

ELECTING BLACK COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
IN TWO SOUTHEASTERN STATES:
THE IMPORTANCE OF RACIAL ATTITUDES

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Over the past fifteen years, numerous studies have examined correlates of black officeholding (e.g. Cole 1974; Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982; Jones 1976; Karnig 1979; Karnig and Welch 1980; Latimer 1979; MacManus 1978; Robinson and Dye 1978; Taebel 1978). Generally, this research has analyzed the effect of electoral arrangements (at-large or district) on the relationship between the relative size of the black city population and the election of black city council members controlling for socioeconomic variables.

This paper increases our knowledge of black officeholding in three important ways. First, this is the only study that uses community political attitudes (racism and policy conservatism) as predictors of black officeholding. As political attitudes are often good predictors of political behavior (Campbell 1979), there is ample reason to hypothesize they would be important predictors of black electoral outcomes.

Secondly, this study uses black electoral strength as a predictor variable, as opposed to a component of the dependent variable. Previous research on the impact of electoral systems on black representation has usually not included black electoral strength as an independent variable (Engstrom

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and McDonald 1981; Karnig and Welch 1980, 103-107 are exceptions). Typically this is because the dependent variable is measured either as a ratio of the percentage of offices held by blacks to the percentage of the population that is black (Jones 1976; Karnig 1976; Welch and Karnig 1978), or as the difference between the proportion of the positions held by blacks and the proportion of blacks in the population (MacManus 1978). By using the percentage of the positions held by blacks as the dependent variable, this study can use black electoral strength as an independent variable. Not only is black electoral strength an independent variable; this study uses a more appropriate measure of it. Previous work has used the black percentage in the population to measure black electoral strength (Cole 1974; Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982; Jones 1976; Karnig 1979; Karnig and Welch 1980; Latimer 1979; MacManus 1978; Robinson and Dye 1978; Taebel 1978). The weakness in using population is that the proportion of the population which is black rarely equals the proportion of voters who are black. Since turnout by race is unavailable, this study uses the next most proximate measure of black electoral strength, the percentage of registered voters who are black.

Finally, this research uses a different unit of analysis than previous work. Prior work on the election of black officials examines municipal offices (see sources cited above). This study analyzes the election of black county commissioners. Since southern black elected county officials comprise approximately 40% of all southern black elected officials, it is important to examine the election of blacks to county offices.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses we will test include those which previous works have found both theoretically and empirically important (H₁ through H₄). Additionally, this study examines theoretically grounded attitudinal hypotheses not found in previous research (H₅ and H₆).

Previous studies (e.g. Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Karnig and Welch 1980) suggest that black officeholding is often related to black resources. Black resources consist of attributes of the black population that are likely to affect its ability to exercise political power.

Since elections are ultimately determined by voters, the first important black resource should be the relative size of the black electorate. Following Karnig and Welch (1980, 61, 96) and Engstrom and McDonald (1981), it is hypothesized that:

- H₁ The black percentage of registered voters is positively related to the percentage of county commissioners who are black.¹

It is unlikely that black electoral strength is the only important black political resource. As Karnig and Welch (1980, 31) note, "Greater affluence and attainment in education probably signal an increase in the number of blacks with the money, time, political talent, interests, and role status requisite for effective political activism." Karnig and Welch (1980, 101) and Engstrom and McDonald (1981, 351) make a convincing case that racial income inequality is the most important economic characteristic associated with low levels of black officeholding. Accordingly it is hypothesized that:

- H₂ The ratio of white median family income to black median family income is negatively associated with the percentage of positions on the county governing board held by blacks (as white median family income increases relative to black median family income black officeholding should decrease).

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that:

- H₃ Black educational attainment is positively associated with the percentage of positions on the county governing board held by blacks.

Urbanization is likely to be related to black officeholding. Urban areas are often trend-setters in political and cultural change. Greater population density facilitates political mobilization and action. It is not surprising that the civil rights movement began in urban areas and then spread to rural locales. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H₄ The percentage of the county population that lives in an urban area is positively associated with the percentage of county commissioners who are black.

