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Author(s): Christopher Dennis
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STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW

GENERAL
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The Election and Impact of Black School Board Members: The Effect of Community Racial and Political Attitudes

Christopher Dennis

■ **Abstract** *Using parish-level data for Louisiana, this study finds that the percentage of parish voters who are black is strongly related to election of black school board members while socioeconomic and attitudinal variables are insignificant. Black school board strength is negatively associated with second-generation discrimination against black students. While socioeconomic variables are largely insignificant, white racism and policy conservatism are positively associated with second-generation discrimination.*

Over the past 11 years, the election of blacks to school boards has been examined in a number of studies. To date, however, only two works have examined the impact of black school board strength on discrimination against black students (Meier and England 1984; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989). None of these analyses have considered the impact of community racial or political attitudes on either the election or impact of black school board members. As political behavior is often accurately predicted by attitudinal variables (Campbell 1979), this omission may be significant.

Previous research on the election and impact of black school board members has measured black electoral strength by using the black percentage of the population. Unfortunately, the black percentage of the population is unlikely to equal the black percentage of that population's voters. To minimize measurement error, this study uses the percentage of registered voters who are black to measure black electoral strength. By examining the impact, as well as the election of black school board members, by analyzing the effect of community racial and political attitudes, and by more accurately measuring black electoral strength, this study increases our knowledge of both the election and impact of black school board members.

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Hypotheses

Previous studies of the election or impact of black school board members and black city council members suggest four plausible hypotheses concerning the impact of black political strength and socioeconomic variables on the election of blacks to school boards and discrimination against black students.

Hypothesis 1. Black political strength is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with discrimination against black students (Meier and England 1984; Robinson, England, and Meier 1985; Stewart, England, and Meier 1989; Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982; Karnig and Welch 1980; MacManus 1978).

Hypothesis 2. The ratio of black median family income to white median family income is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with discrimination against black students (Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982; Karnig and Welch 1980).

Hypothesis 3. The ratio of black educational attainment to white educational attainment is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with discrimination against black students (adapted from Karnig and Welch 1980, 31, 101).

Hypothesis 4. Urbanization is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with discrimination against black students (MacManus 1978).

Because blacks are a minority of the population in most counties, the racial attitudes of nonblacks are likely to affect both the election of black school board members and the political environment, and hence the impact of black school board members. Since opinion surveys include too few local cases for reliable statistical analysis, we use the presidential vote for Wallace to measure community variation in white racial attitudes toward blacks. Certainly no presidential candidate in modern times has been so commonly perceived as opposing the civil rights movement as George Wallace. While the Wallace measure is somewhat dated, it has been shown to have a powerful negative effect on the election of black parish/county commissioners in Louisiana and North Carolina over the 1980-84 period (Dennis 1989).[1] Therefore, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 5. Support for Wallace is negatively associated with electing black school board members and positively associated with discrimination against black students.

Political philosophy, as well as racial attitudes, are likely to influence nonblack support for black school board candidates. As black school board candidates are probably perceived by nonblack voters as policy liberals, nonblack voters could easily oppose black school board candidates for policy, as opposed to racial, reasons. Certainly President Reagan consistently took conservative positions on domestic public policy questions (e.g., narrowing the scope of affirmative action and decreasing inflation-adjusted spending levels for most domestic programs). Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 6. Support for Reagan is negatively associated with electing black school board members and positively associated with discrimination against black students.

Data

As mentioned earlier, one of the major advantages of this study is the use of black voter registration (as opposed to black population) to measure black electoral strength. Originally, data were collected for four states (Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina) which have kept voter registration data by race during the time period of this study (1980-84). Of these states, only Louisiana has substate divisions (parishes) with only one school board having authority in each parish, where this school board is elected, and for which data on all predictor and dependent variables are available. Accordingly, we use parishes in Louisiana as our unit of analysis.[2]

The first dependent variable, the percentage of the parish school board members who are black, was calculated from various editions of *The National Roster of Black Elected Officials,* published by the Joint Center for Political Studies (1981). The other dependent variables are measures of second-generation discrimination against black students. Second-generation discrimination is discrimination in treatment of black students at school (as opposed to school assignment). The three categories of second-generation discrimination used in this study (corporal punishment, placement in an educable mentally retarded program, and suspension) have been employed frequently in previous research (Bullock and Stewart 1979; Meier and England 1984; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989; Wainscott and Woodard 1988). To measure second-generation discrimination, this study uses the ratio of the black percentage of students in a category (e.g., corporal punishment) to the black percentage of all students. Since in all parishes for which we have second-generation discrimination data, the percentage of students who are black is greater than zero (minimum 7 percent), this ratio is "defined" (avoids division by zero) for all observations. Additionally, since the black percentage of students in a category is confined to the numerator, this measure has the advantage of being defined for observations in which no black students are in a category. Both the ratio of proportions and Yule's Q measures would be undefined for the several observations in which both the number of blacks and whites in a category are zero (see formulas in Wainscott and Woodard 1988, 174-77). These data were taken biannually from a survey compiled by the U.S. Office of Education (1984).

