

**Black Representation: Making Sense of Electoral Geography at Different Levels of Government**



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## ***Black Representation: Making Sense of Electoral Geography At Different Levels of Government***

The number of minorities serving in legislatures, councils, and governing boards varies greatly across regions of the country and across levels of government. For example, on the national level, there are more black members of Congress in the North than in the South, while at the local level more blacks serve in the South than in the North. This paper accounts for the variation in black representation primarily as an interaction of the concentration of blacks (in both raw population numbers and in population percentages) and the size of the constituency unit. We show that electoral geography is the single most important element in explaining variations in black representation in government by section and by type of office. We are not claiming, however, that electoral geography is the only major influence on minority electoral success. We recognize that election method is critical; in particular, it is well known that at-large elections produce fewer minority representatives than other systems, independent of the effects of geography. But we show that election method does not vary as greatly by region as does electoral geography. Thus, regional differences in black representation across levels of government can best be explained by making sense of electoral geography.

The question that motivates this paper is a straightforward one: how can we account for the rates of electoral success of minority candidates (blacks in particular) across different regions (especially South versus non-South) and different types of offices (from the U. S. Congress to state legislatures to county and city offices)? Four explanations are commonly offered to explain differential rates of black (or Hispanic or other minority) electoral success. First, blacks or Hispanics are rarely elected from districts that are not heavily minority in composition (Brace, Grofman, and Handley 1987; Brace, Grofman, Handley, and Niemi 1988; Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Grofman and Handley 1987). Second, the proportions of the population who are citizens, of voting age, registered, and turning out to vote are generally lower for minorities than for whites (see, e.g., Brace, Grofman, and Handley, and

Niemi 1988; Cavanagh 1982; Brischetto and Grofman 1987; Williams 1987). Third, high levels of racially polarized voting impede or prevent the election of minority candidates (Engstrom and McDonald 1988; Grofman, Migalski, and Noviello 1985; Loewen 1987). Fourth, certain districting practices, especially the use of at-large elections or multimember districts, tend to submerge minority voting strength (see, e.g., Brischetto and Grofman 1987; Davidson and Korbel 1981; Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 1982, 1986; Grofman 1982; Grofman, Migalski, and Noviello 1986; Heilig and Mundt 1983; Karnig and Welch 1979, 1982).

It is clear that there is considerable variation in the electoral success of black candidates across regions at various levels of government. In Table 1 we show black elected officials by region<sup>1</sup> as a percentage of all elected officials, 1970-85, for five levels of office: U.S. Congress, state senate, state house, county boards, and city councils.

The numbers of black elected officials by unit of government are available from the Joint Center for Political Studies. This tabulation is one basis for our analysis of black representation in Table 1, but we have added information on how many elected officials there are at each level of government, so as to be able to report black representation as a percentage of total representation at each level of government. (See Appendix for details.) We believe that, for county boards and city councils, Table 1 is the first tabulation of black representation in percentage terms for the nation as a whole and by region.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 is also unique in comparing black representation percentages by region for all five levels of government.

There are a number of features of Table 1 that are significant. First, there has been a dramatic increase over the past 15 years in black representation in the South (although, as a proportion of total elected officials, black representation is still low), and there have been slow but steady gains elsewhere in the country. Second, there are considerable differences in black electoral success across regions—differences that cannot entirely be attributed to differences in the size of black population in those regions. Third, differences in black electoral success vary considerably across type of office. Fourth, there appears to be a puzzling interaction between region and type of office. In particular, for the U.S. Congress, blacks are heavily underrepresented in the South; in the other levels of government, especially local government, black success is greatest in the South. These differences in black success by region and by type of office would seem, at first blush, largely haphazard and inexplicable.

