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## **Race, Extended Family Structure, and Voting**

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to address the gap in the literature on how family structures affect voting by looking comparatively at black and white family structure. I review the rather limited scholarship linking family structure with voting, and offer a testable hypothesis that extended family networks facilitates voting, especially among African Americans. To test my hypothesis, I used data from the 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey. I found the inclusion of family structure in addition to demographic variables strengthen the voting effects of family structure for blacks, but weaken the voting effects of family structure among whites.

**Keywords:** Race, Family, Black, African American, Voting

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the Moynihan report (Moynihan 1965), minority families and the extent of their informal social networks have been much debated. The Moynihan report argued Black families had deteriorated into a tangle of pathologies. Initially, minority extended family networks were thought to be “pathological” elements inherent in black cultures; i.e., black family networks were characterized as deviant, disorganized, and dysfunctional, and viewed as an impediment to African American economic progress (Moynihan 1965). Other scholars countered that racial inequality and discrimination produced distinctive family arrangements compared with majority groups, and emphasized their resilient and adaptive features in mitigating the deleterious effects of poverty (Billingsley 1968; Nobles 1974; Stack 1974; Roschelle 1997). That is, studies have shown that extended matriarchal families provide expressive, emotional, monetary, and in-kind support within and between households that enables families to lessen the severity of poverty and provide mobility opportunities (albeit limited) to children (Stack 1974; Edin and Kefala 2005; Roschelle 1997).

Whereas we have learned much about how low-income and minority families rely on extended family networks to adapt and survive, little attention has been paid to how family structure affects other behaviors, for example voting. This is a curious omission given that the political system has the “power for setting the conditions which affect Negro family life” (Billingsley (1968:177). Similarly Hanes Walton Jr. (1994:5) linked “interactive connections” between family members to political behavior, and posited that for

black families political equity can only be achieved through greater political familial discussions of enfranchisement and political participation. In regards to voting, family structures are directly responsible for sharing information about candidates and issues (Walton 1994), sharing transportation to polls (Walton 1994) and/or babysitting while a family member votes (Stack 1974; Roschelle 1997). Yet, there has been little systematic research comparing the effects of family structure on voting behavior by race, and the research that has been done offers no clear answer on this question (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Plutzer and Wiefek 2006; Heflin and Patillo 2002).

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by looking comparatively at black and white family structure and its effect on voting. Below, we review the rather limited scholarship linking family structure with voting, and offer a testable hypothesis that extended family networks facilitates voting, especially among African Americans. Then, we describe the data and measures used to conduct our test of the family structure-voting relationship.

## BACKGROUND

The traditional Socioeconomic Status (SES) voting model is individualistic and views family structure with a limited focus on marriage. The SES model examines education, income, and age as predictors on an individual’s decision to vote or stay home (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba and Nie 1972). Later SES models also include homeownership (Squires et al. 1987). While blacks have dissimilar levels of education, income, and homeownership than whites; scholars found blacks voted at the same

levels as white when SES was controlled (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba and Nie 1972; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1991).

Black scholars typically explain this phenomenon through empowerment (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1991), group consciousness (Dawson 1995) or activism (Jenkins, Jacobs and Agnone 2003) models. Black empowerment was defined as having a black candidate in office or the ballot (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1991). Group conscious was the idea that all blacks share the same political and economic fate (Dawson 1995). Finally, activism examined social movements and motivations for engaging in protest (Jenkins, Jacobs and Agnone 2003).

Nevertheless, there is still “very little research on the political consequences of family context/structure for African American political behavior (Alex-Assensoh and Assensoh 2001:889). This is because researchers have segmented black families (e.g. never married, married, separated, divorced). However black extended families are a composite of singles with children, widowers, and individuals separated or divorced.

The majority of literature omits extended family networks. Thus, models taking into account marriage may depress outcomes in voting. Compared to white families, black families have lower rates of marriage (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994), and are less likely to form nuclear families (Billingsley 1968; Stack 1974). Similarly, compared with whites, black females reported higher rates of never-married and separation from spouses (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994), and black couples are more likely to cohabit than marry (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994). Black women have

children at younger ages than do whites (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994), and reported higher rates of divorce and widowhood than whites (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994). Therefore, single women with kids represent the majority of black families (Wilson 1987; Ruggles 1994).

