

Thesis Prospectus:

Black Faces in White Places:

Does Race Benefit Or Disadvantage Black Candidates Running In Majority-White Electoral Areas?

I: Introduction

This paper will explore the impact of race for black candidates running for political office in majority-white electoral areas. Through statistical analysis of exit polling from a wide variety of biracial elections I will hopefully be able to answer whether race benefits, disadvantages or has no effect on black candidates.

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 the number of black politicians serving in elected office at the federal, state, city and county levels across the United States grew dramatically. When the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies filed its first census in 1970 there were 1,469 black elected officials. In its most recent report from 2001 there were 9,101 black elected officials in the United States, a more than five-fold increase (Bositis 2001). While those numbers point to lessening electoral discrimination and a leveled playing field, the overwhelming proportion of politicians serving black-majority constituencies belies the fact that black candidates are dramatically underrepresented in white-majority areas.

Although African Americans account for 12.9% of the population of the United States as of 2006 (World Factbook), between 1966 and 1996 African Americans won only .52% of

elections for the House of Representatives in white-majority districts (Highton 2004). In American history only two black governors and three black senators have been popularly elected. This dearth of black politicians in highly visible positions of power brings into question both the representative nature of our political system and the prejudices of the white electorate. Putting the debate over the substantive and normative ends of black representation aside, the lack of black politicians in non-majority minority districts necessitates a dialogue about the effects of white prejudice at the ballot box.

As a result of Barack Obama's historic campaign for President the issue of race in politics catapulted into the national spotlight. Some political pundits and armchair political scientists argue that amongst the liberal electorate of the Democratic primary Obama's race was beneficial if not crucial. His race served as a galvanizing and uniting force, helping him build an unlikely coalition of black voters, intellectual elites and young people that provided the financial support and ground game to vault Obama, a Junior Senator without any significant legislative résumé, past the heavily favored and far more experienced Hillary Clinton. Yet others posture that in the general election his race is a hindrance, a stumbling block for many Americans who support his economic populism or plans for universal healthcare but hesitate about placing a black face in the White House. However, as Obama extends his lead in the election polling with voting day drawing near, yet others exclaim that the 'era of black politics is dead'. This highly visible contest highlights many of the complexities of race and politics that I hope to unravel in this paper.

This paper will explore the decision made by white voters in majority-white electoral areas when they step into the voting booth in biracial contests. Is the absence of black candidates serving as Senators, Governors or Representatives to the House a result of white prejudice or electoral discrimination, or is ballot-box racism not an issue? Do black candidates running for

these highly visible positions fare worse than an otherwise identical white candidate would? Are there circumstances or races where candidate race is electorally beneficial? The influence of race in politics is not uniform across elections nor is it always perfectly evident. I will explore the grey areas; discover where race helps and where it hurts, among which groups it matters the most or least and how electoral circumstances or policy discussions alter the landscape in biracial contests.

Part II: Theoretical Considerations and Previous Research

The conventional wisdom states that black candidates are discriminated against on account of race in white-majority electoral areas (Highton 2004). This belief drives the manner policymakers approach minority enfranchisement laws such as voting rights or redistricting. There are a variety of theoretical underpinnings for the ‘conventional wisdom’ of white prejudice against black candidates. The Social Dominance Theory posits that society is stratified into groups aligned along various demographic variables, often socio-biological in definition. These groups form a social hierarchy and white people, as the hegemonic group, are committed to placing in-group members in positions of political power to reinforce and guarantee the hierarchy. The black concentration hypothesis indicates that the white electorate in areas with large black electoral population’s will vote overwhelmingly for the white candidate because they are scared that black electoral dominance will threaten their substantive representation. While this theory is usually applied to white voters in majority-minority districts, it also can be applied to situations in which the black population forms a substantial but not-majority share of the electorate. For example, this theory could be applied to Harold Washington’s quest to become the first black mayor of Chicago in which he received only 12.3% of the white vote (Reeves 1997). Various other theories, such as racial resentment or old-fashioned racism, are also used to

explain the conventional wisdom that white voters discriminate against black candidates in biracial elections.

