

The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order

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Dark-skinned blacks in the United States have lower socioeconomic status, more punitive relationships with the criminal justice system, diminished prestige, and less likelihood of holding elective office compared with their lighter counterparts. This phenomenon of “colorism” both occurs within the African American community and is expressed by outsiders, and most blacks are aware of it. Nevertheless, blacks’ perceptions of discrimination, belief that their fates are linked, or attachment to their race almost never vary by skin color. We identify this disparity between treatment and political attitudes as “the skin color paradox,” and use it as a window into the politics of race in the United States over the past half-century.

Using national surveys, we explain the skin color paradox as follows: Blacks’ commitment to racial identity overrides the potential for skin color discrimination to have political significance. That is, because most blacks see the fight against racial hierarchy as requiring their primary allegiance, they do not see or do not choose to express concern about the internal hierarchy of skin tone. Thus dark-skinned blacks’ widespread experience of harm has no political outlet – which generates the skin color paradox.

The article concludes by asking how much concern the skin color paradox really warrants. Without fully resolving that question, we note that policies designed to solve the problem of racial hierarchy are not helpful to and may even make worse the problem of skin color hierarchy within the black population.

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What is really crucial behind the color point is class; the implication that light color goes with higher status and the Negroid appearance with lower status, is what makes these characteristics so important.

A. Davis et al. 1946:137

So I sit here as a light skin Black woman and I sit here to tell you that I am Black. That people who are my color in this country will always be treated as Black.... We who are Black have got to say 'look, we are people of color, and we are readily identified. Any discrimination against one of us is discrimination against another.'

– Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, 1997

Well-to-do, fair-skinned kids in the neighborhood weren't allowed to play with him and they regularly taunted him about his color, Jones says.... "That's been a dominant force in my life. Having lived through those experiences gave me the desire to fight for the disadvantaged."

Robinson-English 2005:154

In September 2005, CNN news anchor Wolf Blitzer remarked that the most devastated victims of Hurricane Katrina “are so poor and they are so black.” (Blitzer 2005) He presumably was referring to the fact that most displaced people were African American residents of New Orleans. But behind his comment was a physical fact about the people appearing on television sets across the country; those left behind were the darkest as well as the poorest of their race. Commentators have spoken endlessly of their poverty – but beyond this comment, not at all of their complexions.

Blitzer’s remarks were prescient. As the first epigraph suggests, racial minorities with dark skin in the United States have been disproportionately disadvantaged for centuries.¹ Relative to their lighter-skinned counterparts, dark-skinned blacks have lower levels of education, income and job status. They are less likely to own homes or to marry; and dark-skinned blacks’ prison sentences are longer. Dark-skin discrimination occurs within as well as across races (Turner 1995). Some evidence suggests, in fact, that intra-racial disparities are as detrimental to a person’s life chances as are disparities traditionally associated with racial divisions (Hughes and Hertel 1990).

Skin color is associated with individuals’ preferences as well as their outcomes. With some exceptions, most Americans prefer lighter to darker skin aesthetically, normatively and culturally. Film-makers, novelists, advertisers, modeling agencies, matchmaking websites – all demonstrate how much the power of a fair complexion, along with

straight hair and Eurocentric facial features, appeals to Americans.² Complexion and appearance are also related to how voters evaluate candidates and who wins elections.

Given that skin color is connected with attitudes and life outcomes in myriad ways, one would expect that it is also associated with political beliefs and identities. To our knowledge almost no one has examined this expectation. We did so, and found a surprise: skin tone seems almost entirely unrelated to the political views of ordinary residents of the United States. We call this anomaly the skin color paradox.

The skin color paradox is as important as it is surprising. Political scientists expect individuals' social, economic and cultural characteristics to link to their political views, as in the standard finding that education, income, gender, ideology, religiosity and racial self-definition are associated with party identification, policy preferences and candidate choice. Skin color is certainly implicated in social, economic and cultural characteristics – and yet it is essentially irrelevant to political views. Finding a sharp break between individuals' political attitudes and virtually all other aspects of their lives defies the standard pattern of outcomes, and it is important to find out why – if for no other reason than the fact that we are hard-pressed to find any other indicator that shapes almost every element of life but has no bearing on political views.

There are, however, other reasons for examining the skin color paradox. Understanding it helps us to explicate the nature of racial politics in the United States over the past half-century. The paradox is an indicator of issues that have not been available for political debate, having to do with variations within the black population that are consequential for life chances. Americans have certainly engaged in robust political debates about racial hierarchy, with strategies for reform ranging from racial nationalism through interracial integrationism to colorblind individualism. But all of these strategies have been predicated on the assumption that racial groups are fixed, well-bounded and sufficiently similar internally that intra-racial differences should not be given political prominence. The skin color paradox both points to that unstated assumption and challenges it.

Finally, exploring the skin color paradox raises normative and policy issues with which all Americans should grapple. It is deeply troubling to find that dark-skinned blacks must deal with even more barriers to success and happiness than others in their group, especially given that they have no regularized political channels for redress or even public recognition. In addition, examining the skin color paradox raises questions about contemporary strategies for promoting racial equality. If, as we show below, black elected officials are disproportionately light-skinned, then even their election may be inadequate to provide descriptive and substantive

representation. Similarly, if light-skinned blacks receive more education and income than their dark-skinned counterparts, then affirmative action policies may exacerbate inequities among black Americans. Recognizing these concerns by exploring the skin color paradox is a necessary first step toward engaging with them.

