Critical Dialogue

The Obligation Mosaic: Race and Social Norms in US Political Participation. By Allison P. Anoll. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 264p. $105.00 cloth. $35.00 paper.
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In *The Obligation Mosaic,* Allison Anoll examines how social norms are associated with political behavior for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites in the United States. Through her Racialized Norms Model outlined in Chapter 2, Anoll develops expectations that there are some meaningful shared social norms across each of these racial groups, but that they may manifest politically in varied ways due to a combination of historical and contemporary factors (e.g., social context, racial segregation, group activism). But what social norms may be relevant for understanding decisions to head to the polls or participate in other higher-cost forms of political activism?

In Chapter 3, Anoll conducts a set of twenty-three interviews with African Americans and Asian Americans. Through these conversations she identifies two norms that she expects to have differing political impacts across all four racial groups. The first is the "Honoring Ancestors Norm," which is a "basic, widely shared value to recognize and respect the stories, struggles, and traditions of those in the past" (p. 47). For African Americans, this involves an explicitly political commitment to honor prior generations' struggles for civil rights and voting rights through continued protest and voting efforts. For Asian Americans, Anoll finds that this norm was less political but entailed a focus on upholding culture and traditions—e.g., learning the language of one's ancestors as a way of honoring them. The second norm is the "Helping Hands Norm," or a desire to help others including those in need. For both Black and Asian American interview participants, Anoll notes that an emphasis is placed on helping community members and looking to improve their surroundings. Still, the political implications of these norms varied between groups—with African Americans viewing grassroots policy change as part and parcel of the Helping Hands Norm, while Asian Americans emphasized more direct service in lieu of political efforts.

Anoll then builds from her theoretical foundations and qualitative data to develop and test generalized expectations of these norms on a nationally representative survey of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites. These efforts in Chapters 4 and 5 underscore variation in how these social norms influence group politics. For example, highlighting that 1) Black and white Americans are more likely to associate the Honoring Ancestors Norm with politics than are Asian Americans or Latinos; and 2) minoritized racial groups are more likely than whites to link politics with the Helping Hands Norm. Thus, the link between these social norms and politics are nuanced across racial groups.

With this in mind, Anoll spends the final two substantive chapters of the book examining the influence of these politicized norms on political behavior. She explores the connection between the norms and voting records from multiple elections between 2012 and 2016. Here, she demonstrates that the Honoring Ancestors Norm is consistently associated with voter turnout in both federal and local elections across groups. Moreover, if we lived in a world in which these groups did *not* subscribe to the Honoring Ancestors Norm, Anoll underscores that levels of voter turnout among minoritized groups would be significantly reduced relative to white voter turnout. In contrast, the Helping Hands Norm is only associated with voter turnout in local (but not national) elections and in other higher-cost forms of participation (e.g., protest).

Overall, *The Obligation Mosaic* seeks to understand both historical and contemporary social forces influencing political attitudes and behavior. Anoll should be applauded for her efforts towards creating a generalized theory that applies across racial groups, while also acknowledging the complexity and nuance required to reflect the distinct histories and experiences of the four racial groups under study. The novel theory, measures, and findings add to the conversation around an age-old question in political science: What motivates people to vote? Anoll's inclusion of social norms in answering this question—and, particularly, the emphasis on how these norms are racialized in different ways across groups—is a clearly meaningful contribution to the literature. Moving forward, scholars, activists, and campaign organizers interested in questions of voter mobilization, turnout, and political behavior more broadly will turn to Anoll's work as a blueprint for understanding how social norms influence political engagement. It is also easy to imagine future

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work building from and extending the Racialized Norms Model, including potentially incorporating other groups —e.g., Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) individuals or Native Americans—and further enriching understandings of the background history and contextual nuance across all of these racial groups.

Furthermore, Anoll's discussion of how these norms can be used by political candidates and campaigns as resources to increase turnout underscores a core finding from the book: Without the political manifestations of these social norms (and particularly among Black Americans), voter turnout levels would be much lower. This suggests the potential for further political mobilization efforts by tapping into these social norms. As Anoll summarizes the implications of her findings on this score: "Organizing efforts that seek to connect these latent resources with politics may prove an avenue to increasing political participation in otherwise low-propensity communities" (p. 179). It would be valuable for future research to examine this point more closely. That is, what campaign messaging or strategies are most effective for activating these social norms? How does this vary across groups? Are there ways to activate these norms for *all* Americans or for some set of groups in combination (e.g., as discussed in Efren Pérez's *Diversity's Child: People of Color and the Politics of Identity*, 2021)? Are there ways to induce a stronger link between politics and these social norms?