TABLE 1  
Black Elected Officials as a Percentage of All Elected Officials, 1970-85

Year and Region	Percentage of Blacks in Population	Percentage of Black Elected Officials				
		U.S. Congress	State Senate	State House	County Boards	City Boards
1985						
South	18.2	2.1	6.5	9.3	5.2	4.8
West	5.2	4.7	1.6	2.0	.6	.5
North Central	9.1	7.1	3.7	5.1	1.1	1.0
Northeast	9.9	4.2	3.6	3.4	1.1	1.5
Total	11.5	4.4	4.1	5.5	2.9	2.2
1980						
South	18.2	2.2	3.6	7.4	6.1	3.8
West	5.2	3.9	1.6	1.4	.5	.5
North Central	9.1	5.0	3.3	4.8	.8	.9
Northeast	9.9	2.9	2.8	2.6	.9	1.2
Total	11.5	3.4	2.9	4.5	2.6	1.8
1975						
South	18.4	3.0	2.9	5.8	3.8	2.3
West	6.6	3.9	1.4	1.7	.1	.4
North Central	8.1	5.0	3.3	4.8	.7	.7
Northeast	7.5	2.9	2.7	2.5	1.0	1.0
Total	10.7	3.7	2.7	4.0	1.7	1.2
1970						
South	18.4	0.0	1.7	2.4	.5	1.1
West	6.6	1.4	.7	1.4	.1	.3
North Central	8.1	4.0	2.2	4.0	.3	.3
Northeast	7.5	2.8	1.4	1.8	.4	.6
Total	10.7	2.1	1.6	2.4	.4	.6

The purpose of this paper is to provide a coherent explanation of these differences, in terms of the interactive effects of region and office type on black representation percentages. The roots of that explanation lie in an understanding of electoral geography—the distribution of black population across various units of government—and in an understanding of the interaction of that geography with the different types of systems that are used for electing officials at different levels of government.

TABLE 2  
 Black Population in 1980 and Black Representation in Congress  
 in 1986, by Geographic Area

Area	Black Population		Area Representation in Congress		
	Total	Percentage	Number of Black Members	Total Members	Percentage of Members Black
South	13,598,881	18.2	5	142	3.5
Non-South	12,447,238	.2	17	293	5.8

### Black Representation in Congress

There are a number of potentially plausible hypotheses to explain the data in Table 2. As of 1986, with a black population according to the 1980 Census of roughly 14 million, there were only five black members of Congress from the South (and only three from the deep South). In the rest of the nation, with a black population of roughly 12 million, there were 17 black members of Congress—over three times as many black representatives. The explanations include the hypothesis of higher levels of racism among southern than among nonsouthern voters, legislators, and judges; the claim that the Justice Department has failed to prevent racially unfair districting practices in the South; the assertion that there are lower registration and turnout levels among southern than among nonsouthern blacks; the larger total number of nonsouthern districts; and differential rates of population dispersal and urban concentration among blacks in the South and the non-South.

Some of these explanations we can reject as largely irrelevant, since they do not simultaneously explain why blacks have about the same level of electoral success in state legislatures in the South and the non-South nor why blacks are more successful at local levels in the South than outside the South. The explanations we can thus rule out include differences in levels of southern and nonsouthern racism or in levels of black electoral participation in the South and the non-South. However, some of the above explanations are of critical importance in explaining the difference in overall minority representation by region over time, even though they are of limited explanatory power in 1986. In particular, southern and nonsouthern black turnout (as a percentage of black voting age population [VAP]) are now very similar (Williams 1987), but, because of effective disfranchisement or intimidation prior

to 1965, black turnout in the South (especially the deep South) has historically been far lower than black turnout in the North.

One factor, however—differences in geographic dispersion among southern and nonsouthern blacks, when coupled with data on the level of minority population needed to elect black congressional candidates—is found to account almost completely for the present-day observed pattern of differences in black congressional representation.

Even though the South and the non-South each have six states with black populations above one million, the simple fact is that most black members of Congress are elected from cities with black populations above 300,000 (16 of the 22 black members of Congress, or 72.7%, are elected from such cities). Black population is much more concentrated in such cities outside the South; the South contains no cities that have more than 500,000 blacks in their population. Only 20.4% of southern blacks live in cities with more than 100,000 blacks, while 55% of nonsouthern blacks live in cities with more than 100,000 blacks. Only in districts where the minority population is greater than 50% are blacks likely to be elected to Congress (Grofman and Handley 1987). Almost without exception, these districts are in major cities outside the South (see Tables 3 and 4). Thus, once we control for urban concentrations of blacks large enough to form a majority of the constituency in a congressional district, differences between the South and non-South in the degree of black congressional representation effectively vanish.