The Psychology of Colorism

Color preference is a cousin of racial prejudice, and like prejudice it is closely linked with the urge to obtain and maintain power over others. Colorism differs from prejudice mainly by making distinctions within a nominal racial group instead of across groups. That is, for whatever reason, light-skinned – and sometimes dark-skinned – people attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth to one group, typically those designated as white, and believe that that is the right thing to do. Then for the same reasons, people attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth to people of one complexion, typically light skin, within the groups designated as non-white. More simply, colorism is “the tendency to perceive or behave toward members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone.” (Maddox and Gray 2002:250)³

As with racism or prejudice, the concept of colorism has a pejorative connotation. Also like racism, colorism can be thought of as either unidirectional (only those with power and status can exhibit it) or multidirectional (people of any one skin shade can denigrate or subordinate people of another). In our usage, colorism can be manifested within or across racial and ethnic groups and can be multidirectional (although it usually is not).

For colorism to occur, people must see fairly subtle differences of color and must attribute meaning to those differences that largely accord with others’ attributions. Psychologists have amply demonstrated that these conditions hold. To briefly summarize an extensive literature, people perceive differences in others’ skin color. They attend to the differences especially when the others are thought to be part of a coherent group. They offer or remember stereotypes or information based on skin color, especially those that fit traditional assumptions; and they are less able to repress such stereotypes than ones based on race [T.J. Brown et al. 1998; Blair et al. 2002; Yip and Sinha 2002:999; Blair, Judd and Fallman 2004].

Furthermore, people give normative valences to the color differences that they discern. Americans both within and outside a given racial or ethnic group attribute more favorable traits to lighter-skinned members of that group, believe that others see light skin as more attractive than dark skin (this view is more likely to be held by women than by men), and would prefer to have lighter skin and more Eurocentric features

themselves [Parrish 1946; Bond and Cash 1992; Ross 1997; Hill 2002; Ramos and Bastone 2004; Maddox 2004; Wade, Irvine et al. 2004]. For partial exceptions, see Neal and Wilson 1989 and K. Brown et al. 1999]. Dark skin evokes fears of criminality (Dasgupta et al. 1999; Maddox and Gray 2002) or sharper memories of a purportedly criminal face (Dixon and Maddox 2005). Even black first graders are better able to remember stories in which light-skinned individuals are portrayed positively (or dark-skinned people portrayed negatively) than the reverse (Averhart and Bigler 1997).

Most of these studies were conducted in the United States. Research is too sparse to determine whether colorism is invariant around the world. Where it has been studied, however, the psychological dynamic appears to be the same as in the studies just described: skin color matters for social standing, and light-skinned people generally are advantaged [Cunningham et al. 1995; Sidanius et al. 2001; Salamon 2003; Glassman 2004; George 1997; Telles 2004; Sawyer 2005]. European colonialism surely reinforced that preference, but the scanty evidence indicates that it preceded contact with modern western societies.

Skin Color Is Related to Socioeconomic Status

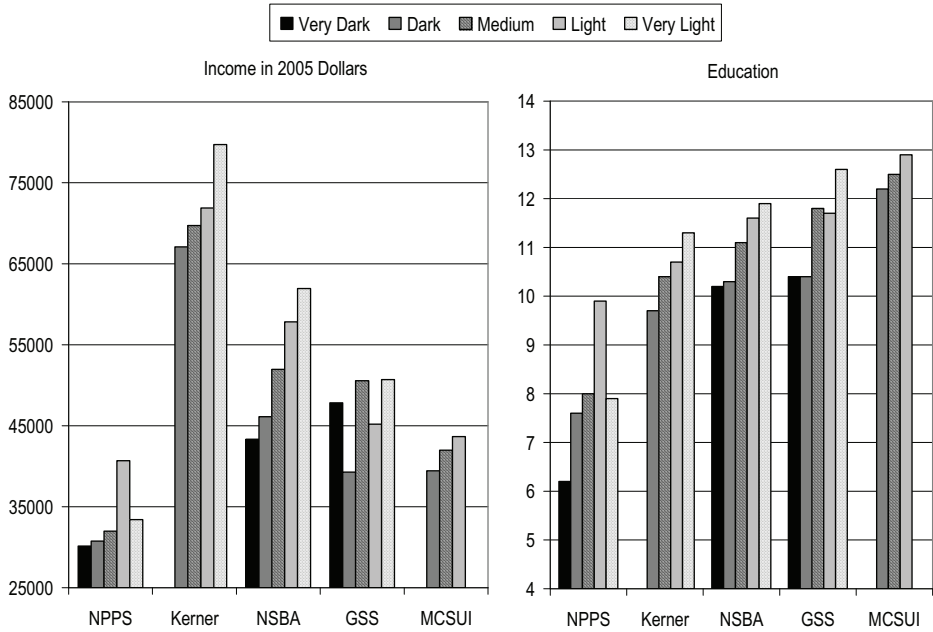
Since 1960, seven academic surveys with either national samples or samples from a wide array of locations have measured skin tone⁴ along with other relevant variables. The surveys that included blacks are briefly described in the Appendix. The surveys are consistent in showing a relationship between skin color and material well-being. Our results accord with almost all other examinations of this relationship including Edwards 1972; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Seltzer and Smith 1991; Hill 2000; Hunter et al. 2001; Bowman et al. 2004; and Hersch 2006.

Education and Family Income

Figure 1 shows the association between skin tone and education (panel A) or family income (panel B) for black respondents with a valid observation for skin color in each survey. All show a clear upward slope corresponding with increasingly light skin tone. Note that, although blacks' schooling outcomes improve over time as one would expect, educational advantage by skin color is substantial enough that lighter respondents in earlier surveys attain more years of schooling than do darker respondents in later surveys.

The same pattern obtains for annual family income as for years of education. The results are slightly attenuated, probably because family rather than individual income is analyzed in order to have a consistent measure across all surveys. The trajectory over time is also somewhat

Figure 1: Socioeconomic Status by Skin Color for Blacks, 1961-1994



Note: For Education, $p < \text{or} = .000$ for all five surveys. For Income, $p < \text{or} = .000$ for NSBA and Kerner; p is n.s. for GSS and NPPS; $p = .039$ for MCSUI.

less consistent than for education, probably because income varies more across settings and groups than does schooling, so the different sampling method in each survey matters more. In addition, nonresponse rates varied more across surveys for income than for education, and MCSUI oversampled high- and low-poverty census tracts. Nevertheless, despite substantive and methodological complexities, the central pattern of light-skin advantage is strong, as one would expect from the operation of colorism.