Another avenue for future research would be to deepen the story of how these social norms matter for politics by speaking with a broader set of interview participants. At the core of Anoll's generalized theory is an acknowledgement that each group has divergent histories and contexts. Anoll's interviews with Asian and Black Americans lay an important foundation for understanding which norms are meaningful for politics, as well as how this varies across two groups with diverse histories within the United States. Still, I was left wondering how additional conversations would have unfolded—and how they would compare and contrast with one another—if we had also heard directly from Latinos and whites. It would be powerful to hear more about this background, history, and the makings of politicized social norms in people's own words from other groups. For example, it would be especially interesting to hear how white Americans speak to the Honoring Ancestors Norm given that, as Anoll notes, their history is quite distinct from that of minoritized groups in terms of access to power and resources. Thus, a broader set of interviews would help to weave together the richness of story that is only possible through qualitative means.

Finally, in the spirit of the "Critical Dialogue" between Anoll's book and Mara Ostfeld and my book *Skin Color, Power, and Politics in America* (which Anoll is also reviewing in this issue), it is worthwhile to consider how these two pieces of scholarship relate. Anoll's framework emphasizing the importance of social norms to politics raises interesting questions of how this might apply to the realm of skin tone. Like Anoll, Ostfeld and I argue that history and context across groups are central to understanding the relative importance of skin tone to political attitudes today. Anoll's work suggests that further examination of how people discuss the histories or norms surrounding skin tone in their community may be especially valuable. For example, is it possible that different perceived norms surrounding skin tone emerge across the skin tone spectrum or across racial groups? If so, what are these norms? And how do they relate to political attitudes or behavior across groups? These would be interesting questions to take up in future research, particularly through an additional series of in-depth interviews complementing those conducted by Anoll.

In conclusion, *The Obligation Mosaic* serves as a shining example of the care and nuance required to both develop a generalized theory across multiple groups and to conduct a rigorous mixed methods study. The qualitative component Anoll incorporates provides depth that is not available by examining purely observational or experimental data. In short, this book is required reading for scholars interested in questions of democracy, political engagement, and political behavior.

Response to Nicole Yadon's Review of *The Obligation Mosaic: Race and Social Norms in US Political Participation*

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— Allison P. Anoll

It is a rare opportunity that an author gets to discuss extensions of her work *after* it's published; I am grateful to the journal and Nicole Yadon for this chance—and to Yadon for her thoughtful and thorough review of *The Obligation Mosaic*.

Yadon poses three questions: how can the racialized norms model, developed in the book, be extended to other racial/ethnic groups? How might interviews with white Americans and Latinos, instead of only Black and Asian Americans, have shaped the selected norms? And what are the broader implications for mobilization?

My book develops the racialized norms model to study political participation of the four largest racial groups in the United States—Asian Americans, Black Americans, Latinos, and white Americans—but Yadon is right to suggest that the model could be applied to other groups as well. Any set of groups who experience distinct histories with respect to their relationship with government and are segregated enough to have separate social spaces are likely to see variation in participatory norms.

Yadon suggests scholars might consider Middle Eastern/North African Americans and Native Americans;

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investigations of this kind could yield fascinating results of understudied groups. I will add further that since this book's publication, at least two people have asked me how religious groups—especially those with strong ethnic histories—might operate within this model. This is another kind of extension of the logic ripe for investigation: do Jewish Americans, for instance, show distinctions in their participatory norms given unique histories and strong group boundaries? I think the answer is likely yes, but right now, this group is by-and-large folded bluntly into analyses of whites.

For these extensions, scholars could gather data using my novel survey batteries and examine across group variation. But Yadon suggests that additional interviews with these groups, as well as whites and Latinos, would be a welcome contribution. I agree and encourage others to embrace the method of interviewing, which was invaluable to my thought processes and later empirical tests. I'm once again grateful to my interviewees for their insight and hope I have done justice in the work to their ideas.

Finally, Yadon considers how my work may inform future mobilization, pointing to its nexus with Pérez's *Diversity's Child* (2021). The Honoring Ancestors Norm depends fundamentally on who we imagine our ancestors to be—and when I say "imagine" I really do mean how imagination fills in the gaps of history. Our ancestors, as a construct, are built from stories passed down through families, observation, formal lessons in school, and even pop culture. In the slippage between reality and perception is opportunity—opportunity to reimagine the boundaries of our groups and our connections to others. Pérez suggests *people of color* is an identity that unites and activates cooperation among minority Americans. How might *people of color* also encompass our stories of the past, building ties across historic social movements and changing what present-day Americans believe is demanded in honoring those before us? I'm eager to find out.

Skin Color, Power, and Politics in America. By Mara C. Ostfeld and Nicole D. Yadon. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2022. 284p. $37.50 paper.
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That race is a social construct, meaningless outside of a specific time and place, is an idea academics and lay Americans are increasingly familiar with. Yet I have found repeatedly that teaching this concept to undergraduates, graduate students, and colleagues alike requires concrete examples to elucidate this process—perhaps because of the ways constructs make our lived reality feel so natural and inevitable. *How* is race, a concept so deeply entrenched in the American mind and its institutions, a construct? *How* is it constructed?