As blacks constitute a minority in virtually every county, the racial attitudes of non-black voters are important in electing black officials. Although surveys would provide a very direct measure of racial attitudes, SRC data and opinion polls contain too few respondents per county for statistical analysis. Fortunately, a relatively direct method of measuring county racial attitudes is available: the county presidential vote. While one may have a variety of reasons for voting for a particular presidential candidate, racial issues have often been prominent in

presidential campaigns. Certainly the Wallace presidential candidacy was commonly perceived as opposing black rights. In all probability, the less a county supports black rights the less likely it would elect black officials. Obviously, the 1968 county presidential vote for George Wallace imperfectly represents contemporary county racial attitudes. However, while dated, the 1968 presidential vote for Wallace does reflect county racial attitudes at a relatively recent point in time.² Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H₅ The percentage of the 1968 county presidential vote for Wallace is negatively associated with the percentage of county commissioners who are black.

While racial tolerance can affect the willingness of non-black voters to support black candidates, so can policy orientations. Since black candidates are likely to be identified by voters as policy liberals, non-black conservatives may oppose black candidates on policy grounds. The Reagan candidacy provides an excellent opportunity to assess such a possibility. Both as a candidate and as President, Reagan has strongly advocated conservative positions on most all areas of domestic public policy (e.g. reducing social welfare spending, narrowing the scope of affirmative action, etc.). Accordingly, our final hypothesis is that:

- H₆ The percentage of the county presidential vote for Reagan is negatively associated with the percentage of county commissioners who are black.

Although all of the previous hypotheses have been phrased in additive terms (the particular predictor variable alone "adds" something to black officeholding), the hypotheses concerning non-electoral black resources (the white/black income ratio and black education) and urbanization are probably best thought of as interacting with black voter registration. For example, if a county had only two black voters and these two individuals became wealthy, it would obviously change the white/black income ratio, but due to low black electoral strength would be unlikely to result in the election of a black county commissioner. Thus, the impact of non-electoral black resources and urbanization (which likely alters the conversion of black resources into political action) on black officeholding is likely to be conditional upon black electoral strength. For this reason, the hypotheses concerning the white/black income ratio, black education and urbanization will be tested by interaction terms with black voter registration.³

Data

The dependent variable is the percentage of county or parish commissioners who are black. The data are from Louisiana and North Carolina and were collected bi-annually over the 1980-84 period. These states were selected because they have recorded county voter registration by race and had either exclusively district (Louisiana) or almost exclusively at-large (North Carolina) electoral systems over the 1980-84 period.⁴ While all North Carolina counties used in the analysis both nominated and elected county commissioners at-large, some counties required all commissioners to live in districts. As a district residency requirement can change the election prospects for blacks, separate equations will be estimated for both electoral formats in North Carolina.⁵ Data on black county or parish com-

missioners was collected from various editions of The National Roster of Black Elected Officials published by the Joint Center for Political Studies.

County-level data on voter registration by race, presidential vote for Reagan and for Wallace were provided by the Office of Secretary of State from each state. Data on black educational attainment (median years of school completed by black persons age 25, or older) and white and black median family income were taken from the series entitled General Social and Economic Characteristics. Data on urbanization was taken from the County and City Data-book.

Findings

Black Registration

Since the impact of black registration on black officeholding is both direct and interactive (in conjunction with the white/black income ratio, black education and urbanization), the coefficients for black registration in Table 1 do not represent the total impact of black registration on black officeholding. To approximate the impact of the interaction terms for an average county, we can multiply each interaction coefficient by the mean of the interacting term. Thus, to evaluate the impact of the interaction of black registration and the white/black income ratio, multiply the interaction coefficient (.173 for Louisiana) by the mean of the white/black income ratio (1.980 for Louisiana). To approximate the total impact of black registration on black officeholding, we then add these products to the direct impact of black registration. As the mean values for black education and urbanization in Louisiana are 9.583 and 44.000, the impact of a one percent increase in the percentage of voters who are black on the percentage of parish commissioners who

are black in Louisiana is approximately .595 percent $[\cdot 813 + \{(\cdot 173)(1.980)\} + \{(-\cdot 054)(9.583)\} + \{(-\cdot 001)(44.000)\}] = .595$. The corresponding figure for counties in North Carolina with a district residency requirement is .442, while for counties in North Carolina without a district residency requirement, the figure is .625. Thus, while there is variation across states and election formats, a one percent increase in the percentage of registered voters who are black is associated with between approximately a .4 to .6 percent increase in the percentage of the county or parish commissioners who are black.