Figure 1 shows only bivariate relationships. The patterns hold, to a lesser degree, with an array of controls for demographic and parental background.⁵ That result implies that the light-skinned have social and economic advantages passed down by their lighter ancestors *and* that the light-skinned are directly advantaged by their appearance, as the phenomenon of colorism would predict.

Socioeconomic Status in Other Arenas

Data on other social and economic arenas of life show the same association between dark skin and disadvantage. Consider criminal justice: among

66,927 male felons incarcerated for their first offense in Georgia from 1995 through 2002, the dark-skinned received longer prison sentences. Whites' sentences averaged 2,689 days, and blacks' were longer by 378 days. Within the black group, those with the lightest skin received prison sentences averaging three and a half months longer than did whites; medium-skinned blacks received the average for blacks and a year more than whites; and the dark-skinned got hit with 3,250 days – a year and a half longer than whites. Controlling for type of offense, socioeconomic status and demographic indicators (which are themselves associated with skin color), light-skinned blacks received sentences statistically indistinguishable from those of whites, while medium- and dark-skinned blacks received sentences 2.7 percent longer (Burch 2005; see also Blair, Judd and Chapleau 2004; Gyimah-Brempong and Price 2006). Black defendants in capital cases with a white victim are twice as likely to receive the death penalty if they have dark skin and more Afrocentric facial features than if they do not (Eberhardt et al. 2006).

Or consider hiring. In an experimental setting, white subjects acting as managers of a firm recommended hiring fair-skinned more than dark-skinned black job applicants, despite identical credentials. This effect came entirely from the male subjects (Wade, Romano et al. 2004). Even the 1995 Federal Glass Ceiling Commission found chances for professional promotion to be affected by gradations of skin color: "Color-based differences are inescapable but nobody likes to talk about them.... Though it is mostly covert, our society has developed an extremely sophisticated, and often denied, acceptability index based on gradations in skin color.... It is applied to African Americans, to American Indians, to Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, and to Hispanic Americans." (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission 1995:29; see also Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1998).

People with dark skin are also more likely to grow up in difficult circumstances. A 1999 study of 3,900 first-year students in selective colleges and universities found that blacks from segregated neighborhoods had darker skin than those from integrated neighborhoods (Massey et al. 2003). Segregated communities had, in turn, lower average incomes and higher levels of social disorder, violence and visible drug or alcohol use. Dark-skinned blacks came from poorer homes than did light-skinned blacks.

Finally, consider interpersonal relations and cultural exchanges. Dark-skinned blacks are less likely to marry (Edwards et al. 2004) and if married, dark-skinned African Americans have spouses of relatively lower socioeconomic status (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 1998; Edwards et al. 2004). Institutions ranging from advertising agencies to filmmakers to adoption agencies reinforce the dominant view that lighter is better (Berry 1988; Keenan 1996; Fears 1998; McRoy and Grape 1999; Kennedy 2003; K. Brown 2004).

In short, skin color indicates a pattern of significant secondary marginalization (Cohen 1999). The causes are both historical and contemporary. That is, light-skinned individuals disproportionately come from families with relatively high status in the black community, *and* the phenomenon of colorism operates in direct interchanges as well. A long string of memoirs and essays show with equal clarity that African Americans are well aware of the impact of skin color on life chances. (For example, see Graham 2000 Russell 1992; Thompson 2001.) Discussion can be voluble and intense, and the effects of skin color discrimination can be deeply painful, as the third epigraph to this article suggests.

Skin Color Is Related to Political Outcome

To our knowledge, no one has systematically examined whether skin color plays a role in the political arena analogous to the role that it plays in society and the economy. There is no theoretical reason to expect the political arena to be more immune to colorism than are other arenas of life – and indeed, our research shows that it is not. Light-skinned blacks are advantaged in electoral politics just as they are advantaged in schooling, incomes, the criminal justice system, hiring and the marriage market.

Skin Color and Political Office

People with lighter skin are overrepresented among elected political elites. Of the 22 blacks in Congress during and after Reconstruction, all but three appeared to be of mixed race. (Swain 1993. Also see note 6 for an explanation of our independent analysis of political officials' skin color.) About half had "marked Caucasian features – light complexions and straight hair," and "some of them may have identified more with whites than blacks." (Swain 1993:26; see also Graham 2006; F.J. Davis 2001. Tate 2003a gives similar descriptions, but interprets behavior differently.)

To see if the bias toward light skin among elite elected officials in the United States persists, we coded the appearance of all African Americans elected to the House of Representatives, Senate or a governor's office since 1865.⁶ Table 1 shows the results. Comparing elected officials' appearance to the relevant population figures from NSBA (column 3) shows that light-skinned blacks have always been considerably overrepresented and dark-skinned blacks dramatically underrepresented as elected officials. The proportion of dark African American elected officials has increased somewhat in recent decades, but not at the expense of the light-skinned.

Skin color coding through photographs is inevitably imprecise, and of course, many factors determine whether a person runs for and wins

Table 1: Skin Tone of all Blacks Elected to Statewide or National Office

	Black Elected Officials		
	1865-1964	1965-present	NSBA 1980
Total N	30	86	2043
% Dark	7	20	38
% Medium	53	40	45
% Light	40	40	17

Note: NSBA 1980 total with skin color measure.

office. Our point is to demonstrate that light skin has been and remains consistently associated with elite electoral office-holding just as it is associated with better outcomes in the society and economy. From the vantage point of a dark-skinned black American, the phenomenon of colorism among prominent political leaders of his or her race might well seem significant and disturbing.

