

***The Supply Side of Minority Representation:
When and Where do Minority Candidates Run?***

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Abstract

The on-going underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in most levels of public office continues to warrant our attention. We argue in this paper, however, that scholars have only focused on what factors contribute to the electoral success of minorities, without attention to the vital precursor – the supply of minority candidates. In this study we address this gap in the literature by examining all candidates for elected office in one state, Louisiana, for the period 1989-2011. Using the new Local Election in America Project (LEAP) data and information on candidate race/ethnicity provided by the Louisiana State Secretary of State, this study provides one of the first glimpses into the supply side of minority representation, detailing where and when blacks decide to run for municipal, county, state and federal office.

Over the past 40 years, the racial and ethnic complexion of elected officials in the U.S. has changed dramatically. Nowhere are these changes more apparent than at the local level. For example, although the first black elected to the mayor's office of a major city did not occur until 1967, today there are more than 500 black mayors and some 300 Latino mayors. That minority candidates are challenging and winning elections in virtually every region of the U.S. marks a remarkable change in the political landscape and one that has gone largely unnoticed. Yet even as scholars have turned to local politics and elections to understand the process of political incorporation, the lack of systematic or comprehensive data on local elections has severely limited both accurate empirical description and the development of more general theories.

Moreover, given the rapidly changing demographics of local jurisdictions, findings from earlier scholarship may no longer hold up. For example, non-Hispanic whites already comprise less than 50 percent of the populace in 62 of the 245 largest cities (U.S. Census Bureau 2000), and whereas the vast majority of U.S. cities, towns and school districts admittedly continue to be comprised of predominantly white residents, the past three decades have witnessed an overall increase in both the depth and breadth of not only predominantly black and Latino cities, but multi-racial cities as well. For example, the number of majority black and Latino cities in the U.S. increased nearly 50 percent between 1980 and 2000 (from 679 to 995 and from 302 to 439 respectively) and the number of multiracial cities increased more than 200 percent, 165 in 1980 to 508 in 2000. That approximately 80 percent of elected officials of color served on municipal councils or school boards in 2006 (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2007) is perhaps unsurprising given these demographic changes. The prevalence of racial/ethnic groups as voters, candidates and elected officials in cities means that municipal elections provide the best arena for testing theories central to minority representation and incorporation in American politics. Indeed, as the nation

moves towards a multi-racial and ethnic reality, the lessons learned from local politics and elections today will pave the road for a better understanding of future state and national elections.

This paper is part of the larger, NSF-funded study *Local Election in America Project*, or LEAP. The project is in the process of developing a software application to systematically collect, digitize and disseminate data on local elections for thousands of U.S. cities, counties, school and special districts. The LEAP database will provide unparalleled opportunities for learning about local elections and the political, racial and socio-demographic features of American cities and will enable social scientists to investigate research questions that have heretofore been little studied in the context of local politics. Our substantive research relies on the LEAP database to investigate two related sets of questions. The first focuses on process of candidate emergence and political ambition for African Americans and Latinos. To date, few studies have systematically examined the conditions under which minority candidates run for office and there is little in the way of theory to guide our understanding of the “supply side” of minority representation. For example, how often is the lack of minority representation due to the defeat of the minority candidate(s) or the absence of minority candidates? To date, systematic data with which to address this question remain available. The second substantive area, which is beyond the scope of the current paper, examines the racial/ethnic dynamics of local elections, particularly in multi-racial/ethnic contexts.

Since the LEAP software application is still under development, the present paper focuses on only one state, Louisiana, and is mostly descriptive in scope. We begin with a brief review of the literature examining the questions of why and how racial and ethnic minorities achieve electoral success. We find that most of this research fails to address the antecedent questions of when, where and why minority candidates seek elective office in

the first place. From here we provide a overview of our Louisiana candidate and elections database and describe some key features of government and elections in Louisiana. We then examine Louisiana's candidates and elections between 1990 and 2010, first examining the electoral landscape, and next examining where black are most likely to run as candidates, and found in greatest numbers on ballots. We conclude with a series of "next steps" that explain how we will proceed once additional data from the LEAP project is available.