Table 1. The Impact of Black Voter Registration, Socioeconomic Variables, Racial and Political Attitudes on the Black Percentage of the Parish or County Governing Board in Louisiana and North Carolina

Inter- cept	Wht./Blk.						Adj. R ²
	%Blk. Regis.	Income Ratio	Blk. Edu.	% Urban	% Wallace	% Reagan	
Louisiana							
7.288	.813* (.334)	.173* (.076)	-.054 (.028)	-.001 (.001)	-.289*** (.084)	.148 (.079)	.54
North Carolina (at-large with district residency requirement)							
5.629	1.158 (.704)	-.288 (.250)	-.025 (.047)	-.001 (.002)	-.381*** (.094)	.033 (.107)	.30
North Carolina (at-large without district residency requirement)							
12.343	1.193 (.976)	-.646** (.233)	.004 (.073)	.010*** (.003)	-.264** (.091)	-.158* (.067)	.51

Note: The coefficients for the white/black income ratio, black education and urbanization are the coefficients of the county products of the particular variable and percent black registration [e.g. for the average county in Louisiana, the white/black income ratio is 1.980 and 24.293 percent of the registered voters are black. Thus, the product of these variables for the average county in Louisiana is 48.100 (1.980 x 24.293 = 48.100)]. The Louisiana coefficient for the white/black income in Table 1 (.173) is the coefficient of these products.

Estimated standard errors are shown in parentheses.

*p ≤ .05

**p ≤ .01

***p ≤ .001

White/Black Income Ratio

The second hypothesis is that the white/black income ratio is negatively related to black office-

holding. The results offer little support for this hypothesis. In Louisiana, the white/black income ratio is both positively associated with black officeholding and statistically significant. In North Carolina, as hypothesized, the white/black income ratio is negatively associated with black officeholding in both equations, but statistically significant only for counties without a district residency requirement.

The $-.646$ coefficient for the interaction of the white/black income ratio and percent black registration for counties in North Carolina without district residency requirements can be interpreted as follows: if the ratio of white median family income to black median family income were to decrease by $.10$ (e.g. from 2.10 to 2.00), the impact of the percent of registered voters who are black on the percent of county commissioners who are black would increase by approximately $.06$ percent ($.646 \times .10 = .0646$).

Black Education

The third hypothesis is that black education and black officeholding are positively associated. Again, the results offer little support for the hypothesis. In Louisiana, black education is negatively associated with black officeholding. In North Carolina, the sign for black education alternates between the two equations, but neither coefficient is statistically significant.

Urbanization

The fourth hypothesis is that urbanization is positively associated with black officeholding. This hypothesis receives modest empirical support. In Louisiana, urbanization is negatively associated with black officeholding (but statistically insignificant). In North Carolina, both the direction and statistical significance of urbanization varies between the two equations. In counties with a district residency

requirement, urbanization is negatively related to black officeholding (but statistically insignificant). However, the hypothesis receives strong support in counties without a district residency requirement where urbanization is both positively related to black officeholding and statistically significant.

Electoral Support for Wallace

The fifth hypothesis is that support for George Wallace and black officeholding are inversely related. The results strongly support the hypothesis. In both Louisiana and North Carolina, the Wallace coefficient is negatively signed and statistically significant. Moreover, support for Wallace has a sizable negative impact on black officeholding. In both states, a one percent increase in support for Wallace is associated with between a .2 to .4 percent decrease in the percentage of commission seats held by blacks. Given population replacement and migration during the post-Wallace period, these results are all the more interesting. Since few blacks were likely to vote for Wallace, these findings strongly suggest that the racial attitudes of non-blacks significantly change the probabilities of electing black officials.

