in the class structure and attitudes toward egalitarian statism for all race/class groups (descriptive statistics for all variables in the analyses are in Appendix A).

Table 1 reports the results from the bivariate regressions across both types of egalitarian statist policies. The results suggest that among the African American middle class support for opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies are a product of different race/class dynamics. In fact, findings concerning opportunity-enhancing policies do not provide support for any

Table 1

*Bivariate Relationships Between Race and Social Class On Support for Egalitarian Statism*

	<i>African Americans</i>	<i>Whites</i>
<i>Middle Class</i>		
Opportunity-Enhancement	3.1 (1.0)	3.0 (.80)
Outcome-Based	2.1 (.79)	1.7 (.68)
<i>Working Class</i>		
Opportunity-Enhancement	3.1 (1.1)	3.1 (.93)
Outcome-Based	2.5 (1.1)	2.2 (1.0)

*Notes:* Standard Deviations are in parentheses.

of the three explanations offered. Specifically, relatively privileged African Americans have mean values (3.1) for opportunity-enhancing policies that are nearly identical to those of both their white class counterparts (3.0) and working class racial peers (3.1). In addition, findings concerning more intrusive outcome-based policy provides support for the ethclass formulation. In particular, levels of support among middle class African Americans (5.7) are intermediate between the higher levels of their working class racial peers (6.6) and the lower values of their white middle class counterparts (4.7).

The bivariate results are suggestive and make necessary additional analysis to reach more definitive conclusions about the effects of race and social class in accounting for middle class African Americans' commitment to the opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies. In this regard, Table 2 presents results from multivariate analyses that assess the additive effects of all variables in the model as well as the interaction terms between race and all variables in the model. The results provide confirmation for the interpretation reached from the bivariate regressions.

Table 2

*OLS Regressions on Support For Egalitarian Statism\**

	<i>Opportunity-Enhancing</i>		<i>Outcome-Based</i>	
	<i>(b)</i>	<i>(beta)</i>	<i>(b)</i>	<i>(beta)</i>
<i>Additive Terms</i>				
<i>Race and Class</i>				
Race	.06	.05	.37	.33***
Class	-.08	-.07	-.32	-.29***
<i>Status</i>				
Income	-.07	-.05	-.09	-.07
Education	.13	.12	.04	.04
Female	.22	.17*	.15	.13
<i>Sociodemographic</i>				
Age	.06	.05	.08	.07
North	.10	.08	.05	.04
South	-.07	-.06	-.15	-.14*
West	.03	.02	.05	.03
<i>Interaction Terms</i>				
RaceClass	.08	.07	.35	.32***
RaceIncome	.07	.06	-.14	-.13*
RaceEducation	.15	.13	.06	.05
R <sup>2</sup>		.21		.25

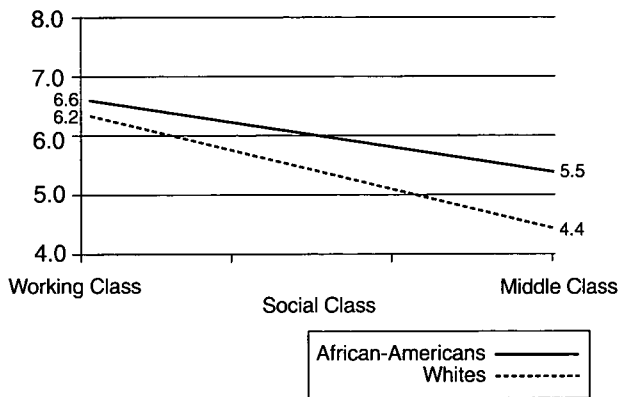
Notes: \*P < .05 \*\*P < .01 \*\*\*P < .001. Only those interaction terms that are significant for at least one of the two types of egalitarian statist policies are reported.

First, none of the three explanations—race, class or ethclass—explain findings reached for policies whose purpose is to facilitate opportunities to compete effectively in the labor market. Specifically, neither race, nor social class have significant independent effects and the interaction term for race and class is not significant. Second, the ethclass formulation constitutes the most appropriate lens through which to interpret African Americans' support

for programs that are closer to guaranteeing socioeconomic outcomes. In this regard, two findings are noteworthy: race and class have measurable independent effects on levels of support for government intervention. Further, the race/class interaction term is highly significant. Accordingly, the multivariate analyses provide further confirmation that with respect to attitudes toward opportunity-enhancing policies an African American subculture exists among the middle class that is distinct from their working class race peers and white middle class counterparts.

Finally, to shed additional light on the magnitude and direction of the interaction effects among the African American middle class in structuring support for outcome-based policies it is necessary to solve the regression equations for both African Americans and whites. Results of this procedure are plotted in Figure 1. The findings are straightforward and provide support for the ethclass interpretation. Specifically, the African American middle class has mean values that are intermediate between the higher levels of support of working class racial peers and the lower values of white middle class counterparts. In addition, one other finding bears mentioning: for outcome-based policies racial differences are trivial among the working class and relatively

Figure 1  
*Joint Effects of Race and Social Class on Support for Outcome-Based Policies*



large among the middle class. In this regard, there is nearly three times as large a racial gap in support among the middle than the working class.