Minority Candidate Emergence and the "Supply Side" of Minority Representation

Three broad arguments are commonly offered to explain why racial and ethnic minorities enjoy fewer successes in obtaining elected office. First, studies have concluded that minorities are rarely elected from districts that are not heavily minority in composition (Branton 2008; Krebs 1999). These studies suggest that the likelihood of minority representation is greatest in "majority-minority" places, and have been cited in arguments supporting the continued use of race in legislative redistricting plans to ensure descriptive representation (Canon 2008). Second, scholars have argued that low voter turnout levels among minorities preclude the election of minorities to office (Hill & Leighley 1999). Paradoxically, minority turnout is increased when minorities are in office (Rocha et al 2010; Hajnal & Trounstine 2005; Washington 2006). Third, studies find certain electoral structures, especially at-large or multi-member systems diminish minority voting strength and cause of minority underrepresentation in elected office (see Marschall et al. 2010 for a review).

Common among all three of these explanations is a focus on the minority *winners*. What has never been studied systematically however, is the antecedent question of whether, or the extent to which, the absence of minority elected officials stems from the absence of minority candidates in the first place. In other words, do we fail to observe

minority elected officials because they are not winning or because they are not running? To address this question, we need information on the race and ethnicity of all candidates for elected office, not simply those who are ultimately elected to office. As we noted above, we have assembled such data for one state and utilize these data to conduct preliminary analyses. Clearly, next steps here include expanding our database beyond Louisiana, a task that we are also working on.

Beyond data however, we also need to develop theories of candidate emergence and supply that account for both minority candidates and lower levels of office. Refocusing the discussion to when and where minority *candidates* run for office, we find very little research investigating what compels racial and ethnic minorities to run for elected office. Few studies have focused specifically on blacks' and Latinos' paths to office, and thus a theory of minority candidate emergence or the "supply side" of minority representation is far from complete. While we can rely on traditional theories of political ambition to provide a foundation for explaining the emergence or supply of minority candidates, these theories were developed in the context of racially and ethnically homogenous candidate pools. In addition, much of the research in this area has tended to focus on higher-level offices, in most cases state and federal legislative positions.

Some explanatory variables commonly used in extant research can be readily transferred to study minority candidate emergence and/or local or non-legislative offices. In particular, open seat contests or the presence of a weak or vulnerable incumbent can be rather universally applied to study candidate supply or emergence.¹ Similarly, the characteristics of the relevant electoral jurisdiction play an important role in structuring the opportunity structures and thus the size, quality and attributes of the candidate pool (Branton 2008). Indeed, we expect that at the local level, the racial/ethnic composition of

¹ Weak or vulnerable incumbents are typically measured by the incumbent's previous vote

the voting age population will have especially significant implications for the presence and number of minority candidates.

However, when it comes to institutional features, which represent an important set of explanatory factors traditionally used in models of candidate emergence, it is likely that the shift from state and federal to local-level offices and/or the inclusion of non-legislative elections may call for a different or expanded set of institutional factors. For example, whereas term limit requirements and levels of legislative professionalization are commonly employed to measure the opportunity structures in extant research (Schlesinger 1966; Stone & Maisel 2003; Goodliffe 2001; Moncrief et al. 2001), these institutional factors may be less relevant for county, municipal, or school board elections. Similarly, given the low incidence of partisan elections at both the municipal and school district level, informal processes like party grooming and mentoring (Kazee & Thornberry 1990; Herrnson 1986) may also be of less explanatory value when it comes to candidate emergence and supply in these electoral contests.

While there is scant research on minority candidate emergence in local elections, findings from the handful of studies that have been conducted have found that ward or district based electoral systems are the most salient institutional feature (Krebs (1999; Juenke 2006). In addition, studies find that black and Latino candidates feel less supported by political parties and a weaker relationship between party affiliation and minority candidate emergence compared to white candidates (Jones-Correa 1998; Frymer 2005; Wong 2006). Since existing studies are based on single city (Krebs 1999) and state (Juenke 2006) analyses, the extent of institutional variation has been somewhat limited. Thus, other features such as timing of elections, the size of legislative institutions, and office remuneration, have not yet been examined.

This project builds upon this prior research, but makes several important contributions to the nascent field of minority candidate studies. While the scope of our analysis is limited to a single state, we examine a number of different offices across a variety of electoral geographies, providing us an opportunity to see how electoral geography impacts minority supply. Second, we examine school districts, cities, counties and state legislative districts over time, which allows us to identify patterns across office and candidates that have emerged between 1990 and 2010. We focus our analytic efforts on three related questions that ascertain both the depth and breadth of the supply of black candidates in Louisiana. First, in which offices and levels of government are blacks most likely to run as candidates? Second, in which offices and levels of government are blacks found in greatest concentration on ballots? And last, how have these relationships fluctuated over time? As we detail below, the answers to these descriptive questions lead to a number of empirical questions that beg further scrutiny.