### **Black Representation in State Legislatures**

The argument based simply on population size and concentration by which we explain differences in black congressional representation needs to be modified to explain differential levels of black representation in state legislatures and in local government offices. Since state senates have fewer seats than state houses, some population concentrations large enough to form a state house district with majority or near majority black population would not also form a majority in the state senate district. If so, then both within and outside the South, black legislative success should be greater in state houses than in state senates, other things being equal. In the South, we should observe reasonable black success in state legislatures, since sufficiently large black population concentrations exist there to form state legislative districts with a majority of black constituents, even though some of these concentrations are not large enough to form the core of a congressional district. If we look at the data on a state-by-state basis, we do find that, in 1985, 42 of 49 states had a proportion of black representatives in their state

TABLE 3  
 Black Representation in Congress in 1986 for Cities with Largest  
 Black Populations in 1980, by Rank

Rank	City	Total Population	Black Population		Number of Black Members of Congress
			Number	Percentage	
1	New York, NY	7,071,639	1,784,337	25.2	4
2	Chicago, IL	3,005,072	1,197,000	39.8	3
3	Detroit, MI	1,203,339	758,939	63.1	2
4	Philadelphia, PA	1,688,210	638,878	37.8	1
5	Los Angeles, CA <sup>a</sup>	2,966,850	505,210	17.0	3
6	Washington, DC	638,333	448,906	70.3	
7	Houston, TX	1,595,138	440,346	27.6	1
8	Baltimore, MD	786,775	431,151	54.8	1
9	New Orleans, LA	557,515	308,149	55.3	–
10	Memphis, TN	646,356	307,702	47.6	1
11	Atlanta, GA	425,022	282,911	66.6	1
12	Dallas, TX	904,078	265,594	29.4	–
13	Cleveland, OH	573,822	251,347	43.8	1
14	St. Louis, MO	453,085	206,386	45.6	1
15	Newark, NJ	329,248	191,745	58.2	–
16	Oakland, CA	339,337	159,281	46.9	1
17	Birmingham, AL	284,413	158,224	55.6	–
18	Indianapolis, IN	700,807	152,626	21.8	–
19	Milwaukee, WI	636,212	146,940	23.1	–
20	Jacksonville, FL	540,920	137,324	25.4	–
21	Cincinnati, OH	385,457	130,467	33.8	–
22	Boston, MA	562,994	126,229	22.4	–
23	Columbus, OH	564,871	124,880	22.1	–
24	Kansas City, MO	448,159	122,699	27.4	1
25	Richmond, VA	219,214	112,357	51.2	–
26	Gary, IN	151,953	107,644	70.8	–
27	Nashville-Davidson, TN	455,651	105,942	23.2	–
28	Pittsburgh, PA	423,938	101,813	24.0	–
29	Charlotte, NC	314,447	97,627	31.0	–
30	Jackson, MS	202,895	95,357	47.0	–
	United States	226,545,805	26,495,025	11.7	22

*Note:* Cities are rank ordered by total black population in the 1980 U. S. Census.

<sup>a</sup> Includes Compton.

houses as large or larger than that in their state senates (data omitted). The data in Table 1, however, do not indicate that black representation at the congressional level is uniformly lower than black representation in state legislative districts. One reason is that our data contain a pre-

TABLE 4  
Black Congressional Representation in 1986,  
as a Function of Urban Concentrations of Blacks, by Region

Black Representation	Cities with Black Populations of			
	More Than 500,000	300,000 to 499,999	200,000 to 299,999	100,000 to 199,999
<b>Non-South</b>				
Number of Cities	5	–	2	10
Number of Representatives	13	–	2	2
Percentage with at Least One Black Representative	100%	–	100%	20%
<b>South</b>				
Number of Cities	–	4	2	4
Number of Representatives	–	3	1	–
Percentage with at Least One Black Representative	–	75%	50%	0%

*Note:* Washington, DC, is excluded from this tabulation. Data on black population are from the 1980 U.S. Census.

ponderance of states with minuscule black populations, making averages unreliable.