### CONCLUSION

Analyzing a broader range of policies than has been previously considered and assessing interaction effects alters our understanding of the race/class bases of support for egalitarian statism among the African American middle class. First, findings indicate that race/class determinants of support for egalitarian statism are not monolithic. In fact, they vary across well-recognized types of anti-poverty policies—namely, those that are opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based. In particular, neither race nor social class account for high levels of support for opportunity-enhancing policies that are shared by African Americans and whites at all class levels. Further, race and class exert a joint effect on levels of support for outcome-based policies that are intermediate between the relatively pro-interventionist stance of the African American working class and the more anti-statist posture of the white middle class. Second, assessing interaction effects are indispensable for arriving at a more nuanced understanding of race/class dynamics. Indeed, the finding that race and social class jointly influence support for outcome-based strategies suggests that interpretations of research findings in prior studies concerning the predominance of racial effects are in need of reassessment.

Overall, it is plausible to conclude that the race/class dynamics among the middle class are a product of the extent to which the two policy types conform to the dominant principles of American stratification ideology. First, it appears the premise underlying opportunity-enhancing policies—economic self-reliance—is a deeply-engrained tenet of the “dominant ideology” (Huber and Form 1973) that minimizes minority status and class position as factors in accounting for policy support. It is striking that similar to a range of ideological tenets which are in line with the “dominant ideology” (Huber and Form 1973), such as individualistic causal beliefs about poverty (Kluegel and Smith 1986) and

beliefs about an open opportunity structure (Hochschild 1995), opportunity-enhancing policies are supported by both African Americans and whites at all class levels. Second, it seems reasonable that race and social class are more important determinants for outcome-based policies because of their foundation—guaranteed socioeconomic outcomes—which is a precept that violates normative stratification ideology (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Significantly, similar to tenets at odds with normative stratification principles, such as structural causal beliefs about poverty (Kluegel and Smith 1986) and beliefs in a closed opportunity structure (Sigelman and Welsh 1991), levels of support for outcome-based policies vary across class categories and racial group affiliation. In the case of the African American middle class, it appears that modest levels of support are produced by sentiments about the deep-rooted nature of inequality associated with minority status that serve to counteract the conservatizing influence of occupying a privileged class position.

In addition, not to be overlooked are how the findings further our understanding of crucial issues surrounding the implementation of egalitarian statist policies. First, they help to identify the kinds of anti-poverty initiatives likely to be enacted. Significantly, recent sociological research on the sociohistoric roots of civil rights legislation in the post-1965 period has found that interracial group coalitions among the middle class are indispensable for providing adequate funding to interest and lobby groups who directly influence the outcome of the legislative process (Quadagno 1994; McAdam 1981). Accordingly, it appears that government policy will revolve around the premise of providing incentives for the poor to become self-reliant: opportunity-enhancing initiatives receive broad support among both the white and African American middle class, while relatively favorable levels of support for outcome-based measures are restricted to privileged African Americans. Second, findings indicate that among the middle class the policy preferences of whites are more likely to be implemented than those of African Americans. In particular, enacted policy—which is based on principles of enhancing economic opportunity—reflect whites' views of the government's ultimate role in regulating inequality, while the sentiments of

African Americans, which extend to policy premised on guaranteeing socioeconomic outcomes, will likely go unheeded in the legislative process.

Finally, it is important to underscore that the findings from this study provide directions for research that would further enhance our understanding of the race/class determinants of privileged African Americans' commitment to egalitarian statism. In particular, they justify advocating that a wider range of opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies be examined with an approach that incorporates interaction effects. In this regard, it is especially crucial to examine the effects of minority status and class positions across both income and race targeted policies. A recognized limitation of this study is the failure to examine policies that are explicitly race-targeted which may invoke a different range of dynamics than the policies targeted to the general poor which have been examined in this study (Tuch et al. 1997; Bobo and Kluegel 1993). This research is much anticipated: it will assess race/class dynamics at a time when they are becoming increasingly important because of the rapidly changing racial composition of the middle class.

## NOTES

1. The one study that examines public commitment to opportunity-enhancing and outcome-based policies—that by Bobo and Kluegel (1993) focuses almost exclusively on whites and assesses the impact of racial attitudes, forms of self-interest, and causal attributions about poverty on levels of support.
2. One study, that by Gilliam and Whitby (1989) assesses the joint effects of race and social class on support for egalitarian statism among the African American middle class. However, support for "welfare" is one item in a five item additive index composed otherwise of questions about social problems including crime, drug abuse, aid to cities, and health care.
3. In Gordon's original elaboration of the ethclass formulation he states that the joint effects of race and social class result in differing ethclasses. However, the majority of illustrations used to demonstrate its utility involved the "minority middle class."
4. Analyses that utilize polychoric correlations support constructing the indices used in the regression analyses. First, the two opportunity-enhancing items are highly intercorrelated (.53), as are the three outcome-based items (range from .34 to .52).

## Appendix A

## Characteristics of GSS Sample

	African Americans		Whites	
	X	SD	X	SD
<i>Policy Types</i>				
Opportunity-Enhancing	3.1	.80	3.1	.83
Outcome-Based	2.3	.90	2.0	.88
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Earnings	\$22,234	\$5,569	\$26,747	\$6,101
Education	12.0	3.9	12.3	4.2
Female	51.7		53.8	
Age	35.0	5.2	37.2	5.5
North	N = 89		N = 491	
South	N = 74		N = 351	
West	N = 65		N = 374	
Midwest	N = 56		N = 431	

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