Data

To be sure, one reason research on candidate emergence continues to lag behind research on candidate success is lack of data. For one, a comprehensive collection of local elections at the candidate level does not yet exist, and creating such a database is a daunting task given the large number of local, county, and state elections occurring every year. Second, our substantive interest in race can be a challenge, since few states ask candidates to report their race/ethnicity, and fewer make this information publicly available. We are able to overcome these challenges with Louisiana's candidate database, housed at Louisiana Secretary of State, for all elections between January 21, 1989 and April 11, 2011. The database includes candidate race, ethnicity and gender, and thus provides a unique opportunity to examine the supply of minority candidates across a variety of offices and

over time. Although the racial makeup of Louisiana has changed somewhat since 2000, the majority of racial minorities in the state are African American. Moreover, as we discuss in more detail below, very few Latino, Asian or other racial minorities have run for office between 1989 and 2011. Thus, for this analysis we focus on black candidates for all levels and types of elected office.

We merged these candidate data with the appropriate interpolated Census-level data (school district, city, county or state legislative district) from 1990, 2000 and 2010 (only 2000 and 2010 are available for state legislative districts). Institutional variables – electoral structure, legislative size – were derived from the candidate database, or merged from data obtained from website searches.

Louisiana's Government and Elections

Before examining the data, here we provide a brief overview of Louisiana's electoral landscape. Louisiana currently has six Congressional districts and its state legislature includes 105 House of Representatives members and 39 Senators. State legislators are elected for four-year terms.² At the executive level, in addition to the Governor, six of the 20 state executive department heads are elected. These include the lieutenant governor, Secretary of State, Treasurer, attorney general, commissioner of agriculture and forestry, and commissioner of insurance.³ These officials do not run on a party ticket and may represent different parties. Elections for governor and other statewide elected officials are held in the year prior to the presidential election. Two state departments have supervisory or policy boards composed partly or entirely of members elected from districts. One of

² A 1995 constitutional amendment limits the number of consecutive terms so that anyone who has served more than two and one-half terms in three consecutive terms may not be elected to the succeeding term in the same house.

³ Unlike the governor, the six statewide elected officials are not limited to serving only two terms.

these is the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), which consists of eight elected members and three members-at-large appointed by the Governor. The other is the Public Service Commission (PSC), which includes five members elected from single-member districts.

When it comes to local government, Louisiana has 64 parishes (counties),⁴ 303 municipal governments, 69 school districts, and 95 special districts. Most parishes(41) are governed by a “police jury,” which functions essentially as a county commission. The other 23 have various other forms of government, including: president-council, council-manager, parish commission, and consolidated parish/city. Parish councils range from 3 to 15 members, with a mean of 9.5. Other commonly elected parish officials include sheriff and tax assessor.⁵ Each parish also elects a school board, which ranges in size from 6 to 15 and has a mean of 9.6 members. While school board members typically serve six-year terms, all other parish elected officials serve only four-year terms.⁶

Municipalities in Louisiana are classified by the state as villages, towns or cities based on population. Municipal officials include the mayor, chief of police and council or board of alderman. Though Louisiana granted municipalities much easier access to Home Rule in its 1974 Constitution,⁷ the vast majority continues to operate under charters created by the Lawrason Act (1898). Under this Act, the number of alderman (council members) is designated as three for villages, five for towns and between five and nine for cities. In 2011, the average council size is 4.5. The Lawrason Act also specifies how aldermen/council

⁴ Four of these are consolidated city-parish/county governments: East Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Orleans, and Terrebonne.

⁵ Many fewer parishes elect district attorneys (about 1 in 6) and only one parish elects a coroner.

⁶ In addition to the 60 parish boards, Louisiana also has 4 consolidated parish-city boards and 5 city school boards (Baker, Bogalusa, Central, Monroe, and Zachary).