It is much easier to see patterns clearly if we confine ourselves to states with populations that are more than 10% black (see Table 5).

We see from Table 5 that the predictions above are confirmed. In each year, in states where blacks were more than 10% of the population, whether in or outside the South, a higher proportion of blacks were elected to state houses than to state senates. Moreover, in these states with substantial black population percentages, differences between the South and the rest of the nation are, as expected, far smaller at the state legislative level than at the congressional level. Thus, for state legislatures, an explanation based on electoral geography, relying on the fact that the upper chamber of a state legislature has fewer seats than the lower chamber or than the state congressional delegation, seems to be of considerable explanatory power. However, black representation in state houses is greater outside the South ( $10.0/12.7 = .79$ ) than in the South ( $10.9/19.8 = .55$ ), a finding which suggests that regional differences in geographic dispersion of the black population within states also need to be taken into account.

But how do we explain minority representation in local units of government, which is higher in the South than outside the South?



TABLE 5  
 Black Elected Officials as a Percentage of All Elected Officials,  
 1970-85, for States with Populations More Than 10% Black

Region	Percentage of Blacks in Population	Percentage of Black Elected Officials				
		U. S. Congress	State Senate	State House	County Boards	City Boards
<b>All States with Populations More Than 10% Black</b>						
1985	16.4	5.8	7.3	10.6	4.4	3.7
1980	16.4	4.4	4.9	8.4	4.2	3.0
1975	15.4	4.8	4.4	7.1	2.8	1.9
1970	15.4	2.8	3.0	4.0	.5	.9
<b>Southern States with Populations More Than 10% Black</b>						
1985	19.8	2.4	7.4	10.9	5.8	5.6
1980	19.8	2.6	4.0	8.4	6.7	4.4
1975	20.1	3.4 <sup>a</sup>	3.2	6.5	4.2	2.6
1970	20.1	0.0	1.7	2.4	.6	1.3
<b>Nonsouthern States with Populations More Than 10% Black</b>						
1985	12.7	9.3	7.2	10.0	1.8	1.9
1980	12.7	6.2	6.8	8.3	1.4	1.7
1975	11.2	6.2	6.8	8.1	1.4	1.3
1970	11.2	5.3	5.8	7.2	.5	.6

<sup>a</sup> The decline in the percentage of members of Congress from the South between 1975 to 1980 and 1985 represents a loss of one black member (from four black members in 1975 to three in 1980). When Andrew Young, who represented the Fifth District of Georgia, was appointed ambassador to the U.N. by President Carter, a white member of congress replaced him. The Fifth District has been represented by a black since 1987.

### Black Representation in Local Government

The percentage of black representation in local government bodies is higher in the South than outside the South, reversing the pattern observed for Congress. We believe that this fact can best be accounted for by differences in the percentages of southern and nonsouthern cities and counties with significant black population. We show in Table 6 the distribution of black population by county and city for all states and for those states with above 10% black population, both

TABLE 6  
Distribution of Black Population in U.S. Counties and Cities,  
1980 Census

Percentage of Blacks in Population	Counties		Cities	
	South	Non-South	South	Non-South
<b>All States</b>				
1-10	48.7	96.4	33.9	77.2
10-20	16.3	2.6	18.7	11.2
20-30	11.9	.5	18.3	5.5
30-40	10.6	.4	12.4	2.3
40-50	6.2	.1	10.4	1.4
50-60	3.8	0.0	4.4	1.0
60-70	1.8	0.0	1.2	.4
70-80	.6	0.0	.8	.4
80-90	.1	0.0	0.0	.4
> 90	0.0	0.0	0.0	.1
(N)	(1426)	(1747)	(251)	(706)
<b>States with Population More Than 10% Black</b>				
1-10	39.6	90.4	30.3	60.2
10-20	18.0	7.0	17.2	17.5
20-30	14.4	1.1	19.9	9.8
30-40	12.9	1.3	14.0	4.5
40-50	7.5	.2	11.8	2.8
50-60	4.6	0.0	5.0	2.0
60-70	2.2	0.0	1.4	1.2
70-80	.6	0.0	.5	.4
80-90	.2	0.0	0.0	1.2
> 90	0.0	0.0	0.0	.4
(N)	(1173)	(471)	(221)	(246)

