

**Ernest McGowen III.** *African Americans in White Suburbia: Social Networks and Political Behavior.* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017. 214 pp. (\$45.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper).

As a result of exclusionary practices such as redlining, suburbia was a predominantly white space for most of the 20th century. But the percentage of African Americans residing in U.S. suburbs has increased dramatically since the 1990s, with more than 50 percent of all U.S. African Americans living in suburbs in 2010 (p. 4). Who are these individuals who differ racially from suburban whites and differ socioeconomically from urban African Americans? Moreover, does social network matter for black suburbanites' identity and political behavior? This is the topic Ernest McGowen III examines in his timely and accessible book, *African Americans in White Suburbia*.

Academics have increasingly studied suburban blacks as a growing population, but most of this research comes from anthropology, sociology, and urban ethnography (i.e., Bruce Haynes, Valerie Johnson, and Mary Pattillo-McCoy), and not political science. Moreover, most of the work on black suburbanites has been qualitative, has not focused on political behavior, and is quite dated. *African Americans in White Suburbia* builds on, and complements, this rich research of suburban black political behavior by employing quantitative analysis to answer the following overarching question: "How does this suburban environment, especially the racial makeup of one's neighborhood and social networks, affect the political behavior of suburban African Americans who have strong racial identifications and policy preferences aimed at aiding the racial group writ large?" (p. 1).

While the first chapter of *African Americans in White Suburbia* focuses on the study's primary questions and methodology, McGowen also highlights the context for the project. He discusses the financial, educational, and employment gains African Americans made between 1990 and 2010, and the social and political questions that have arisen as a result of those gains. McGowen points out that it is not clear how suburban social networks and environments influence black suburbanites' identity and political behavior. On one hand, political science literature shows the importance of class in understanding the ideology, partisanship, and behavior of wealthier Americans. And on the other hand, racial and ethnic politics literature demonstrates that racial identity among both low-income and high-income blacks is relatively strong and that a racial identity is one of the most important determinants of black political behavior. As McGowen points out, it is not obvious who black suburbanites would resemble. They might resemble and behave in the political arena like their wealthy white neighbors and colleagues, but they might also resemble and participate like urban African Americans.

The theory McGowen advances in *African Americans in White Suburbia* is grounded in and informed by the following prominent bodies of literature: racial identity and consciousness formation, environment and social network contexts and political behavior, and the black public and counterpublic sphere. McGowen's theory is that, because black suburbanites have strong

racial identities, and live and work in spaces that are often inconsistent with and hostile towards black interests, suburban blacks will seek out networks that center black interests and opportunities that empower and aid the broader black community and group. To test his theory, McGowen conducts quantitative analyses and draws on three surveys: 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES); 2008 American National Election Study (ANES); and 2004 National Politics Study (NPS).

Does the racial makeup of social networks influence African Americans and whites' political views, and do suburban African Americans view their residential and work places as welcoming or hostile to their racial identities? These questions guide the analysis in the third chapter. McGowen finds that African Americans in white networks hold opinions that differ significantly from the opinions of their white neighbors and work colleagues, with African Americans in white networks having lower trust in several societal institutions, like police, when compared to whites in white networks. Blacks in white networks not only differ from their white neighbors, but they also differ from their white work colleagues. Taken together, these differences in opinion lead blacks in white networks to perceive their views as being in line with other black Americans and not in line with whites in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Consequently, blacks in white networks view their neighborhoods and workplaces as more hostile than welcoming to them and their racial identities.

Chapter Four builds on the data analysis in Chapter Three by asking where blacks in white networks go in order to find environments that reinforce their racial identity and center their interests if their neighborhoods and workplaces are often hostile to them and their racial identities. McGowen posits that black suburbanites near metropolitan areas will travel to the urban inner city where they can find a robust cultural community and be inundated with "norms of behavior" that are central to an authentic or "true" black racial identity (p. 102). McGowen finds that "Suburban white and urban African Americans actually use their cultural community more frequently than suburban African Americans," but "the fact that suburban African Americans are over the midpoint of the index (57.4 percent) shows their usage is not negligible" (pp. 104-105). Additionally, the data highlight the importance of church attendance to suburban African American community usage – black suburbanites who attend black churches use the cultural community much more than those who do not attend black churches, and find the cultural community to be more informative and less depressing than black suburbanites who do not attend a black church. Finally, McGowen's analysis demonstrates how black suburbanites differ from white suburbanites on political attitudes and opinions but hold opinions similar to their urban co-ethnics. Taken together, McGowen concludes that black suburbanites generally seek out cultural communities because they see them as being in line with their views, reinforcing their racial identity, and centering their interests, but "the confluence of suburban environment and race does not appear to have an independent effect on the racial opinions of suburban African Americans" (p. 120).

The final empirical chapter in *African Americans in White Suburbia* centers on the effect of suburban political environment on suburban African Americans' political behavior. McGowen examines four aspects of political behavior: "the political choices that confront suburban African Americans, whether they are more or less likely to seek out confirmatory information, their voting behavior, and whether they engage in political participation that could more directly benefit their groups" (p. 124). The data show black suburbanites with a strong racial identity were very interested in politics and news and thought their congressional districts were more in line with their views, compared to black suburbanites without a strong racial identity (pp. 126-128). The data also show there was no difference between black suburbanites, white suburbanites, and urban blacks in terms of presidential voting, but suburban blacks were less likely to participate in local and state elections than urban co-ethnics and white suburbanites. Finally, the data show that, while they are less likely to participate in House elections, black suburbanites often seek and engage in alternative forms of political participation that better target and benefit black communities, such as attending political meetings, giving to religious organizations, and passing along political information (pp. 132-138). In sum, McGowen finds that both race and political environment matter for suburban blacks' participation in the political arena.

*African Americans in White Suburbia* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of suburban blacks. McGowen's book complements, and extends, the body of research on black suburbanites, and shows how black suburbanites possess a strong racial identity and intentionally seek out, (re)connect to, and participate in, black counterpublics and cultural communities because they often find their predominantly-white residential and employment networks hostile and unwelcoming to them and their interests. While this quantitative research is important because it addresses understudied questions, this project is also important because suburban blacks represent a burgeoning population in the U.S. and we know very little about how this group's politics are being affected by their social networks. This book is truly a must-read for scholars and students interested in the relationship between race and racial identity, social networks and environment, and political behavior.

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