Table 1 provides information about electoral winners, not candidates. To determine whether it is candidates or winners who are disproportionately light, we examined all political contests at statewide or national levels in 2002 and 2004 that involved at least one black candidate, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Of the 83 blacks (counting each person once, even if he or she ran for office in both years), 25 percent had light skin tones, 40 percent were medium-toned, and 35 percent were dark. Comparing those proportions with the distribution in NSBA (column 3) shows that light-skinned candidates were somewhat more prevalent than their proportion in the population, and the other two groups were proportional. Thus, according to this initial analysis, skin color is not strongly associated with blacks’ candidacy for office, but light-skinned candidates are somewhat more likely – and dark-skinned candidates somewhat less likely – to win their electoral contests.

Thus representatives often do not resemble, at least in the sensitive arena of appearance, the modal member of their group – and they resemble even less the most disadvantaged members of their group. When black residents of the United States look toward Congress, they have less difficulty than they used to in finding descriptive representation by race, but the most disadvantaged among them will have just as much trouble finding descriptive representation by appearance. Primary marginalization has been alleviated somewhat in the past few decades of black electoral victories, but secondary marginalization of dark-skinned blacks remains almost as acute as ever.

These electoral outcomes might arise from indirect factors including family background. However, our other work demonstrates a powerful direct impact of skin color on voters’ evaluations of black candidates. A

survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of whites that varied the skin tone, platform and name of candidates in a hypothetical election for Senate, provides evidence for the impact of skin color on candidate favorability. Subjects were shown candidate advertisements with basic information included and then given a survey about the candidates as well as being asked to cast a vote for their preferred representative. While candidate platform, color and name all interact, and further interact with the partisanship, gender and racial predispositions of the respondent, the findings are clear and consistent with regard to skin color. Black candidates were punished regardless of skin color in elections where their opponents were white. However, when two black candidates opposed each other, lighter skin was an important predictor of candidate popularity and voting. In this condition, the light-skinned black candidate prevailed over his darker opponent by an astonishing 18 percentage points, a larger margin than any other treatment group received. Holding the candidate platform and respondent ideology constant, the probability of casting a vote for Candidate A increased by 21 percentage points going from the dark-skinned to the light-skinned black candidate. Voters' preferences for the lighter black held regardless of the racial predispositions of the subject. Respondents also rated the light-skinned black candidate as being more intelligent, more experienced and more trustworthy than his dark-skinned opponent. Thus, black candidates were disadvantaged by race, but the support eroded even further when the candidate's complexion was dark.

In sum, despite very different kinds of data, colorism operates in the political realm in much the same way that it does in socioeconomic realm; dark skin amplifies racial inequality. Together, these relationships fuel the expectation that color will also shape attitudes and beliefs.

Skin Color Is *Not* Related to Political Views

Reams of evidence show that a person's political behaviors, commitments and perceptions are generally connected to his or her social and economic standing. For example, people with relatively low incomes, education or job status are disproportionately Democratic; white evangelical Protestants are disproportionately Republican; women vote slightly but consistently more for Democratic candidates (Verba et al. 1995; Burns 2001; Bartels 2006). Every survey ever conducted on the point shows that blacks see more discrimination in American society than do whites, with Hispanics and Asians in between. People are especially likely to engage politically on issues highly salient to someone with their characteristics – union members follow labor legislation; blacks focus on discrimination; women

attend to family policy, and so on (Hutchings 2003). Following that logic, one would expect dark-skinned blacks, who suffer from secondary as well as primary marginalization, to perceive colorism more than would others of their race. They can also be expected to perceive more discrimination against themselves than would their light-skinned counterparts. They might also be more alienated from American society and from whites, and project their own situation into a perception of greater discrimination against their race. It is plausible that they would see greater need for group solidarity or perceive a stronger linked fate among blacks than do their lighter-skinned counterparts, who are more successful at moving within mainstream or white society. Most generally, dark-skinned blacks might feel more intense racial identity, for several reasons. They may have fewer non-black ancestors or family members; they may sense that whites see them as quintessentially black literally as well as metaphorically; and they may feel less welcome in non-black environments.⁷

The 1979-80 NSBA and the 1993-94 MCSUI contain questions that enable us to examine these expectations. Table 2 shows the relationships in these surveys between skin color on the one hand, and perceptions of disparate treatment by skin tone, discrimination against the race and against oneself, judgments of linked fate, and the sense of racial identity. The first conclusion to draw is simple: despite plausible expectations, African Americans' skin color has almost no relationship to any of these political beliefs or values.⁸

Perhaps the most surprising non-result has to do with perceptions of discrimination; because dark-skinned blacks do in fact suffer from additional discrimination, one might expect them to be more attuned to racially disparate behavior. But they are not. We examined all five national surveys with a measure of blacks' skin color and items about discrimination. Across 64 measures, the evidence is ambiguous both for perceived discrimination against oneself and against one's racial group. Most results were not statistically significant in any direction, and in the cases where there was an association between blacks' skin color and their report of discrimination, it was not consistent in direction. Even when the dark-skinned did report more discrimination, their differences from the light-skinned are quite small.

With these non-results in hand, the final – and surprising – element of the skin color paradox falls into place. Contrary to the evidence and inferences drawn from other political science research, differences in skin color among African Americans are hardly ever associated with differences in key political attitudes. That makes it different from virtually all other personal characteristics – such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, religiosity, region, urbanicity, immigration status or sexual orientation – that usually show associations with political views and behaviors. Why?