⁷ Home Rule was first provided in Louisiana under the Constitution of 1921; however, that document contained an excessive amount of ‘detailization’, making it impractical (see Engstrom 1976 for more details).

member will be elected (i.e., by district or at-large).⁸ Both the mayor and chief of police are elected at-large, though in many municipalities with and without Home Rule, police chiefs are increasingly appointed rather than elected. In addition, all elected municipal officials serve four-year terms.⁹

When it comes to the timing of local elections in Louisiana, there is considerable variability. The Lawrason Act stipulates that elections be held every four years on “the date for municipal and ward elections,” so that those elected take office on the first day of July following the election. However, it also allows the governing authority, by ordinance, to adopt an irrevocable plan for holding elections at the congressional elections. In this case, elected officers take office on January first following their election. (Guillot 2004; R.S. 33:383(A)(2)). Finally, the Act also includes a provision allowing the governing authority of a municipality with a population of less than 1,000 persons, which holds municipal elections at the 2004 congressional election, to adopt by ordinance, a plan for holding municipal elections at the gubernatorial election.

⁸ If a city has eight or more aldermen, two must be elected from each district and the remainder elected at large. If a city has seven or fewer aldermen, an equal number of aldermen are elected from each district and the remainder elected at large. If a town is divided into districts, one alderman is elected from each district and one elected at large. Aldermen in villages are elected at large. (Guillot 2004; R.S. 33:382(B))

⁹ In addition, all judges in Louisiana are elected. Elections occur at times of a regular congressional election. The state is divided into seven Supreme Court districts, and at least one judge is elected from each. Supreme Court judges serve ten-year terms. Louisiana also has five circuit courts, with one court of appeal in each. Each court has panels of at least three judges and at least one judge is elected from each. Circuit court judges serve ten-year terms. For both the Supreme and Circuit courts, circuits and districts and the number of judges elected in each are subject to change by law enacted by two-thirds of each house of the legislature. There are also 40 District Courts in Louisiana, each of which includes at least one parish and is served by at least one district judge. Each district elects a chief judge. District court judges serve six-year terms. Other Judicial Branch organizations are: Mayors' Courts, Justice of the Peace Courts, Parish Courts, City Courts, Magistrate Courts. The term of a parish, or city court judge is six years.

Table 1 describes Louisiana’s racial profile between 1990 and 2010 across the state, state legislative districts, parishes and municipalities, and we find similar demographic trends across all of these electoral geographies. First, the proportion of the population identified as black has remained stable at approximately a third of the population for the last 20 years. At the same time, the white population has declined between three and five percent, whereas the Latino population has doubled (although Latinos still comprise a small overall proportion of the state population).

[Table 1 here]

Analysis

We begin with our first question of depth – what proportion of all candidates for public office in Louisiana are non-Hispanic white? Between February 3, 1990 and November 2, 2010, 115, 948 candidates registered with the Louisiana Secretary of State to run for office (see Table 2). The vast majority (70%) of candidates were white, followed by black (16%). Latinos, Asians, American Indians and other racial/ethnic minorities comprised less than one percent, suggesting that elected politics in Louisiana continues to be a black-white affair. Note that a non-trivial percentage (13.5) of candidates opted not to report their racial/ethnic background, making it difficult to accurately compare the how representative the candidate pool is to the general population in Louisiana.

[Table 2 here]

We further disaggregate these data by election year. Table 3 reports the total number of candidates registered by year and the percent black. We find a pattern of highs and lows, ranging from 10-32 percent of the candidate, with larger proportions in the years with fewer candidates overall (i.e. “off” years). This pattern raises two questions: First, are all black candidates concentrated in a few elections? In other words, what is the breadth of black candidate presence across Louisiana elections? And second, what is the relationship

between type of office and the presence of black candidates? Are black candidates more likely to run for municipal and county-level offices, which are often held in off years?

[Table 3 here]

To answer the first question, we collapsed the candidate-level data to the election level (measured by election date, jurisdiction, and type of office), which yields 20,386 elections held in Louisiana between 1990 and 2000. On average, across all of these elections, blacks were represented in 6,710, or 33 percent, suggesting their presence is dispersed across elections. In Figure 1 we examine the relationship between the percent of black candidates and the percent of elections with black candidates over time. We find a unique pattern of moving between greater proportions of black candidates in years with few elections, to smaller proportions of black candidates in years with more opportunities to run (i.e. more elections). Interestingly, dips in black candidate presence occur during presidential elections years (noted by the asterisk), suggesting perhaps variation across levels of government and the types of elected office.