Despite the theoretical underpinnings of the conventional wisdom, political science researchers arrive at conflicting conclusions about the true effect of race in biracial campaigns. Researchers used content analysis, experiments and survey-based methodology to approach this question but there is no industry standard explanation or uniform conclusions. Many researchers utilize experiments as a means to prove causation. Interviewing white voters about their racial attitudes or electoral prejudices is difficult because of social desirability bias. Keith Reeves, in Voting Hopes and Fears: White Voters, Black Candidates and Racial Politics in America, used an experiment to measure the impact of race in elections where the political issues vary in their racial salience. Reeves' experiment found that in elections where policy issues with racial importance, such as affirmative action or anti-poverty programs, are prominent, white voters are likely to harbor less favorable opinions of black candidates and support them less than they do white candidates with identical viewpoints. However, he also found that in elections without issues of racial salience, white voters react identically to black candidates as similar white candidates (Reeves 1997). Additional research employing experimental methodology found that white voters often have less favorable opinions of black politicians and are inclined to support white candidates (Terkildsen 1993; Moskowitz and Stroh 1994). However, these results are not constant. Additional experiment-based research demonstrated that white voters often view minority candidates as more compassionate towards disadvantaged groups. This positive sentiment is likely offset by the prejudiced perception that black candidates are less fit to handle major policy issues. The researchers found that ultimately white voters are no more or less likely to vote for black candidates (Sigelman et al 1995). While experiment-based research may demonstrate causality more effectively, lab experiments are unable to fully replicate the

intricacies and complexities of a real-world election and hence survey-based research is needed to complement these findings.

The nonexperimental research is likewise inconclusive. The vast majority of survey-based research focuses on white support for black candidates in congressional elections. Two separate studies used aggregated precinct vote counts in races of black Democratic incumbent Representatives in Georgia to estimate white voter support. Using two methods of ecological inference, both studies found that the black candidates received nearly identical support as their white Democratic counterparts—candidate race was a negligible factor for white voters (Bullock, 200; Voss and Lublin, 2001). In an exhaustive study of the 1996 and 1998 congressional elections no apparent racial discrimination or prejudice by white voters was found (Highton 2004). The researcher analyzed exit poll data from 357 elections across 43 states. The author found that black candidates garnered nearly identical support as white candidates once variations in individual, electoral and district-level variables were accounted for—again, voter discrimination was not a factor.

In contrast to these findings, additional research quantitatively analyzing white voter response in biracial elections demonstrated that black candidates receive significantly less support than their white counterparts. Two separate pieces studying congressional races in the South throughout the 1990s concluded that once various demographic and electoral variables were accounted for, white support for black Democratic candidates was still on average 10% lower than for white Democratic candidates (Gay 1999; Bullock and Dunn 1999).

The existing research does not present a uniform answer to the original question posed. Not only is much of the research contradictory, but also the various survey-based research models don't approach the question with adequate breadth or depth. For example, none of the research surveyed include a discussion of black candidates running in senatorial or gubernatorial

racers. This is partly a time-sensitive issue as in the past decade there has been significant growth in the number of black candidates running on a statewide level that could serve as potential case studies. In order to more adequately understand the effect of race in biracial campaigns I will simultaneously broaden the sample of elections surveyed and include additional variables on the constituent, electoral and individual level. While the research of Gay, Bullock and Dunn was methodologically rigorous, it was focused solely on black incumbent Democratic candidates from the South running for the House of Representatives. Therefore the authors could not describe the varying effects of candidate race depending on geographic region, demographic differentiation or voter familiarity with the politician (because they were all incumbents). The 2004 Highton study entitled “Black Candidates for Congress in White Areas” most closely approaches my intended methodological approach. I will expand upon its findings by including additional variables in my model as well as expanding the elections studied to include statewide campaigns and a larger number of house elections.

III: Chapter Outline

Note: Unfortunately at this point in my research I have not definitively settled on a methodology so it is very difficult for me to theorize as to the outline and logical progression of the research. I have an ideal methodology completely set but am uncertain if I will be able to obtain all the necessary data to run that exact statistical analysis. I recognize that this is late in the process for me to still be struggling between methodologies but I have spent significant time refining my question and am now actively searching for data. I have outlined two potential methodologies and will settle on one depending on the survey-data I am able to collect (until today I was under the incorrect assumption that I would be able to aggregate survey data on basic questions from various sources into one dataset). I will outline both approaches here as well as a rough overview of a thesis outline if I follow-through on the given methodology.