According to historians government policies explain why black families are less likely to form nuclear families, why black females reported higher rates of never-married and separation from spouses, and are black couples are more likely to cohabit than marry. The government systematically either explicitly or implicitly created institutions to break black nuclear families apart and unintentionally aided and abated in creation of black extended family networks. Initially the government did this through slavery, tearing apart slave families (Billingsley 1968). More contemporarily this was done with Medicaid, prior to the 1996 reform (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Prior to 1996, if a woman on Medicaid had a man in her home, social workers could deny her subsidies (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Together these policies did severe damage to the structure of black families.

Since the publication of the Moynihan Report, several authors argued black extended family networks were culturally resilient through norms of reciprocity (Billingsley 1968, Stack 1974, Staples 1985). Reciprocity generally refers to any object or service offered with the intent of obligating (Stack 1974). Often, in response to the challenges of single parenthood, non-married women formed extended family or kinship networks to help lower the cost of living and childcare (Stack 1974). These extended family networks, predominately comprised of non-married

women, pooled financial resources to split the cost of food, shelter, utilities, transportation and luxury goods (Billingsley 1968; Stack 1974).

Stack (1974) argued black kinship networks were adaptive to individual and social problems. Kinship networks allowed single female-headed households the ability to share resources, child-care responsibilities, and exchange information based on norms of reciprocity (Stack 1974, Roschelle 1994). Moreover, since black families were more likely to change residential locations than whites (Squires et al. 1987) extended family provided stability, despite the uncertainty of shelter (Stack 1974).

Even though Heflin and Patillo (2002) cautioned against attributing homeownership differences to kin networks; the authors' revealed, some black families deferred purchasing a home due to immediate kin financial emergencies. Adhering to the norm of reciprocity, black families who were affluent enough to buy a house instead gave money to extended family members who needed financial assistance. This finding explained why blacks when compared with whites are much more likely to rent than own homes (Stack 1974, Heflin and Patillo 2002, Squires et al. 1987).

However norms of reciprocity may affect extended families members in four potential ways. First, since black extended families' rely on governmental assistance, relatives have a direct stake in making sure their family members vote for candidates whom share their economic and political interest. Second, maximizing information gathering and ensure pertinent information is disseminated. Third, extended families might pressure members to vote,

especially toward favorable candidates. Fourth, the extended family structure may act as a barricade to oppositional pressure and insulate group members from becoming apathetic.

Several scholars have used non-black family metrics to examine black family structure and voting behavior. Plutzer (1998) defined family structure as whether only a mother lived in the residence; as opposed to also examining extended family. Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2010) defined family structure by measuring whether individuals were married, divorced, separated, widowed, or never married, and then differentiated adults with and without children. As previously discussed, black family structures should not be categorized individually but as a composite measure. Past metrics were not sufficient for studying black families and electoral participation.

### ***Family Structure and Voting***

The SES and life cycle models were two models that relate family characteristics to voting. First, early studies analyzed individual characteristics related to voting (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), finding significant positive effects of education, income, and age on voting (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Similarly, homeownership and length at residence increased the likelihood of voting (Squires et al. 1987). However, marital status was the only familial characteristic used to analyze voting behavior, ignoring the role that extended kin networks might play in determining voting among African Americans. Most studies (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) found individuals married people who shared similar

beliefs, which through discussions motivated them to vote.

Second, the life cycle model suggested that individuals voted more frequently as they got older. In addition, Wilensky (1961, 2002) found political participation varied over the life course due to family structure. He suggested that participation is highest for married, never married and lower for once married. Wilensky, similar to Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1972), attributed lower political participation of once married individuals to a rupture in social networks due to mobility. Divorce often causes individuals to move to another home, which created a lag time in re-registering to vote.

Several scholars have discussed a marriage gap in voter turnout. However, there was no consensus on why married individuals voted more than non-married individuals. Initially, scholars argued that individuals married people with the same political values, which strengthened their desire to participate electorally (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Weisberg (1987) suggested that the marriage gap in voter turnout was because married people are more likely to be white and well off compared with African Americans. Plissner (1983:53) speculated the marriage gap was linked to homeownership because “married people are more likely to own property and to worry about protecting it.”