within and outside the South. It is apparent from the lower half of the table that a far higher percentage of local units of government in the South (15.1% of counties, 18.7% of cities) have populations that are more than 40% black than do such units outside the South (0.2% of counties, 8.0% of cities). (This difference is even more pronounced if we look at the data for all states, rather than just for those states whose populations are at least 10% black.)

The data in Table 6 support the claim that regional differences in levels of black representation across cities and counties can in part be accounted for by differences in the underlying distribution of black

population across these governmental units. However, electoral geography is not the entire story: some differences between the South and the rest of the U. S. may be due to differences in election methods. In particular, in the South, especially in local government units, at-large electoral systems were once far more common than outside the South. A spate of recent litigation brought under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (as amended in 1982) has challenged such plans on the grounds of racial vote dilution (see, e.g., *Thornburg v. Gingles*, 106 S.Ct. 2752, 1986). A very high percentage of these challenges to at-large elections have been successful (Brischetto and Grofman 1987). In areas where the minority population is highly concentrated, at-large elections at the local level are becoming increasingly rare.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, pure at-large elections still are somewhat more prevalent in the South than elsewhere in the country.

We show in Table 7 a crosstabulation of election methods for cities and counties by region. The South has a considerably lower percentage of counties in which board members are elected from purely single-member districts than does the rest of the nation. Cities both within and outside the South have similar percentages of single-member district systems, although the South has a higher percentage of cities with purely at-large systems than does the non-South.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the non-South has a higher proportion of districted county systems should reduce the importance of aggregate-level county black percentages, since in a district system it is the ability to draw districts with black majorities that is critical for black electoral success rather than the percentage of blacks in the population of the city or county as a whole.

Table 6 shows a much higher proportion of cities than of counties in which a substantial percentage of the population is black, but the higher proportion of at-large schemes in city government should partially counteract the effects of this greater black population concentration. The first fact leads us to expect higher black representation in cities than in counties; the latter fact leads us to expect lower black representation in cities than in counties. The facts are (see Table 5) that, as of 1985, for states whose population was more than 10% black, in every section of the county, differences in black representation at the county and the city level were in fact minimal. Thus, it would appear that these two countervailing effects largely canceled each other out.<sup>5</sup>

### Discussion

Politics in the United States, especially but not exclusively in the South, is characterized by a high level of racially polarized voting

TABLE 7  
Election Methods for U.S. City and County Governing Boards

Election Method	Counties		Cities	
	South	Non-South	South	Non-South
At-Large Elections Only <sup>a</sup>	26.4	30.6	56.8	41.2
Mixed System	38.0	8.6	30.5	45.2
Single-Member Districts Only (N)	35.6 (368)	60.8 (582)	12.7 (118)	13.6 (199)

*Note:* County data are for 1986-87; city data are for 1982.

<sup>a</sup> Includes at-large districts with residence requirements.

(Loewen 1987). As a consequence, only areas with very substantial black population percentages are likely to elect blacks (Brace, Grofman, and Handley 1988).

For the U.S. Congress, where it is necessary to create districts that are over 40% black in population if black candidates are to have a high probability of election success (Grofman and Handley 1987), the most relevant aspect of electoral geography is the existence or nonexistence of large cities with substantial black "ghettos" that can form the core of a congressional district. Such cities are far more common outside the South, even though the percentage of large cities with a large proportion of blacks is far higher in the South than in the rest of the country. For example, there are only six southern cities with black populations over 200,000, and only 2,035,853 blacks (14.97% of all southern blacks) live in them. Outside the South there are seven cities with black populations over 200,000, and 5,342,097 blacks (42.92% of nonsouthern blacks) live in them.

For state legislatures, the key fact of electoral geography that can account for differences in black representation between the lower and the upper chamber is the greater number of seats (and thus the smaller black population concentration needed to create a winnable seat) in the lower chamber.