[Figure 1 here]

We examine this possibility, asking at which offices and levels of government are blacks: a) most likely to run as candidates and b) found in greatest concentration on local ballots? As Table 4 illustrates, the majority of black candidates are found running for legislative offices. Indeed, blacks comprise greater than half (55%) of the all candidates for legislative office, and these account for almost three-quarters (73%) of all black candidates. Further, the vast majority of legislative offices that blacks run in are at the local level: Of the 13,721 black candidates for legislative office, 18% (2,441) ran for school board positions, 31% (4,229) ran for city or town councils, and 18% (2,498) ran for county commissions.

[Table 4 here]

We also look this relationship between level of office and black candidates at the election level (Table 5). In line with the previous findings, we see that elections with a black candidate are most likely for school board and municipal offices. These results lead to a number of additional questions. Do we find more blacks running for school board and municipal offices because these geographies have larger shares of African Americans—whether due to population characteristics or the electoral systems that determine whether and how minority voters will be concentrated? Is it because these elections take place off cycle and are of lower salience – reducing the number of voters needed to win, and reducing costs of campaigning? Or does it have to do with the competition? Are these less desirable offices that attract lower quality candidates, less serious candidates (e.g., people doing it one term out of sense of duty rather than in pursuit of a political career?)

[Table 5 here]

Unfortunately, these data cannot tease out all of these possibilities. But we can look at two explanatory variables – vote strength and electoral structure – that have been found to be particularly salient to minority success in winning office. Here, we focus on four particular offices: city council/mayor positions, parish school board positions, parish legislative positions (police juror or councilor), and state legislative positions (house or senate).

We begin with the relationship of minority voting strength to black candidacy, and ask: are black candidates more likely to run in places with larger black populations? In Figure 2 we plot the range, median and interquartile ranges of the percent black at different electoral geographies, for those elections with and without black candidates. For all four offices, we find that black candidates are more likely in places with larger black populations.

However, it is also apparent that minority voting strength itself does not guarantee black representation among the candidate pool – the range of black population overlaps for all four geographies. Other possibilities are legislative body size and electoral structure. The modal city council size is 5, and indeed, we find 66 percent of black candidates running for city council seats to do so in municipalities with five-person councils. Running for school board seats is likewise related to the modal categories – we see the most blacks running for 7 and 9 person school boards.

[Figure 2 here]

Given the history of the VRA and the conclusion from many studies that district or ward-based elections are most advantageous for assuring minority representation, we also examine how electoral arrangements impact the number of black candidates. Louisiana has instituted district elections for many of its governments, particularly at the school board and county levels. And these are the most common form of electoral structure for municipal elections – 62% of elections are ward-based, and 37% are at-large. The vast majority of blacks running for city council office do so in ward-based elections (63%) and 37% run in at-large elections.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Our review of black candidates across Louisiana’s elections between 1990 and 2010 reveals that blacks are more likely to run in local (municipal and school board) races for legislative positions. However, we also find that they run in not so insignificant numbers at all levels of government, and for executive and judicial positions as well. The questions that remain, therefore focus on the why? Are the institutional and structural characteristics of local elections a driving force behind black candidate presence? Our preliminary evaluation suggests that the concentration of voting strength and the larger number of seats (i.e.

opportunity) might be contributing factors, but we cannot yet tease out which of these matters more. Another variable is the relationship between past representation (either as a candidate or winner) and likelihood of running in subsequent elections. Do blacks run more often in places where black candidates have previously been on the ballot? Similarly, when and where do we find multiple black candidates running, and what factors determine who wins in these situations? And last, what is the relationship between running for office and winning at different levels of office?

Each of these substantive questions leads to important methodological questions about modeling these relationships. While Branton (2009) uses zero-inflated Poisson (Branton 2009) to capture the two stages of descriptive representation-- running and winning— selection models (Tobit, Heckman, hurdle, etc) are also possible and perhaps more appropriate to answer the questions of how characteristics of the electoral space impact both likelihood to run and likelihood to win. .

As the number of racial/ethnic winners of elections continues to increase across the country, a better understanding of the supply of minority candidates, and the relationship between candidates and winners becomes even more salient. In this paper, we have offered an initial report of black candidacy across a variety of electoral geographies and time that suggests where and when blacks enter the race is not random, but rather in part determined by the institutional and structural characteristics of the electoral landscape. These findings support further research and effort in teasing out the mechanics of these relationships, both in Louisiana and in other states.

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