Our answer to that question cannot be guided by the literature on the subject as few analyses of links between skin color and political views exist.¹⁰ The one comparable study, of blacks in the 1982 GSS, resembles this one in finding virtually no relationships between skin tone and several dozen attitudinal items. The authors concluded that given "class stratification based on color," the lack of attitudinal results is "a remarkable finding." (Seltzer and Smith 1991:284-85). We concur – but we differ in

Table 2: Relationships between Blacks' Skin Color and Political Attitudes

Issue	Item	Skin Color			N		
		Survey	Dark	Medium		Light	P ≤ .05
Color	Whites treat R differently because of color	NSBA	21.7	20.4	23.9	—	2007
	Blacks treat R differently because of color	NSBA	17.0	17.0	26.3	•	2022
Group Discrimination	Blacks in the United States are "kept back because of race"	NSBA	57.8	53.8	56.3	—	1969
	Blacks don't get good education or job because they have "no chances"	NSBA	62.1	64.5	65.8	—	1991
	Blacks are treated badly at work	NSBA	75.0	74.6	70.9	—	1152
	Whites want to "keep blacks down"	NSBA	41.5	40.8	41.9	—	1910
	Blacks have "no" power	NSBA	5.6	4.8	7.7	—	1982
	Discrimination now compared with the past: "same" + "more"	NSBA	37.6	34.1	35.0	—	1968
	Discrimination in 20 years: "same" + "more"	NSBA	40.9	44.5	39.1	—	1850
	"Strongly agree" that outcomes are due to discrimination	MCSUI	49.1	46.7	46.2	—	2117
	"A lot" of job discrimination	MCSUI	62.2	63.3	66.5	—	2926
	Housing discrimination index ¹¹	MCSUI	60.1	67.1	58.9	•	2859
	Individual Discrimination	Being black is "very important" in keeping you from good jobs	NSBA	24.9	21.0	25.7	—
You or your family are treated badly because of race		NSBA	10.6	11.3	12.9	—	2057
Discriminated against at work		MCSUI	18.5	16.5	15.5	—	1525
Race affected promotion		MCSUI	23.7	21.5	19.3	—	1875
Ever refused job because of race		MCSUI	37.2	40.6	40.2	—	1549
Faced housing discrimination		MCSUI	22.3	24.0	19.7	—	1710
Linked Fate	R's chances depend more on blacks as a group or both blacks and self, rather than on what R does for self	NSBA	54.5	49.5	46.0	•	2022
	Blacks should work together rather than alone to have power and improve their position	NSBA	90.1	89.8	88.7	—	2025
Racial Identity	What happens in general to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life, and it will affect you "a lot" + "some"	MCSUI	67.2	71.5	71.6	•	2929
	Is R black or American? ("Black" + "Both")	NSBA	92.4	91.0	90.2	—	2008
Racial Identity	R feels "very close" to poor blacks	NSBA	76.1	67.7	67.1	•	2037
	R feels "very close" to middle class blacks	NSBA	44.0	41.7	39.5	—	2025
	R feels "very close" to working class blacks	NSBA	68.2	64.4	61.3	—	2033

finding the lack of relationship between complexion and political attitudes to be a substantively important window into American racial dynamics.

Explaining the Skin Color Paradox

The starting point for understanding the skin color paradox is racial identity. Black racial identity is an emotional or affective attachment to the concept of being black and to other people who share the same label or self-definition. Its precise contours cannot be specified, nor is precision in this case appropriate; racial identity is simultaneously a sentiment, a worldview, a perspective and a framework for political action. People with a strong racial identity are likely to look at the world through a racial lens – to be acutely aware of other people’s race in social settings, to define their own interests in light of the situation of other blacks, to invoke a racial connotation in interpreting complex situations and subtle interpersonal cues.

Identification with blackness thus understood is a long-standing historical phenomenon that emerged out of both external pressure and internal choice. Self-chosen racial identity is apparent in David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, in Martin Delany’s 1852 *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, in W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*. Black identity was powerfully reinforced by the laws that swept the American South during the 1920s declaring that even one black ancestor made a person a Negro, and by the U.S. Census Bureau’s new rules for enumeration in 1930, declaring that, “A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood. Both black and mulatto persons are to be returned as Negroes, without distinction.” The courts concurred, and by the 1930s, the long-standing idea that one could identify with or be labeled as belonging to more than one race – as a mulatto, quadroon or octoroon, for example – had largely disappeared from Americans’ consciousness. This external push merged with an internal pull to create a strong impulse toward racial connectedness.

Given the 20th century’s history of creating a bright-line distinction between blacks and others and the powerful influence of majority sentiment, one would not expect racial identity to vary with skin color. And according to the best measure available, it does not. In 1961, 94 percent of light-skinned, 87 percent of medium-skinned, and 89 percent of dark-skinned black adults living in the South agreed that they felt “very close” or “pretty close” to other blacks (NPPS). NSBA results were the same, although the questions in this survey were slightly less direct.

Figure 2 shows schematically how racial identity explains the skin color paradox. For most blacks, racial identity functions as a background condition – an unstated context or unquestioned assumption. Three more narrowly-defined phenomena interact within it: skin color, perceptions of discrimination (against oneself or one’s race), and the belief in linked fate. Perceptions of discrimination and the belief in linked fate are closely related, probably in a system of mutual causation. That is, if one perceives a lot of

discrimination in American society, one is likely to believe that blacks’ fortunes are necessarily linked; conversely, if one believes that blacks’ fortunes are linked, one will be highly attuned to racial discrimination. (See Dawson 1994; Tate 2003b; Gay 2004 on the correlates of linked fate among blacks.)

However, skin color differences have no relationship to linked fate or to perceived discrimination, because engagement with colorism would war with a strong sense of racial identity. Black racial identity is premised on recognition of primary marginalization, whereas skin color differentiation is a form of secondary marginalization. In an environment in which members of a group feel deeply threatened by institutional or individual racism, it is very difficult for members of that group to protest internal differences. Attention to intersectionality (Hancock 2007) or intense concern for disfavored group members seems like a luxury that cannot at present be afforded (Cohen 1999; Stone 1989; Hull 1982), or even like a betrayal of the comradeship and collective spirit needed to fight the external threat (Walzer 1970; Carmichael 1967). And especially when group members come to believe that they might be able to defeat the oppressor if they stretch their resources to the utmost, then drawing attention to internal differences or expressing dissension from the collective enterprise becomes very difficult indeed.