Parish-level data on the percentage of registered voters who are black, and the percentages of the presidential vote for Wallace and for Reagan were provided by the Louisiana Office of Secretary of State. The percentage of the parish population living in an urban area is from the U.S. census bureau's *County and City Databook.* Socioeconomic data by race (median family income and median years of school completed by persons age 25 or older) are from the census bureau series entitled *General Social and Economic Characteristics.* Since covariance tests (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1981, 123-24) indicated that the statistical differences between years were insignificant, data for the 1980-84 period were pooled.

1. For a discussion of the validity of the Wallace measure, see Dennis (1989, 109-11).

2. The parish-wide school boards in Orleans, Ouachita, and Washington parishes are excluded from the analysis because they did not have exclusive jurisdiction throughout the 1980-84 period. Another state with a history of recording voter registration data by race, Florida, was excluded because its format for school board elections (held the same day as even-numbered year general elections, using partisan ballots) produces exceptionally high turnout rates (Milton 1983) and a highly atypical electoral environment.

Findings

Black Political Strength

In terms of the election of black school board members, black political strength is operationalized as the percentage of the registered parish voters who are black. As the results in Table 1 show, a 1 percent increase in the percentage of black registered voters is associated with an approximately .8 percent increase in the percentage of black parish school board members.[3] Certainly black voter registration has a strong positive impact on the election of black school board members.

Since we want to examine the impact of black school board members on second-generation discrimination against black students, it is necessary to make black school board strength an independent variable. Table 1 also shows the impact of each predictor variable on each of the three measures of second-generation discrimination. As hypothesized, black political strength (indicated in Table 1 by percentage of black representation on school boards) is negatively associated with each measure of second-generation discrimination and is always statistically significant.

Black/White Income Ratio

The results offer no support for the hypothesis that greater relative black family income makes the election of black school board members more probable or reduces second-generation discrimination against black students. In each equation the black/white income ratio is incorrectly signed.

Black/White Education Ratio

Our third hypothesis, that the black/white education ratio is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with second-generation discrimination against black students, receives very modest support from the findings. In two of the three second-generation discrimination equations, the black/white education ratio is positively associated with discrimination against black students. In the equation for the election of black school board members, the coefficient for the black/white education ratio is correctly signed but not statistically significant.

Urbanization

The fourth hypothesis is that urbanization is positively associated with electing black school board members and negatively associated with second-generation discrimination against black students. The results provide very limited support for the hypothesis. While the urbanization coefficient is incorrectly signed in the school board equation, it is not statistically significant. However, in two of the three second-generation discrimination equations the urbanization coefficient is correctly signed, but statistically insignificant. In no equation is the urbanization coefficient both correctly signed and statistically significant.[4]

3. The equation in Table 1 was also estimated with quadratic and cubic black registration terms. The nonlinear black registration terms were highly multicollinear, added virtually no explanatory power to the linear model, and did not change the significance of the other predictor variables. Various models containing interaction terms with black political strength were also tested. The goodness of fit of these models was either the same, or worse, than the results reported in Table 1.

4. Alternative measures of urbanization (requiring that a parish have greater than either 40 percent or 60 percent of its population living in an urban area in order to be classified as urban, or using total parish school enrollment) did not improve the goodness of fit. See Stewart and Sheffield (1987, 785).

