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Inventing social capital: Evidence from African American inventors, 1843–1930

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Abstract

Much recent work has focused on the influence of social capital on innovative outcomes. Little research has been done on disadvantaged groups who were often restricted from participation in social networks that provide information necessary for invention and innovation. Unique new data on African American inventors and patentees between 1843 and 1930 permit an empirical investigation of the relation between social capital and economic outcomes. I find that African Americans used both traditional, i.e., occupation-based, and nontraditional, i.e., civic, networks to maximize inventive output and that laws constraining social-capital formation are most negatively correlated with economically important inventive activity.

Research highlights

• We examine social capital and economic outcomes using novel data on African American inventors from 1843 to 1930. • Our findings show that African Americans used both traditional, i.e., occupation-based, and nontraditional, i.e., civic, networks to maximize inventive output and that laws constraining social-capital formation are most negatively correlated with economically important inventive activity.

American inventors from 1843 to 1930. Like white inventors, African American inventors use traditional, occupation-based, networks to maximize inventive output. Unlike white inventors, African American inventors leverage nontraditional civic networks to maximize inventive output. Laws constraining social-capital formation are most negatively correlated with economically important inventive activity.



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Keywords

Social capital; Invention; Innovation; Segregation; African Americans

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