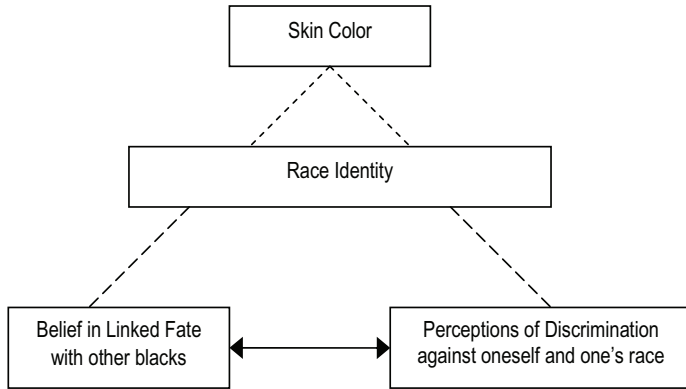
Such was the case from roughly the end of World War II until at least the 1990s. African Americans became emboldened by their experiences in the

Table 3: Black Racial Identity

Survey	Year	Item	%	N
National Election Study	1980	Feel close to blacks (yes)	87.2	164
National Black Election Study	1984	Feel very close + fairly close to blacks	93.2	844
		Think about being black a lot + fairly often	29.3	1122
National Black Politics Study	1993	Feel close to blacks (% over 50, neutral rating, on thermometer rating)	87.5	1180
General Social Survey	1993-2004 combined	Feel close to blacks (% over 50, neutral rating, on thermometer rating)	78.9	855
National Black Election Study	1996	Think about being black a lot + fairly often	33.0	1183

Notes: Black respondents only; percentages exclude “don’t know” and “no answer.”

Figure 2. Schematic Explanation for the Skin Color Paradox



war, stirrings in local communities, hints from federal elites that the racial logjam should and could be broken, and slow accumulation of politically useful resources. They began to believe that resistance to segregation and discrimination might finally succeed. With that hint of hope, the centuries-old desire for racial solidarity on the part of many blacks became a passionate conviction of its necessity on the part of most.

In short, in the post-war context of “one drop of blood” laws that made escape difficult and a burgeoning civil rights movement that made escape less attractive, any possible political mobilization around colorism would have been swamped by the intense and urgent sense of racial identity. That could have happened in several ways; dark-skinned blacks may have deliberately chosen to submerge concerns about colorism for the sake of the whole, or their commitment to their race may have kept them from any awareness that skin color discrimination even could be a political concern. Both mechanisms would produce the same lack of connection between political attitudes and daily experiences of double discrimination.

To put the point more formally, we propose that skin color is unrelated to racial identity because the latter is so widely shared, and it is unrelated to both the sense of linked fate and perceptions of discrimination because dark- and light-skinned blacks have been equally invested in fighting primary marginalization and ignoring secondary marginalization. There are still differences within the black population, however; some blacks are more intensely aware of discrimination and more committed to their race’s linked fate than are others. But those differences are orthogonal to skin color.

In the first panel of Table 4, seven of the ten questions about discrimination against blacks show a statistically significant and substantively meaningful relationship between belief in linked fate and perceptions of group discrimination. In the second panel, five of the six items about discrimination against oneself show a similarly significant relationship to linked fate. As these results show, blacks do differ among themselves in their views about primary marginalization – but those differences are independent of the discriminatory practices associated with colorism.

Thus the skin color paradox can be explained by placing it within a broader political context. Despite colorism with regard to their preferences and outcomes in all arenas of life, blacks' political attitudes do not vary by skin color because mobilization around primary marginalization trumps mobilization around secondary marginalization. In contrast, belief in linked fate and perceptions of discrimination can safely vary within a strong racial identity because there is no zero-sum relationship, as there appears to be between primary and secondary marginalization. The political arena offers no opportunity for blacks to publicly protest colorism, and it exerts a great deal of pressure not to do so.¹¹ Hence the paradox.

So What?

Whether one sees the skin color paradox as an interesting theoretical puzzle growing out of an odd pattern of non-results, or whether one sees it as a window into understanding the depths of racial inequity depends on a judgment about disparate outcomes. Do dark-skinned blacks suffer from serious "excessive" discrimination as a consequence of historical and contemporary colorism – or does the pattern of outcomes mostly reflect mere differences in taste or marginal concerns in the larger scheme of racial hierarchy? Choosing the second interpretation leads one to ignore skin color and focus on race (or some other dimension such as class by which goods are distributed); choosing the first leads one to focus on skin color and other forms of internal difference that generate double disadvantage for some black Americans.

Skin color differentiation is not a greater problem in the United States than persistent racial hierarchy. But neither should it be ignored as trivial or submerged from public view in the name of racial solidarity. Receiving a longer prison sentence because one is dark or being on the receiving end of skin color snobbery like Mr. Jones in the third epigraph is painful and unfair. Are there policy remedies?

Unfortunately, most remedies for the primary marginalization of racial hierarchy do nothing to help, and sometimes exacerbate, the secondary marginalization of colorism. The recent increase in descriptive representation

of black Americans in elite electoral office largely reinforces the relatively advantaged position of light-skinned blacks. It need not do so, and the results in Table 1 suggest that dark-skinned candidates are gaining ground compared with several decades ago. But for now, at least, dark-skinned