While much scholarship focused on the marriage gap in voter turnout, recent studies produced inconsistent findings on the voting behavior of the divorced and widowed. Waite and Gallagher (2000) found divorced and widowed individuals were less likely to turnout than married and never-married individuals. However, Sandell and Plutzer (2005) found that divorce had

large negative effects on voter turnout for whites, but had no impact on minority turnout. The authors suggested that divorce parents are less likely to vote because divorce more negatively affected white teens. Therefore, voting becomes less of a priority as opposed to other family concerns.

Similarly, the debate about the impact children have on voter turnout was mixed. Plutzer (2002), found number of children had no effect on turnout. And, Plutzer and Sandell (2005) found voter turnout decreased when children were born to white parents with at least a high school education; but found no effect for blacks. Finally, Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2010) found parents with children have lower turnout, but race mitigated those differences. For example, compared to their white counterparts single, married, widowed, and never married African-American females with children still voted at similar levels. As cited earlier, black families have children earlier than whites; and therefore, should vote less, but this had not been found true.

Previous literature makes evident two points. First, it was apparent family structure and voter turnout was related. Married individuals voted more than non-married individuals. Similarly, this paper expects to find married individuals are more likely to vote, due to the husband and wife’s increased income, education and homeownership. Additionally, divorce depressed the likelihood of voting (Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008). Quite often, divorces usually required residential mobility, which reduced turnout because finding a new polling station was time consuming (Squire et al. 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008). In addition, single

parenting and employment leave little time for voting (Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008).

Second points previous literature makes evident is as a group, black voters have only consistently been a part of these academic studies as a demographic (racial) description, but since the Civil Rights Movement are rarely the focus. Nevertheless, research on family structure and voter turnout has yielded different racial outcomes. Thus electoral turnout may be explained by different racial family structures.

### ***Black Family Structure and Voting***

Billingsley's (1988) *Black Families in White America* contends that black families have sometimes been influential in the politics. Focusing on the 1976 Cleveland, Ohio and Gary, Indiana mayoral campaigns, he argued that black families, within their respective communities, discussed and collaborated among their extended networks to vote for a black candidate over a white. However, Cohen and Dawson (1993:297) disputed this conclusion, finding that a "negative relationship exists between neighborhood poverty and the probability of talking to one's family about politics." The authors speculated individuals and families living in severe poverty lacked access to formal information networks. Other possible reason poor blacks did not discuss politics with friends and family was their more important concerns about shelter, food, and work. Stack (1974) made a similar argument; poor blacks developed extended family networks to mitigate these very problems. Interestingly, both studies revealed black women played a central role in political participation.

The central role played by black

women is linked to a gender gap in electoral participation, specifically, black women voted at higher levels than black men (Tate 1993). Tate (1993) found black women registered to vote more than black men. Tate also found black women were more politically engaged than black men. Finally, black women were generally more interested in political campaigns and more partisan than black men. Pultzer (1998) found that black single mothers voted at the same rate as married mothers; however, single mothers lagged in voting behind married mothers because of age differences.

The outcome that black women voted more than men is not surprising for two reasons. First, this outcome was partially attributed to the disenfranchisement of black men who are ex-convicts (Preuhs 2001; Bower & Preuhs 2009). In many states, once a person was convicted of a felony, he lost his right to vote (Preuhs 2001; Bower & Preuhs 2009). Moreover, Bower and Preuhs (2009) found strict felon disenfranchisement laws reduced the probability of voting for blacks as a group. Former convicts can regain the right the vote, but the process was both tedious and uncertain (Preuhs 2001; Bower & Preuhs 2009). Among several states the decision to reinstate an individual's right to vote was the sole decision of the Governor (Preuhs 2001; Bower & Preuhs 2009). Second, previous research correlated voting to working in the labor force (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Historically, it has been easier for black women to find jobs than for black men (Pinkey 2000).

Unfortunately, there has been little research on how men and their political views affected family networks.

However, there was much research on black women's political participation. Ardrey (1994) found married or single-head households of black women were more likely to participate politically than white women. Additionally, Ardey found the combination of single women with children and employment increased the participation of these women. Generally, she explained black women's community participation as spillover from their "over-participation" in family life (1994:225).

Similarly, Stack (1974) argued that females' involvement in extended kinship networks mitigated structural barriers to adequate housing, employment, and childcare. However, the benefit of kinship networks extended beyond housing, employment and childcare to voting. Plutzer and Wiefek (2006) found extended families were more likely to vote than single-headed households. The authors found family members within extended family networks had greater social relationships with friends, family and voluntary associations (i.e. church, social clubs) and more positive psychological beliefs of greater self-confidence and political efficacy.