Electoral Support for Reagan

While support for Wallace is strongly and negatively associated with black officeholding, support for Reagan has a less certain impact. In both Louisiana and counties in North Carolina with a district residency requirement, support for Reagan is positively associated with black officeholding, but statistically insignificant. Only in counties in North Carolina without a district residency requirement is support for Reagan both negatively associated with black officeholding and statistically significant.

Discussion

The preceding findings contain three important results. First, while electoral format alters the rate of converting black electoral strength into black officeholding (Engstrom and McDonald 1981), the relative size of the black electorate is important in accounting for county or parish variation in black officeholding.

Secondly, county racial attitudes are better predictors of black officeholding than socioeconomic variables. It is important to note that this finding is largely unaffected by choice of state, electoral format, measurement of socioeconomic variables (regardless of whether one uses racially disaggregated or non-racially disaggregated measures), or model specification (use of linear or non-linear terms and/or interactive or non-interactive terms). Finding that county racial attitudes are better predictors of black officeholding than socioeconomic variables is important because past research (Karnig 1979; Karnig and Welch 1980; McManus 1978; and to a much lesser extent, Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982) has emphasized the importance of socioeconomic variables (particularly racial income inequality) in explaining black officeholding. While one might guess that the generally small impact of socioeconomic variables found here is due to multicollinearity between these variables and the attitudinal variables, the evidence is mixed.⁶ What we can be sure of is that by omitting racial attitudes, previous research has overlooked an important predictor of black officeholding.

Additionally, these findings indicate that while racism has a strong, negative impact on black officeholding, policy conservatism has a much less certain impact.⁷ In only one of the three equations was policy conservatism both negatively associated with black officeholding and statistically significant.

These findings suggest that moderating southern racial attitudes would help black candidates more than an increase in policy conservatism would hurt black candidates.

Obviously, this study does not answer all questions concerning the election of black officials. However, these results should encourage others studying black officeholding to incorporate black registration data, and most importantly, attitudinal variables, in their models. Clearly, there is much to gain by such an approach.

Notes

¹Since the use of a black electoral threshold (e.g. including only counties with a certain minimum percentage of black voters) is both arbitrary (e.g. what threshold?) and misleading (counties below the threshold may or may not have black commission members), this study follows Engstrom and McDonald's (1981) approach of regressing the percentage of commission seats held by blacks on black electoral strength.

As both Keech (1968, 101) and Murray and Vedlitz (1978, 33) have suggested that the relationship between black electoral strength and black officeholding may be non-linear, equations containing quadratic and cubic black registration terms were estimated. The non-linear black registration terms were almost entirely functions of the other predictor variables (hence highly multicollinear) and added little explanatory power to equations containing a linear black registration term. Replacing the linear black registration term with a non-linear term had virtually no effect on the results.

²Using a twelve to sixteen year-old aggregate-level measure to infer individual-level attitudes and behavior raises important questions of validity and fallacious reasoning. To address these problems let us consider three questions. First, was the Wallace vote a valid measure of white racism in 1968? Second, if so, would we have committed the ecological fallacy by using the aggregate Wallace vote to infer white racial attitudes toward black candidates in 1968? Finally, if the Wallace vote was a valid measure of white racial attitudes in 1968 and ecological fallacy problems were minimal in 1968, is this approach still appropriate in the early 1980's?

Since opinion surveys contain too few respondents per county for statistical analysis, in order to measure white racism, we must infer racial attitudes either from socioeconomic data or a public vote. As inferring racial attitudes from socioeconomic data is risky, at best, and we already have socioeconomic variables in our model, the best approach is to use a public vote. Certainly no well-known modern candidate (for which we have data for both Louisiana and North Carolina) has so openly based his campaign on opposing black rights as George Wallace did in 1968. Therefore, the 1968 Wallace vote would seem to be the most valid vote-based measure of white racial attitudes.