Table 4: Linked Fate and Perceptions of Discrimination

Issue	Item	Survey	Perception of Linked Fate	P ≤ .05	N
Group Discrimination	Blacks in the United States are "kept back because of race"	NSBA	62.8	48.3	1996
	Blacks don't get good education or job because they have "no chances"	NSBA	69.3	57.9	2015
	Blacks are treated badly at work	NSBA	25.9	26.5	1153
	Whites want to "keep blacks down"	NSBA	44.5	38.5	1928
	Blacks have "no" power	NSBA	5.0	6.4	2001
	Discrimination now compared with the past: "same" + "more"	NSBA	36.3	34.1	1986
	Discrimination in 20 years: "same" + "more"	NSBA	38.1	46.2	1867
	"Strongly agree" that outcomes are due to discrimination	MCSUI	38.4	51.2	2219
	"A lot" of job discrimination	MCSUI	51.4	68.4	3025
	Housing discrimination index	MCSUI	59.1	65.8	2949
Individual Discrimination	Being black is "very important" in keeping you from good jobs	NSBA	26.3	20.4	1107
	You or your family are treated badly because of race	NSBA	12.3	10.1	2053
	Discriminated against at work	MCSUI	11.3	19.6	1515
	Race affected promotion	MCSUI	14.7	25.5	1936
	Ever refused job because of race	MCSUI	24.7	44.4	1609
	Faced housing discrimination	MCSUI	16.2	25.8	1816
			None or not much	A lot or some	
			Relay on blacks or on both race & self	Relay on self	

residents of the United States are hard-pressed to find representatives who have had the same experience with the effects of appearance.

Affirmative action policies similarly benefit the relatively advantaged among African Americans. In this case the mechanism is class; recipients of affirmative action policies in universities, law firms and even police departments are disproportionately well-off and well-educated – and studies show that light-skinned blacks attain higher family incomes and more years of schooling than do their dark-skinned counterparts. We have seen one proposal to include photographs in college applications so that there could be affirmative action to offset colorism, but it was made in a tone of heavy irony without any serious intention behind it (Fleming 2003).

Other policies to combat primary marginalization, such as majority-minority districting or laws against employment discrimination, are probably irrelevant to colorism. A few people have filed lawsuits alleging skin-tone prejudice based on the 1964 Civil Rights Act proscription with regard to “race, color, religion, or national origin.” A very few have even prevailed in court, including a charge against Applebee’s restaurant where a dark-skinned black employee was discriminated against by a light-skinned black supervisor and another in which a Latino was denied rental housing based on his skin color by a Latino of lighter complexion.¹² The number of such complaints is increasing at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.¹³ But compared with the amount of successful litigation or number of filings focused on racial discrimination per se, such cases are almost invisible. Still, we can conclude that the skin color paradox is a genuine problem and not simply an empirical oddity; the dark-skinned Mr. Joneses of this world may have developed “the desire to fight for the disadvantaged” because of their treatment as children, but they have no political outlet for doing so with regard to color discrimination.

While the primary reason that color has been ignored in political mobilization is arguably the reigning one-drop framework that has characterized black politics, it is also possible that some or many African Americans do not challenge second-order discrimination around skin color because they believe that ameliorating racism would also ameliorate colorism. After all, both are based on the same underlying fallacy that links appearance and descent to desirable or undesirable human qualities. We know of no survey or other kinds of evidence that would allow us to sort out the degree to which people focus on racism as an overarching evil, so we remain agnostic on this point.

Nevertheless, it is clear that to at least some African Americans, skin color discrimination is just as bitter as, perhaps even more painful than, racism – if only because it can come from people inside as well as outside their own group and because it can be highly personalized and intimate. Mr.

Jones was eloquent about colorism being the “dominant force in my life.” Also as a child, Justice Clarence Thomas became “harden[ed]... against some of the most successful products of his race. To him, most blacks of a lighter hue were snobs, the self-anointed superior class of the race who considered themselves a cut above dark-skinned blacks with broad noses and thick lips, like himself. This class-and-color consciousness [is] not uncommon in the South.” (Merida and Fletcher 2007:49). These two are not alone, and others have noted that as overt, and perhaps covert, racism has declined dramatically over the past half-century, colorism has not declined at the same rate.

It is probably more than one can hope for to say that the relationship between colorism and racism will be revealed when one or the other disappears. Until that day, the possibility remains that some people ignore a potential politics of color because they think a politics of race is all that is needed. Nevertheless, there are more than sufficient grounds for political organization around skin-color discrimination. It does not, however, occur. That is the skin color paradox.

Notes

1. In the larger project of which this is a part, we examine the skin color paradox among Hispanic Americans and, to the degree that data are available, white and Asian Americans as well. However, the politics around Latino and Asian (and ethnic white, for that matter) incorporation differ from the politics for blacks, so we do not consider non-black groups in this article.
2. In this article, as in most of the literature, skin color is a stand-in for a broader focus on physical appearance. There is, however, very little systematic evidence on associations with racial or ethnic differences in appearance more generally – hence our focus on skin color.
3. Despite the phrase “nearly invariant,” we are not arguing that people are always and inevitably prejudiced against some skin tone(s). After all, racial or phenotypical prejudice apparently arose at particular times and places in Europe (Sollors 2004; Fredrickson 2002; (Goldenberg 2003). We do claim that since the 1600s, most Americans have perceived, and developed attitudes or emotional reactions toward, different racialized appearances, including skin colors.
4. We use “skin tone” synonymously with “skin color.”
5. Regression models are available upon request from the first author.
6. We sought at least two colored photographs of each official with a fallback of at least three black-and-white photos. (For the earliest subjects, we often had to settle for one portrait, supplemented by descriptions.) Each image was coded on a three-point scale within race by at least three independent

coders, using a set of model photos as a guide. Discrepancies were averaged. We included all elected representatives even if they had no vote in Congress (such as those from the District of Columbia or U.S. territories). We counted a person who won two offices (e.g. representative and then senator) only once. We excluded representatives or governors of Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands and Guam.