Option # 1: Single survey source and statistical modeling (preferred)

I want to build a statistical model much like the one included in Highton’s 2004 study that includes data from every biracial senate, gubernatorial and house race (in majority-white

electoral areas) from the years 1996 to 2006. If the number of observations in this study is insufficient to consistently provide statistically significant results, I could potentially expand it to include every biracial mayoral race in majority-white cities with over 200,000 residents. I will include variables measured on three different levels in this model:

- 1) Electoral level variables: constituent-wide partisan and ideological identification*; demographic distribution along race*, age*, income* and education*; vote share of Republican candidate in most recent presidential election*; change in average per capita income in the past four years*; political salience of race in election*¹
- 2) Candidate level variables: race of candidate*; candidate partisan affiliation; incumbency*; quality of non-incumbent* (likely measured by whether they have held no electoral office, low-electoral office, or high-electoral office); campaign spending*
- 3) Individual level: race, gender, age, income, and education

All of the starred (*) variables are ones that I expect to add to the model post-survey collection through research on the United States Census and other similar sources. A model including all of these variables and data from elections in geographically and demographically diverse areas would allow me to make substantive conclusions about where, when, and to whom race helps or hurts black candidates.

The largest impediment to following through on this research design is collecting the data from a single survey source so that the responses would be comparable. The 2004 Highton study utilized exit poll data collected by the Voter News Service (and its predecessor, Voter Research Service), an association of major news organizations (Highton 2004). I will try to collect data

¹ I will likely only measure the explicit political salience of race in the election; i.e. are issues that are considered racially conscious, such as affirmative action or welfare, prominent in campaign dialogue? I will include discussion of *implicit* racial appeals, such as the famous 'Call Me' ad in the 2006 Harold Ford Senate race, as part of the post-hoc analysis. This separation will minimize, although not entirely delete, the amount of subjective influence on the model

from this source as soon as possible. Additionally I will pursue data from the National Election Study to see if this source has substantial data on these various elections.

Without the results of the data analysis it is nearly impossible to organize a logical thesis outline or a progression of ideas. My expectation is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction (12-15 pages): Importance of topic; literature review; place my thesis in existing literature and explain theoretical background as well as contribution to the field

Chapter 2: Methodology and explanation of dataset (5 pages)

Chapter 3: Overview of results of data analysis (10-12 pages)

Chapter 4: Discussion of the effect of [income and education] on white voter response to black candidates in biracial elections (8-10 pages). The results of the data analysis will dictate which variables are most interesting to analyze here (hence placing the above terms in brackets), but I expect that income and education (both on state and individual level) will be highly correlated with white support for black candidates in biracial elections.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the effect of [political salience of race-conscious issues] on white voter response to black candidates in biracial elections (15-20). I expect that political salience of race-conscious issues will additionally be a highly influential variable. If this is the case, I will also engage in a case study-esque discussion of implicit racial appeals using content analysis of political advertisements or prominent news stories and tie this to expected vote share vs. real vote share in those races (Harold Ford TN 2006 is an immediate one that comes to mind).

Chapter 6: Discussion of the effect of [incumbency] on white voter response to black candidates in biracial elections (8-10 pages).

Chapter 7: Conclusion (10-12 pages).

Option # 2: Aggregate data and follow-up with thorough case studies:

If I am unable to find the proper data for the first research method I will pursue a limited version of the same data analysis. I will subsequently complement this limited analysis with a heavier reliance on case studies to show the effects of region, incumbency and political salience of race-conscious issues. I will build a dataset that includes information on all of the various campaigns as well as all of the starred variables from the previous method. The dependent variable will hopefully be percentage of vote share of white voters garnered by the black candidate. If not all of the exit polls include questions on race of the survey participant the dependent variable will simply be vote share for the black candidate in the total electorate. I will run multivariate regressions to understand the relative influence of these variables in predicting the electoral support amongst white voters for black candidates in biracial elections. This analysis will comprise second chapter of my thesis (after the introductory chapter, which would be identical to the Introduction in the first option).

This option would rely more on case studies and quantitative analysis of specific races to isolate and understand the effects of region, income/education distribution, incumbency, or political salience of race-conscious issues on white voter response to black candidates. Chapters three and four (and five if necessary) would each likely include quantitative and qualitative analysis and then comparison of two elections that contrast across a key dimension. For example, in a chapter about the political salience of race-conscious issues and the impact of implicit racial appeals I could compare the Lynn Swann campaign for Governor of Pennsylvania, in which racial issues were not prominent, with Harold Ford's racially-tinged campaign for Senator of Tennessee. If I am unable to gather the adequate data to complete the first option I will spend significant time over the next week fleshing this option out.

Work Completed To Date

I have spent significant time narrowing and honing my question as I originally started the semester on an entirely different topic and have gone through two iterations on this one to arrive at the present form (which I am very pleased with). I have also spent a lot of time considering various methodological options and variables to include in any statistical models.

I have completed substantial research that will serve as the foundation for my literature review and introduction. I spent some time researching various data sources but unfortunately discovered today that I will be unable to merge various data sources that ask nearly the same questions (i.e. individual level variable questions and candidate support).

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