Table 1: *The Impact of Black Political Strength, Socioeconomic Variables, and Attitudinal Variables on the Black Percentage of Parish School Boards and on Three Measures of Second-Generation Discrimination in Louisiana Parishes, 1980-84*

		Black Political Strength		Socioeconomic Variables			Attitudinal Variables		
	Intercept	Measured in Percentage of Registered Voters	School Board Members	Black/White Ratio in Income	Education	Urban Percentage	Percentage Voting for Wallace	Reagan	Adj. R^2
Black Percentage of Parish School Boards *(N=165)*	−4.442	.832*** (.091)		−18.187 (10.643)	12.322 (10.672)	−.012 (.032)	−.082 (.096)	.066 (.079)	.61
Measures of Second Generation Discrimination *(N=116)*									
Assignment to educable mentally retarded program	−.715		−.015* (.006)	.821 (.943)	.485 (.903)	−.003 (.003)	.023** (.008)	.019* (.008)	.32
Corporal punishment	.642		−.008* (.004)	.097 (.598)	−.488 (.572)	.002 (.002)	.005 (.005)	.012* (.005)	.16
Suspension	−.484		−.009** (.003)	1.583** (.503)	.549 (.481)	−.003 (.002)	.011* (.004)	.007 (.004)	.40

Note: Estimated standard errors are in parentheses.
*Significant at the .05 level. **Significant at the .01 level. ***Significant at the .001 level.

Electoral Support for Wallace

The fifth hypothesis is that electoral support for George Wallace is negatively associated with electing blacks to school boards and positively associated with second-generation discrimination against black students. The results offer moderate support for the hypothesis. The Wallace coefficient is correctly signed in each equation and is statistically significant in two equations.

Electoral Support for Reagan

The final hypothesis is that electoral support for Ronald Reagan is negatively associated with electing blacks to school boards and positively associated with second-generation discrimination. The results offer some support for the hypothesis. While the Reagan coefficient is incorrectly signed in the school board equation, it is not statistically significant. Support for the Reagan hypothesis comes from the second-generation discrimination equations. In all three second-generation discrimination equations the Reagan coefficient is correctly signed. It is statistically significant in two equations.

Discussion

From the standpoint of generating support for the hypotheses, the results are somewhat disappointing. In terms of electing black school board members, relative black voter strength has a powerful positive impact. However, the socioeconomic and attitudinal variables are insignificant.

As socioeconomic variables have been inconsistent predictors of black officeholding (Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Robinson, England, and Meier 1985; Stewart, England, and Meier 1989; Karnig and Welch 1980), the results for the socioeconomic hypotheses are not surprising.[5] However, as the white racism measure (Wallace) has been shown to be strongly negatively related to electing blacks to parish governing boards in Louisiana during the 1980s (Dennis 1989), the rather weak impact of white racism is more surprising. The relatively small impact of white racism is most likely due to the particular office examined. Over the past decade, blacks have been at least equitably represented on elected school boards, especially in areas such as Louisiana where a district electoral system is used (Meier and England 1984; Robinson and England 1981; Stewart, England, and Meier 1989; Welch and Karnig 1978). Because the generally greater affluence of white families permits them to send their children to private schools more easily, whites may participate less in school board elections than in either legislative or executive elections. As voter turnout is generally low in school board elections (Milton 1983), the impact of black electoral strength could be significantly magnified in school board elections.

The findings are somewhat different for the second-generation discrimination equations. Finding that black school board strength is always negatively related to second-generation discrimination and statistically significant is especially noteworthy since the low absolute level of black school board strength inhibits exercising black political power. In only 9 percent of parish school boards do blacks constitute more than 33 percent of the school board membership (mean 13.8 percent, standard deviation 13.3 percent). These findings may indicate that while blacks are almost invariably a small minority of the school board, the mere presence of black school board members may sensitize white policymakers to issues relating to equal educational opportunities. Additionally, the policy impact of black school board members may be reflected partly in selections of black teachers and administrators (Meier and England 1984; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989). Our data do not permit us to examine this linkage.

While the socioeconomic hypotheses receive little support, the white racism and policy conservatism measures seem to have some impact on the level of second-generation discrimination against black students. Although the findings are not extremely strong, they suggest that community racial and political attitudes may well affect the degree of racially discriminatory policies and/or policy outcomes. Additionally, community racial and political attitudes may have an additional effect on policy outcomes through the hiring of black teachers and administrators. While there is still much to be known about the election and impact of black school board members, these findings suggest the potential importance of incorporating racial and political attitudes more fully into future research on racial policy in particular and on public policy in general.

5. The lack of support for the socioeconomic hypotheses is not likely the result of multicollinearity. Regressing each socioeconomic variable on the remaining predictor variables produces adjusted R^2s between .2 and .4.

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Christopher Dennis is a member of the Department of Political Science at California State University, Long Beach. His major research interests are in political economy. He has published articles recently in the American Political Science Review *and the* Southeastern Political Review.