While, there is still debate in accounting for variation in black voting; very few scholars have attempted to explain black voting behavior as a result of black extended families. Again, the nuance of this paper is the ability to examine black extended families, while controlling for black empowerment and group consciousness. The candidacy of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election was ipso facto black empowerment. Moreover, many blacks were conscious the election of Barack Obama was mutually beneficial for the fate of their race. Based on the literature

I advance a single hypothesis concerning black family and voter turnout:

*Hypothesis 1: Compared to white nuclear and extended families, black nuclear and extended families will be more likely to vote.*

## **METHODS**

To test our hypothesis above, we used data from the 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) (United States Bureau of Census 2008). This data set has two major advantages: the data is collected biennially, its large sample and subsamples, and it is administered in the calendar week after the election. Second, the 2008 data saw the largest African American turnout since 1960. Given the large variation in African-Americans who voted, we ideally assume our model will work regardless of "normal" or "low" African-American turnout.

The presented statistics are based on replies to survey inquiries about whether individuals voted in the 2008 national election. Our sample population consisted of the civilian non-institutionalized population living in the United States. The study population (N=150,799) represents a rich set of data for studying blacks family structures. Almost nine percent (8.8%) of the survey population was African-American. While the percentage is not equal to estimated African-American population, the data represents the most accurate source for variables of family structure, education, income and race.

### ***Voting***

The dependent variable was whether each person voted in the 2008 presidential election, coded as a dummy variable with non-voters as the reference group. Voting age respondents were

asked, “*In any election some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy, or have some other reason, and others do not want to vote. Did (this person) vote in the election held on November (date varies)?*” Respondents

were classified as either “voted” or “did not vote.”

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S. D.
Voted	67469	0	1	.7453	.43572
Black Extended Family	67469	0	1	.0300	.17071
Black Nuclear Family	67469	0	1	.0346	.18275
Black Single	67469	0	1	.0233	.15099
White Extended Family	67469	0	1	.1135	.31721
White Nuclear Family	67469	0	1	.5557	.49689
Age	67469	18	85	47.2425	17.38911
Female	67469	0	1	.5251	.49937
Income	67469	1	8	5.5089	2.35137
Education	67469	1	5	2.8821	1.13810
Housing Tenure	67469	1	6	5.0841	1.34660
Renter	67469	0	1	.2452	.43020
Urban	67469	0	1	.7713	.42003

**Family Structure**

Family structure was measured with a series of orthogonal dummy variables. Cases were coded into nuclear, single no children, or extended families. Three categories were collapsed to create extended families. Interviewers asked respondents if the household included related or unrelated person who resided in the home. Additionally, single with children were collapsed into extended family because Stack (1974) described this structure as the basic unit for black extended families. Moreover, group quarter family and non-group quarter family were also collapsed into extended family. First, group quarter families were units where nine or more extended family members live together. Second, non-group quarter families were units where individuals may not be related to the head householder.

Since Stack (1974) argued that black families were comprised of both extended family and fictive kin, group and non-group quarters were collapsed into extended family structure. Altogether group quarters, both family and non-family related, accounted for 39 cases or less than 1% of my sample. To account for race differences in the effects of family structure on voting, an interaction was created for black nuclear, extended families and black singles without children, along with the interaction of white nuclear and extended families; thus single whites with no children is the reference group (constituting a little more than a fourth of the sample).

**Controls**

Gender was dummy coded with men as the reference female. This

substantially important because while women represent 52% and black 8.8% of my sample, previous literature dictated black women head the majority of black families (Stacks 1974; Billingsley 1968, Ruggles 1994). In addition to gender, we control for age, education, income, shelter, and residential mobility since previous literature showed that these variables influence voting (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Previous research showed age has a curvilinear association with voting, thus the *age-squared* was included to account for age differences in voter turnout (Wolfinger and Rosentone 1980; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008). Education and income were included as ordinal variables; education was coded from 1= *no high school degree* to 5= *advanced degree*. Income was coded into eight ordinal categories ranging from 1= *less than \$10,000* to 8= *\$75,000 and above*.