For local governments, for minority representation, the key fact of electoral geography is the percentage of blacks in the constituency. The South has a far higher proportion of units of local governance with a large black population, while outside the South the black population is concentrated in cities that are not majority or near-majority black. This means that, *ceteris paribus*, black representation in local units of government would be expected to be higher in the South than outside the South, and that is in fact true.

Also highly relevant to minority representation in local government by region is the electoral method. A number of researchers have demonstrated the relationship between electoral system and the propensity to elect minority representatives, and it is clear, *ceteris paribus*, that minorities are more likely to be elected in cities or counties that have single-member election schemes than in those that elect representatives at-large. This fact mitigates the advantage blacks in the South have over blacks outside the South at the local level due to their relatively high percentage concentration in local units of government. Finally, we should note that at-large election plans at the local level are at least partially responsible for the levels of minority representation at the local level being lower than at the state level (see Table 1), since the number of state legislatures that elect representatives from multimember districts has declined in recent years (Niemi, Hill, and Grofman 1985).

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## APPENDIX DATA SOURCES

There are six principal data sources for this paper.

1. *Roster of Black Elected Officials*, published by the Joint Center for Political Studies (Washington, DC, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985). All numbers pertaining to black elected officials come from the relevant JCPS Roster (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 5). For cities, mayors have been excluded from the number of city council members if they are not elected as city council members. We plan on tabulating data on mayors separately in a subsequent paper.

2. *The Book of States*, vol. 18, 21, 23, and 26. This source provides the total number of state legislative seats in each chamber for the relevant years (see Tables 1 and 5).

3. *U.S. Census of Governments Survey*. Although this survey is conducted every 5 years, it is only every 10 years that the survey includes a study on popularly elected officials. We used the most recent volume available, the 1977 Census of Governments, Vol. 1, no. 2, *Popularly Elected Officials of 1977*, and the 1967 Census of Governments, Vol. 6, no. 1, *Popularly Elected Officials of State and Local Governments in 1967*. This survey includes all local governments by state and is the source for the number of county and city governing board members by state (region).

For numbers of county and city governing board members, we took 1970 data

from the 1967 Census of Governments; we took 1975, 1980, and 1985 numbers from the 1977 Census of Governments. This information is used in Tables 1 and 5.

4. Engstrom and McDonald's (1982) survey of 317 principal cities of U.S. SMSAs. We use this data, kindly made available to us by the authors, for the city data in Table 7. *The Municipal Yearbook 1982* (Washington, DC: International City Management Association, 1982) in its survey of cities (conducted by the International City Management Association) included a question pertaining to election type, and is a standard source. However, we have not used this source. Our attempts to check this data source suggest that the survey was not particularly well done. Moreover, its results are not adequately coded in the yearbook.

5. *The National Association of Counties Survey*. Included in the last annual survey (1986-87) were several questions concerning election type. The county percentages in Tables 4 and 7 were calculated from this source.

6. *The 1980 U.S. Census*. Census data were used for various tables.

## NOTES

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1. States were assigned to region according to the U.S. Census regional designation. The states in the South are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

2. The Southwest Voter Registration Institute has gathered minority representation data for most Texas cities and school boards (see Brischetto and Grofman 1987), and it is possible that similar data have been gathered for other states.

3. Similarly, the use of multimember districts for state legislatures has been considerably reduced. See, for example, Niemi, Hill, and Grofman 1985; Grofman, Migalski, and Novello 1986.

4. Percentages for cities are based on data collected prior to 1982, however, and it is unlikely that the number of at-large or multimember districting systems is currently as high (either in the South or outside the South). The county data is more recent (the survey from which this data was taken was conducted in 1986 and 1987). See Appendix for details.

5. In the South, however, for states in which blacks constituted more than 10% of the population, black representation in 1975 and 1980 was higher in counties than in cities. We suspect that the effect of single-member districting was particularly pronounced in increasing minority representation at the county level in the South at that time, but we do not have sufficiently reliable disaggregated data to be sure of this.

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