In their book, *Skin Color, Power, and Politics in America*, Mara C. Ostfeld and Nicole D. Yadon join a growing literature that attempts to explain precisely how this process happens. In demonstrating that skin color is subjective; that it affects life outcomes; and that individuals' perceptions of their own physical appearance are tied to political beliefs and characteristics, Ostfeld and Yadon dismantle a foundation of the American racial hierarchy—that groups of people can be defined objectively by skin color, which is both stable and bounded. Ostfeld and Yadon's book builds a theory of race that crosses ethnoracial boundaries and identifies structural features that produce variation by group. In this endeavor, they join pivotal works—like Natalie Masuoka and Jane Junn's *The Politics of Belonging* (2013) and Donald Kinder and Cindy Kam's *Us against Them* (2010)—that take on the difficult task of explaining behavior across multiple groups while using the same theoretical levers.

The authors argue that race can be conceptualized as the trunk and branches of a tree with many constitutive elements, or "roots," feeding into its expression (Chapter 2). These roots are variables that readers are likely already familiar with from other scholarship: phenotypical characteristics, socioeconomic status, language, and region of ancestry, to name a few. In their "Roots of Race" conceptualization, Ostfeld and Yadon argue that some roots are more central and pronounced than others in defining racial experience. Skin color is one such taproot but even this large and dominant component of the racial construct "can shift in importance over time, across context, and among groups" (p. 35).

This point, that the elements defining racial meaning may vary by group history and context, helps unify existing ideas about *what race is* in an increasingly diverse nation. The most convincing theories of racial hierarchy in the United States, I find, consider multiple dimensions of oppression and privilege, explaining the experiences of not just Black and white Americans, but of Asian Americans, Latinos, and other groups as well. Compiling these dimensions under a single theory of racial construction, which anticipates that some elements for some people are more dominant in racial experience, is an innovation—one that scholars engaged in the analysis of multiple racial groups simultaneously like myself should carry with us.

One "root" of race for Ostfeld and Yadon is ethnoracial classification itself (pp. 31-33)—or as I would think of it, identifying which racial indicator an individual selects when asked. The authors argue that this label is but one of many variables that affect racial experience: for instance, skin color may shape experiences above and beyond this categorical identity. I'm persuaded by this point, but left curious about what the authors think, then, leads to self-identification choices themselves. Do we not need to pull

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from other roots—skin color, experiences with discrimination, governmental definitions, wealth, myths about ancestry—to self-categorize and to categorize others? Is a self-identified racial group more like a low branch in the tree of race—an outcome itself that springs from this conceptualization rather than an input?

Once they have their theory of race outlined, the authors identify two contextual features that produce variation in the contribution of skin color to life outcomes and political attitudes by group: institutional privilege and blurriness of category boundaries (figure 3.4). This concept of "blurriness" is one that is particularly intriguing. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner once predicted that a group's perceived *boundedness* would affect not just identity strength but mobilization strategies ("The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relation,* 1986). When group boundaries are tightly guarded and clearly defined—what Ostfeld and Yadon refer to as "bright"—low-status group members must pursue changes in the hierarchical laws in society to improve their life chances. But, when group boundaries are "blurry," enterprising members of low-status groups have the option to exit the group, leaving the structural inequities largely intact. This prediction is, in my opinion, an often-overlooked element of Social Identity Theory with implications for movements and policy change. Ostfeld and Yadon build on this theory when they suggest that the blurriness of groups' boundaries shape the centrality of skin color in individuals' racial experience. In putting together privilege and boundary clarity, the authors predict outcomes and build expectations for a wide range of groups, including those they are unable to test with their data: Arab, Asian, Black, Latino, Native, and white Americans.

Another innovation of the book is how it builds new measures and collects difficult-to-get data. Ostfeld and Yadon develop a novel interval scale as a self-reported measure of skin tone (*self-assessed skin color*) and use a spectrophotometer to obtain a measure of *machine-rated skin color.* The authors approach their measures with normative and ethical care, constantly placing their inquiry within a broader historical context that has regularly measured skin tone with nefarious and violent intent. Ostfeld and Yadon's thoughtful measures are part of the contribution of their work and, because of their novelty, I was left hoping for more details about them. The spectrophotometer returns a single number identifying skin color, for instance, but skin is irregular; how does the machine deal with imperfections or disturbances like scars, hair, or freckles? How much variation appeared in the interior wrist reading versus the top of the hand? Did self-assessed skin color, or racial group membership, relate more closely to the first reading on the interior wrist or the second on the exterior hand—or did it make no difference?

