Partisan Influence and Race in Congressional Elections

Bernard L. Fraga
Ph.D. Candidate, Government and Social Policy
Harvard University
scholar.harvard.edu/bfraga

Motivation

- Theories of racial politics in congressional elections assert that the ethnic group comprising a majority of the electorate will almost always be able to elect a co-ethnic in the district, because ethnic groups vote as a bloc.
- This assumption of racial bloc voting underlies our understandings of the Voting Rights Act, enshrining the majority or near-majority threshold as necessary to achieve minority representation.

However, these theories do not incorporate two critical factors that we know to be highly relevant in U.S. elections: The single most important determinant of vote choice, partisanship, and the necessary precondition for election to Congress, nomination by a political party.

Project Strategy:
I use data on the ethnic background of all Democratic and Republican party nominees for 2006, 2008, and 2010, combined with party registration statistics broken down by ethnic group, to quantify the influence each ethnic group has within each party (partisan influence) for all available congressional districts. Then, I examine how changes in the influence an ethnic group holds determine rates of co-ethnic, co-partisan nomination.

Quantifying Partisan Influence

I calculate partisan influence with the following generalizable model:

\[ \gamma_{pj} = \frac{\mu_j \gamma_j N_j}{\sum \mu_j \gamma_j N_j} \]

Notation:
- \( \gamma \) = influence
- \( \alpha \) = partisanship
- \( \gamma \) = ethnic group
- \( r \) = population proportion
- \( p \) = party
- \( N \) = total population size

For each jurisdiction (states and congressional districts) I calculate a given group \( \gamma \)'s influence (\( \gamma_j \)) in each party \( p \). The result is a number from 0-1, that corresponds to the group's proportion of (in this analysis) all registered Democrats (Republicans) within a jurisdiction.

Based on past literature, I hypothesize that influence will have the following impacts on candidacy:

H1: As the influence an ethnic group has within a party increases, the likelihood of candidacy via said party by a group co-ethnic also increases.

H2: When the proportion of influence an ethnic group has within a party reaches 0.5, the probability of candidacy by said party will also be approximately 0.5.

I use a combination of two datasets in the analysis:

1. Comprehensive Voter Registration Database
   - Nationwide voter registration database acquired from Catalist, LLC, consisting of 185.5 million currently registered voters.
   - Race of registrants coded via name matching and contextual data.
   - Party affiliation of all individuals in the 30 states (265 districts) with party registration systems.
   - To quantify the partisan influence an ethnic group holds, I apply the formula above, using party registration data in my calculations as the measure of partisanship. In this way, partisanship is imputed directly from voluntary affiliation with a political party by citizens via party registration.

2. Congressional Candidate Demographics
   - Compilation of major party general election House and Senate nominees for 2006, 2008, and 2010, with about 1,600 total nominees in states with party registration.
   - Race of each candidate as either White, Black, Latino, or Asian, collected using statements made by candidates, membership in ethnic caucuses or organizations, ethnic advocacy foundations, news articles, and candidate websites.

From 2006 to 2010 there were a combined 1,100 unique candidates from either party, 47% of whom were Black, 41% Latino, and 24% Asian. There are sizable partisan differences in rates of minority nomination, despite the fact that parties nominate candidates to the same districts and have the same general election constituency. The figure below provides the geographic distribution of minority nominees to Congress.

States with Minority Candidates, 2006-2010

Results

The below figures represent the change in probability of co-ethnic candidate nomination while varying the level of partisan influence a group holds in a hypothetical district, holding other variables at their means.

We see a positive relationship between partisan influence and likelihood of getting a co-ethnic nominee from your party.

However, the thresholds necessary to achieve a 50% probability of co-ethnic candidate nomination vary across three groups, with Whites needing to comprise only 34% of Democrats and 37% of Republicans, Latinos 56% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans, and African-Americans at 58% of Democratic registrants in a jurisdiction.

Causes

- Strategic voting?
  - But we don’t get better predictions when using district CVAP
- Turnout differentials in primary elections?
  - Among registered partisans?