Whenever one infers individual-level attitudes and behavior from aggregate-level data, they run the risk of committing the ecological fallacy (Robinson 1950). Given the racist appeal of Wallace, it is unlikely that many Wallace voters would have supported black candidates in 1968. Thus, we would be unlikely to have a major incidence of fallacious reasoning for 1968.

The potential for longitudinal change in community racial attitudes raises important validity questions in using the 1968 Wallace vote to measure contemporary white racial attitudes. In the post-1968 period, three possibilities present themselves. First, there could have been a longitudinally constant

increase or decrease in white racism across communities within each state (for example, by the generational replacement of more racist voters with less racist voters). Regardless of the direction of such a constant intrastate change, the Wallace measure would accurately gauge the impact of white racial attitudes on black officeholding. In terms of the regression model, a constant uniform change would only bias the intercept, but not the coefficient for the Wallace variable.

A second possibility is that the post-1968 changes in white racial attitudes were either random within each state or moved toward less intrastate variation. In either case, the Wallace coefficient understates the impact of white racial attitudes on black officeholding.

The final possibility, that inter-county differences in white racial attitudes have increased in the post-1968 period, is the only circumstance in which the Wallace measure would overstate the impact of white racial attitudes on black officeholding. While white racial liberals could have primarily moved into racially liberal areas and/or primarily vacated racially conservative areas, there is no hard evidence that this has taken place. Even if this situation were found to be the most accurate of the three post-1968 possibilities, it would take a rather drastic in/out migration to cause the Wallace measure to seriously overstate the impact of white racial attitudes on black officeholding.

Thus, under all but one possibility, the longitudinal change in white racial attitudes would cause the Wallace measure to either remain constant, or downwardly bias the impact of white racial attitudes. Given that the Wallace measure has a low probability of seriously overstating the impact of white racial attitudes on black officeholding, that no alternative measure of white racial attitudes is preferable to the Wallace measure, and that omitting the Wallace measure would cause model misspecification and inconsistent parameter estimates (Pin-

dyck and Rubinfeld 1981, 129), the Wallace measure greatly strengthens the analysis.

³Replacing the interaction terms with non-interaction terms has little effect on the results. In equations without interaction terms, black registration is always positively signed, statistically significant and has a coefficient value between .4 and .6. The coefficients for the white/black income ratio, black education and urbanization have the same signs and similar levels of statistical significance to those reported in Table 1. Most importantly, in terms of the conclusions of this paper, the results for the attitudinal variables (Wallace and Reagan) are virtually identical to those in Table 1. Furthermore, using interaction terms between black registration and the attitudinal variables tends to decrease the significance of the Wallace variable, but not by very much. Finally, using non-linear interaction terms has little effect on the findings.

⁴Three other states with a history of recording county voter registration by race were eliminated because of either insufficient black officeholding (Florida and Georgia) or longitudinally diverse and unstable electoral formats (Georgia and South Carolina).

⁵Over the 1980-84 period, eleven counties in North Carolina either nominated and/or elected county commissioners by district, or used a mixed district at-large system (some, but not all seats required district residency). These counties were dropped from the analysis.

Since covariance tests (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1981, 123-24) revealed insignificant statistical differences between years for each state, data were pooled by state for the 1980-84 period. Pooling the data increases the sample size and, hence, the efficiency of the parameter estimates (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1981, 28-29).

⁶Concerning the significance of socioeconomic variables, no strong pattern emerges when comparing equations omitting both the Wallace and Reagan variables to equations containing either variable alone. In general, Wallace reduces the significance of socioeconomic variables more than Reagan does. When equations omitting both Wallace and Reagan are compared to equations containing Wallace alone, socioeconomic variables are usually, but not always, found to be more powerful in the former. However, it is important to note that no interaction coefficient which is statistically insignificant in Table 1 becomes statistically significant if both the Wallace and Reagan variables are omitted.

⁷Since there is not a high correlation between support for Wallace and support for Reagan ($r=.27$ in Louisiana, $r=-.33$ in North Carolina), they would appear to be measuring substantially different attitudes.

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