7. These expectations arise from two sources: the burdens directly accruing to colorism and the burdens accruing to lower socioeconomic status, which is more likely to be the condition of the dark-skinned. Future research could usefully sort out the relative weights of these sources, but for now we simply note them and move directly to explicating the skin color paradox itself.
8. And one of the very few statistically significant relationships is opposite our expectation.
9. We see two plausible explanations for the paucity of scholarship on the political correlates of skin color difference: the political sensitivity of this issue, and academic journals' bias toward positive results. The political sensitivity and lack of positive results are themselves directly linked.
10. Three examples of that pressure: First, the NAACP ran advertisements urging blacks not to choose more than one racial category in the 2000 U.S. Census, for fear that evidence of multiracialism would undermine both racial solidarity and governmental policies to ameliorate racial inequity. The second epigraph of this article refers to that controversy. Second, a spokesperson for a dark-skinned mayoral candidate in Atlanta accused the candidate's light-skinned opponent of staying in the north and "passing" during the civil rights movement. Third, in 2002 Mayor Sharpe James of Newark reportedly called his light-skinned opponent a Republican, a captive of Jewish interests, an employee of the Ku Klux Klan, and a "faggot white boy." The mayor won re-election.
11. This index is comprised of the following measures: "agents won't show/sell/rent," "banks won't lend money," and "whites won't rent/sell." First the variables were collapsed from a four-point measure of "very often" to "almost never" into a dichotomous yes/no variable. Then each question was put into an additive index with resulting values of 0, 1, 2, 3 such that a 0 means the respondent said "no" to all questions and a 3 means they said "yes" to all.
12. The U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, "EEOC Settles Color Harassment Lawsuit with Applebee's Neighborhood Bar and Grill." Available at <http://www.eeoc.gov/press/8-07-03.html>. (last accessed 09/23/07). See *Rodriguez v. Guttuso*, 795 F. Supp. 860, 865 (N.D. Ill. 1992) for the case involving Latinos.
13. The press release notes that, "The Commission has observed an increasing number of color discrimination charge filings at agency field offices across the country. Color bias filings have increased by more than 200 percent since the mid-1990s from 413 in Fiscal Year 1994 to 1,382 in FY 2002."

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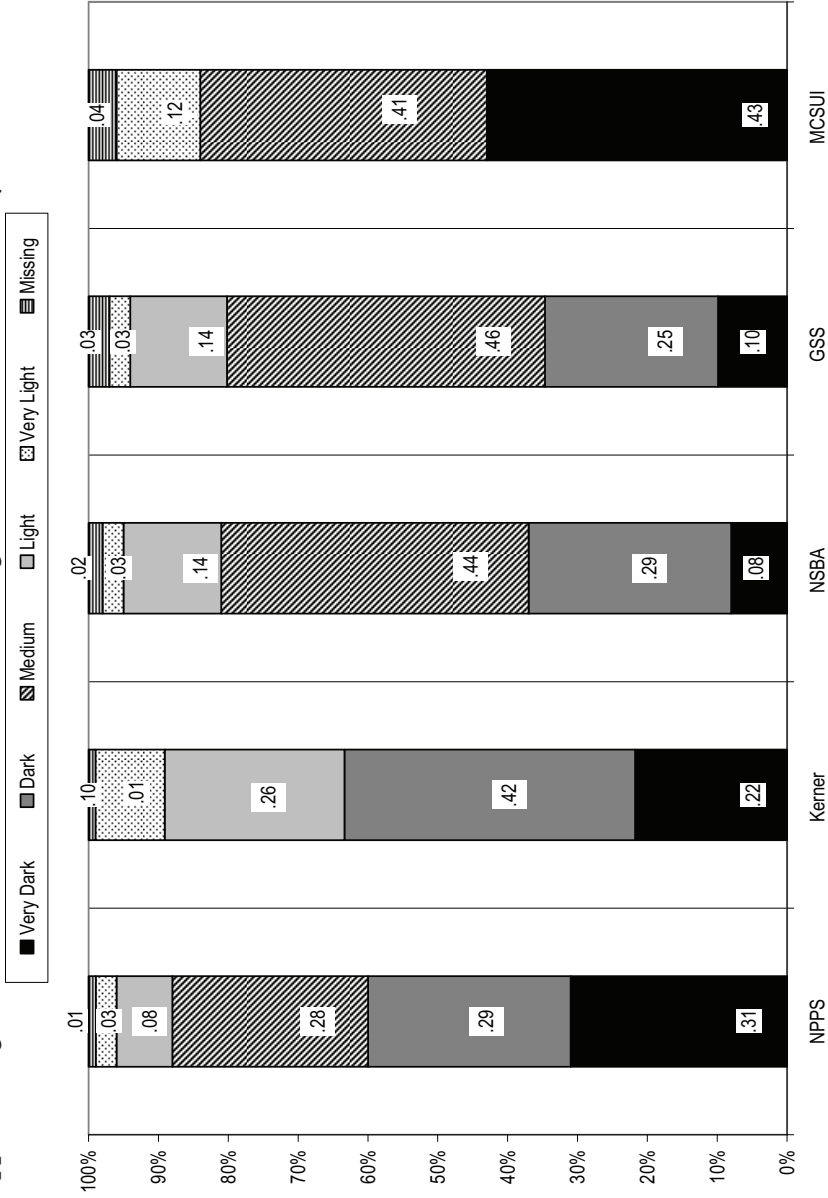
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Appendix Table A.1. National Surveys Measuring Blacks' Skin Color, Socioeconomic Status and Political Views

Survey	Year	Sample	Region
The Negro Political Participation Study (Matthews and Prothro 1961)	1961	618 black adults 264 black college students	11 southern states
Racial Attitudes in Fifteen American Cities (Campbell and Schuman 1997)	1968	2,809 black adults (175 in each city)	15 northern or border-state cities with riots
National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson and Gurin 1980)	1979-1980	2,107 black adults	National
General Social Survey (Davis and Watson 1982)	1982	510 black adults	National
Multi-city Study of Urban Inequality (Bobo et al. 2000)	1992-1994	3,111 black adults	Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles

Appendix Figure A1. Skin Color Distributions among Blacks in Five National Surveys



Note: In percentage of each sample, as determined by the interviewer.