



Lessons from Brazil for U.S. Black and Brown Politics as the United States Becomes a Minority-Majority Society

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According to the most recent Brazilian census, the Brazilian population is now 54% Afro-Brazilian, yet members of this group remain underrepresented in politics, universities, and prestigious employment opportunities. Brazil's story holds lessons for Americans who presume that as the United States moves towards becoming a non-white majority society, racial equality will prevail between whites and nonwhites. Many Americans seem to believe that the growing ranks of racially mixed people are a sign of increasing tolerance and less racism in society.

But Brazil is a racially mixed country where racism is rampant; and the country is on the Human Rights Watch list because of the large number of its citizens, disproportionately Afro-Brazilian, who are killed by police each year.

Changing race relations in Brazil serve as an important case study for understanding how identities and alliances among racial groups affect support for racially relevant policies. I discuss these issues drawing from my research on black group identity and its impact on coalition-building and support for Brazilian racial policies.

Black Identity in Brazil

Brazil has long been touted as a racial paradise where racial group identity is non-existent. Despite this presumption, black activism driven by a growing Brazilian black movement advocated for affirmative action programs in universities enacted at the federal level in 2012 under the leadership of former President Dilma Rousseff.

Brazilian black activists have been successful at raising racial consciousness and awareness of the marginalization of many Brazilians based on inequalities of race and class. As policies like affirmative action are challenged in the United States, policymakers, advocates, and other civic leaders should look to the successes Brazil's black activists have enjoyed in building group ties across racial groups and pushing for full protection of the civil rights of marginalized groups.

As Brazil's experience makes clear, the "browning" of a country does not necessarily lead to equality. In fact, this type of population shift can lead to the consolidation of white power and domination. U.S. civil rights proponents can take inspiration from the ways Brazilian marginalized groups pushed back by forming alliances with one another. U.S. emulators could use similar tactics to build bridges between the United States' own minority groups, for example by developing ties and a shared identity among African-Americans, bi-racial Americans, and Latino-Americans to advocate for policies that would benefit all minority groups.

Such measures could speak to issues ranging from immigration reform and anti-poverty efforts to affirmative action and rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

Black and Negro Linked Fate

In my research, I use an idea called “black linked fate” originally developed by University of Chicago political scientist Michael Dawson in 1994. In the Brazilian context, I refer to this idea as negro linked fate, because “*negro*” is the Brazilian term for both black and mixed-race Brazilians. Put simply, this is the idea that *negros* feel they share a common experience with other *negros*, and believe that what happens to other *negros* in some way has an impact on individual Afro-Brazilians in Brazil.

Michael Dawson’s work on beliefs about linked fate helped develop an understanding of black racial group identity and policy preferences in the United States. As Dawson emphasizes, this sense of shared group relies on people’s sense of shared historical experiences. Often individuals with shared, historical experiences develop a sense of groupness, a sense that can also reinforced by discrimination. In this view, African-Americans share a sense of *linked fate* because of their shared history of discrimination.

Even though Dawson situated his concept within the American context, I have discovered that a similar kind of black linked fate – *negro* linked fate – has become important in the Brazilian context. In the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and São Paulo, I find that most Afro-Brazilians espouse beliefs in *negro* linked fate, because of their shared experiences of discrimination or exclusion. My research also probed whether Afro-Brazilians who espouse this sense of shared fate are more supportive of racial policies, compared to those who do not hold this perspective. That is the case, my results show. Afro-Brazilians who subscribe to or demonstrate a belief in linked fate are more likely to support affirmative action in universities and legislation that requires Afro-Brazilian history to be taught in schools. Their support led to the passage of a 2003 law requiring all Brazilian schools to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history.

Lessons for the United States

When many people in comparable circumstances believe their fates are linked, as Afro-Brazilians and mixed-race Brazilians do, they can more readily work together to boost support for policies that benefit the entire group. For comparable developments to occur in the current, racially shifting American context, it could be effective for African-Americans, Latinos, and bi-racial activists to forge alliances and a sense of shared fate, so they can more effectively advocate together for policies that could benefit all of them together.

Sheer numbers of minority group citizens are not enough to end economic and political inequality in large societies like Brazil and the United States – unless the minority citizens gain increased representation and organized voice. Only if they build coalitions and gain governmental leverage are they likely to be able to secure rights and gain public benefits. Taking such steps, in turn, may require fashioning a sense of linked fate so that policy battles can be reframed in joint terms. In today’s United States, for example, immigrant issues could be framed as an issue that affects many different minority groups – not just Latino residents. And affirmative action could be framed as important to all minorities, not just African Americans.

Each national arena is unique, of course, and it remains to be seen if Brazilian developments will find echoes in the twenty-first century United States. But Brazil’s history does hold both caveats and lessons for Americans seeking racial equality and justice in these times.

Read more in Gladys Mitchell-Walthour, *The Politics of Blackness: Racial Identity and Political Behavior in Contemporary Brazil* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).