Stack (1974) discussed that black kinship networks are dependent on family members, which may move residences fairly often. To account for the likelihood that extended family members may move before an election we measured the length of a respondent's residence in a dwelling. The tenure of a respondent living in a dwelling ranged from 1= *less than a month* to 6= *over four years*. We also included binary controls for homeownership (1= *renter*; 0= *homeowner*).

Finally the model included binary controls for Metropolitan Statistical Area (1= *urban*; 0= *rural*). Urban was included to moderate the effect that race has on extended family and voting. Several scholars have located the majority of black extended families in

metropolitan areas (Wilson 1987), whereas white extended families are often located in nonmetropolitan areas.

### ***Statistical Model***

Stepwise logistic regression was employed for two reasons. First, voter turnout was a binary variable. Second, stepwise models were estimated to determine the strength of the impact of black family structure on voting as additional predictors are added to the model.

## **RESULTS**

Table 2 presents coefficients for the determinants of voting in the 2008 national election in comparison to the reference group white singles without children. Compared to the reference group, black singles without children increased their likelihood of voting with each additional variable included in models 2 ( $b = 0.991, p < .001$ ) and 3 ( $b = 1.036, p < .001$ ).

### ***Extended Families***

Family structures alone, we see in model 1 are significantly related to voting. That is, compared with single whites without children, blacks living in extended families were 67.3 percent ( $67.3 = 100 * [1.673 - 1]$ ) more likely to vote ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the inclusion of control variables in model 2 only increases the percent likelihood of voting for individuals associated with black extended family networks ( $b = 1.048, p < .001$ ). Even the addition of homeownership, longevity as residence and urban in model 3 do not moderate the effect, instead the relationship between black extended families and voting increases ( $b = 1.048, p < .001$ ). In comparison, white extended families likelihood decreases with the additional

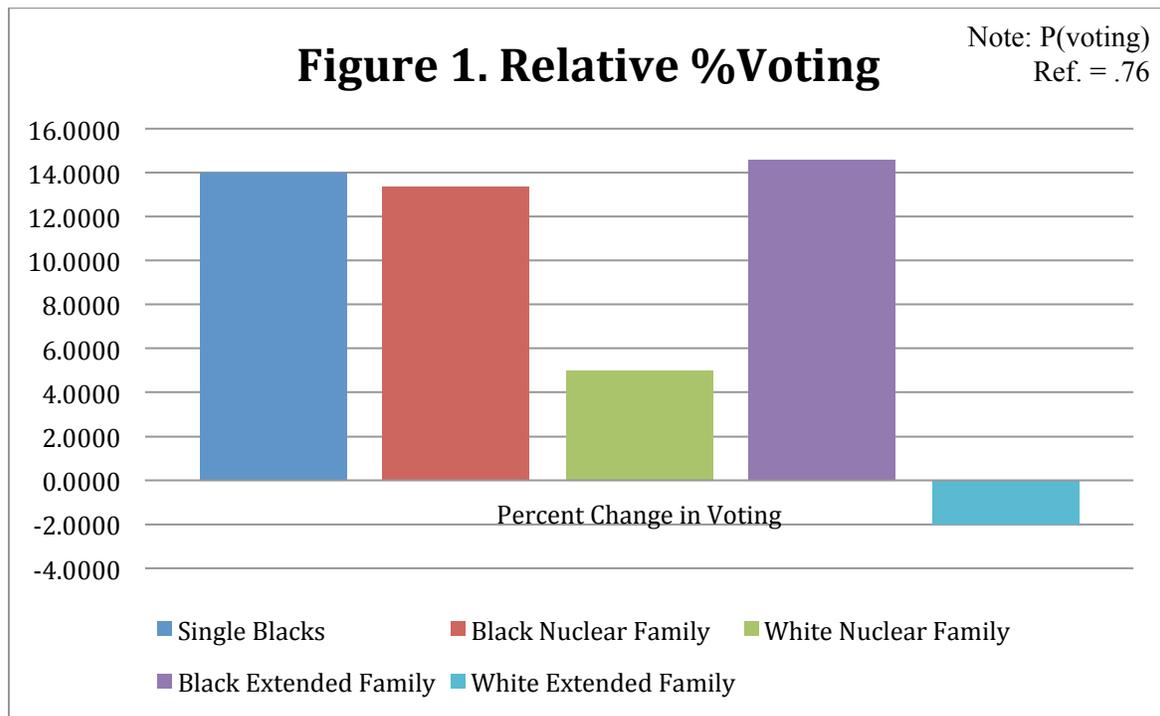
of control variables in the models. In model 2, after the inclusion education, income, age and female white extended

families are no longer significant ( $b = -0.048, p < .127$ ).