Following their discussion of measures, the authors provide what I see as the most thought-provoking figure of the book: a distribution of the measures for skin tone by Black, Latino, and white respondents (figure 4.4). While across-group means are distinct on matched measures, the distributional overlap of skin tone by racial group membership is striking, providing an elegant point of evidence to the broader concept that racial categorization is a shifting, fuzzy construct. In my own work, I have found that Americans across racial group most often identify skin color as central to race's definition in open-ended responses ("Essentialist or Constructivist? Americans' Understandings of the Meaning of Race," Allison Anoll, Cindy Kam, and Colette Marcellin). But as becomes obvious from figure 4.4, and throughout Chapters 5 and 6 of Ostfeld and Yadon's book, skin color not only varies widely among self-identified racial group members but overlaps across membership to a *large* degree.

The remaining elements of Ostfeld and Yadon's book consider how both machine-rated and self-assessed skin color relate to socioeconomic status, political ideology, and racialized policy beliefs for the three largest racial groups in the United States. A central finding is that white Americans with machine-rated darker skin report significantly more conservative beliefs with respect to racialized policies—namely, speaking English and police quality. The authors argue this is because whites' privileged status has been challenged as the nation has diversified, making the boundaries of the group blurrier (p. 148). I'm left wondering whether it is just demographic trends around diversification that are blurring the boundaries of whiteness or whether we must consider a broader set of transformations in the American racial order: changing norms that value diversity (tied in part to historical affirmative action laws), a growing nonwhite middle and upper class, and increased rates of multi-racial children (see *Creating a New Racial Order,* 2012, by Jennifer Hochschild, Vesla Weaver, and Traci Burch).

Collectively, Ostfeld and Yadon's book provides a careful and innovative example of race as a social construct in American life. It is the kind of example I often search for to clarify to students what, exactly, we mean when we say race is socially constructed. I can imagine assigning selections from the book to make these points: race has many constitutive elements that vary over time and by context (Chapter 2); skin color is but one element, and it is one that cannot clearly delineate boundaries between people very well (Chapter 4); group members on the periphery react to threat more strongly when the boundaries of a group are blurry (Chapter 6). These points go a long way in describing the nature of social and political experience in the United States—and we can thank Ostfeld and Yadon for this contribution.

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Response to Allison P. Anoll's Review of *Skin Color, Power, and Politics in America*

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— Nicole D. Yadon

We thank Allison Anoll for her close read of our book. Although we are limited to a relatively brief response, we did want to note a few points in response to the stimulating points she made.

First, our "Roots of Race" conceptualization argues that multiple components feed into how race is experienced. There are a number of possible "roots" of varying importance or influence in this construct—e.g., one's ethnoracial identification, skin color, political views, and socioeconomic status. Anoll rightly asks what influences one's ethnoracial identification itself if not some combination of these other roots? As we summarize in Chapter 2, "specifically, we argue that the construct of race and the role of skin color in this construct are not static but instead are constantly shifting and evolving. Skin color and the other components of race are not independent but highly interconnected" (p. 19). Our view is that the roots analogy attempts to represent this complex interplay of factors. Put differently, we believe that the roots have the potential to shape each other just as they shape the larger race construct.

A second important point raised is with respect to measurement using the spectrophotometer device. Of course, skin color varies throughout the body. As with any project, our measurement decisions—namely, focusing on the hand and wrist—influence the measurements we have and the potential patterns we are able to uncover. For example, other studies take skin tone measurements from more "hidden" places, such as the armpit. We opted for a balance of being less intrusive while still obtaining a measurement appropriate for our research questions. More specifically, Anoll wonders "how does the machine deal with imperfections or disturbances like scars, hair, or freckles?" In short, the spectrophotometer assesses the portion of the skin visible under its lens and produces an averaged measure of the overall lightness and darkness of that "snapshot." This means that if, for example, a person has a mole where the measurement snapshot is taken, their skin tone reading would be assessed as slightly darker than if there was not a mole. On the rare occasions when a participant had a noticeable discoloration of the skin (most often from tattoos) where we traditionally took our measurements, we instead took our measurement from a neighboring location, such as slightly higher on the forearm.

A final point of response is related to the racial boundaries around whiteness. Anoll questions whether our argument, that the racial boundaries around whiteness have blurred in part due to increasing diversification, is sufficient, or whether other factors—e.g., "changing norms that value diversity," growth in the "non-white middle and upper class," or "increased rates of multi-racial children"—may play important roles. We fully agree that the latter two points are likely to induce a potential status threat response among whites, particularly those with darker skin themselves. It is less clear to us how changing norms around diversity would similarly contribute to perceptions of racial boundaries. At a minimum, our finding that darker-skinned whites hold more conservative views on racialized issues suggests that any such norms are not taken up equally among whites. Drawing from Anoll's own research, though, we believe that examining how such norms may influence perceptions is a valuable potential opportunity for future research.

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