Table 2: Odds Coefficient for Voter Turnout on Black Family Structure and Other Variables

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
blkextfam	0.409*	0.050	1.133*	.059	1.081*	.060
blknuclearfam	0.801*	0.052	1.048*	.061	0.965*	.062
blksingle	0.515*	0.058	0.991*	.068	1.036*	.070
wnuclearfam	0.555*	0.019	0.390*	.024	0.275*	.025
wnextendedfam	-0.403*	0.026	-0.048	.032	-0.107*	.032
income			0.127*	.005	0.100*	.005
education			0.693*	.011	0.706*	.011
age			0.031*	.003	0.023*	.003
age <sup>2</sup>			0.0001	.000	0.0001	.000
female			0.246*	.019	0.246*	.020
housing tenure					0.152*	.008
renter					-0.186*	.026
urban					0.081*	.023
Cox and Snell r <sup>2</sup>	0.025		0.155		0.162	

Note: \* $p < .001$ , -2L 64649.925, Predicted Percentage Corrected 77.2



### ***Nuclear Families***

Similar to black extended families in model 2, black nuclear families likelihood of voting increase with the addition of control variables ( $b = 1.048$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However dissimilar to black extended families, the housing variables moderate black nuclear families' likelihood of voting ( $b = 0.956$   $p < .001$ ). While similar to black nuclear families, whites living in nuclear families were more likely to vote but not at similar levels to blacks. Additionally, the increase of control variable with each model decreased the likelihood of out voting the reference group.

### ***Percent Voting Differentials***

The results in Table 1 suggest that family structure has a stronger effect on voting among blacks than whites. Another way to assess this is to compare the change in the probability of voting of different race x family structure configurations (compared with single whites without children). In holdings the other variables at their means, we are able to calculate the change in the relative percent voting of race/family type compared with the reference group.

Comparing black and white family types, it is apparent membership in a black family is more positively associated with an increased probability of voting. Black extended families have the highest probability of voting, when all predictor variables were held at their means of 15%. Oppositely, white extended families' have the lowest probability of voting, their probability decreased by 2%. However, the probability of voting increases for both black (13%) and white (5%) nuclear families, albeit the increases are different.

### **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

Whereas the inclusion of income, education, age and female strengthen the voting effects of family structure for blacks, but weaken the voting effects of family structure among whites. Blacks living in extended families were the most likely to vote compared with the reference group. Moreover, once the socio-economic determinants of voting were controlled, black family structure effects on voting are far larger than their effects among whites. Based on these results, my hypothesis was supported that black family structures outvote their white counterparts.

We think there are two possible explanations for the differences in voting. First, the result might be explained by conventional wisdom that white extended families resided the rural areas and are hindered by structural impediments to education and finances. When a family's income is increasing, it creates more time for people to participate civically. Also, family income may be tied to government policy and change member's efficacy toward government (Pultzer 1998). Similarly, as a family's level of education increase, it creates greater awareness of civic issues. Family members with more education may remind other members about when, where, who is on the ballot and how to vote. Second, white extended family members or whites in particular, may have stayed home instead of voting possibly due to their dissatisfaction with either presidential candidate.

In conclusion, our results extend previous research on the study of voting. More importantly, our results advance what was previously known about the impact of family structure on voter turnout. Also, the finding black extended

families have the greatest likelihood of voting moves our understanding the relationship between family structure and voting forward. Stack's (1974) adaptive nature and cultural resiliency explanation of extended black families may explain the variation. It is conceivable that black extended families use their networks to disseminate information about candidates, motivate one another to vote, provide child-care and transportation for various members to vote on Election Day.

Further research on this topic should better investigate the impact that African-American churches have on black families' electoral participation. Future voting scholarship needs to build on individual variation in voter turnout by analyzing the family's church attendance. Since the Civil Rights Movement, African-American churches played a central role mobilizing voter turnout (Jenkins et al. 2003; McAdam 1986; Morris 1989). As for voting, a family's church attendance may covariate with racial consciousness, racial empowerment, and activism. Again, future research should examine whether these variables affect familial explanations of voter turnout.

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