One Run Leads to Another: Minority Incumbents and the Emergence of Lower Ticket Minority Candidates

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The primary determinant of minority office holding is the racial/ethnic composition of the legislative district. Using comprehensive data on the race/ethnicity of state legislative candidates in 2012 and 2014, we find that minority candidates still emerge at lower rates than whites after accounting for district composition. Leveraging information about the overlap between congressional and state legislative districts, we demonstrate that the victories of candidates of color for Congress reduce the coethnic/racial demographic thresholds associated with state legislative candidacy and that the same pattern holds for white incumbents and state legislative candidacies. Once accounting for both the race of congressional incumbents and the racial/ethnic composition of state legislative districts, white, Latino, African American, and Asian American state legislative candidates emerge at similar rates. These results suggest that perceptions of minority candidate viability play a key role in structuring contemporary disparities in who runs for office.

Political scientists and legal scholars have long examined the relationship between electoral district demographics and the race/ethnicity of officeholders in seeking to understand racial/ethnic minority underrepresentation. Modeling the relationship between these factors as a representation "threshold," or the percentage that a racial/ethnic group must comprise to achieve at least a 50% chance of having a coethnic representative, researchers have focused on places with equal opportunity for minority voters. The general consensus is that districts with a majority or near-majority minority population are necessary to ensure substantial nonwhite representation (Grofman, Handley, and Lublin 2001; Lublin et al. 2009).

As most legislative districts nationwide do not have large minority populations, the paucity of minority representatives continues to be attributed to racial/ethnic voter compositions and white voter bias against minority candidates (Lublin et al. 2009). This "voter demand" model suggests that without a substantial minority population to counter white opposition, minority candidates could not be elected. However, scholars have also identified instances where minority representation occurs outside of majority-minority districts, challenging the notion that white voter bias is sufficient to explain underrepresentation (Highton 2004; Juenke and Shah 2016). More recent work focuses on the supply of minority candidates, suggesting a better explanation for minority underrepresentation is the fact that minority candidates rarely emerge in white districts, but when they do, they win at similar rates to white copartisans (Juenke 2014; Juenke and Shah 2016).

771

The shift in focus to racial/ethnic minority candidate emergence and supply produces new opportunities for research addressing minority representation. Chief among these is the possibility that minority candidates may be discouraged from seeking office because of perceived inability to win, an insight drawn from the literature on gender and politics. Parties exert substantial control over who seeks office in legislative elections, and scholars have determined that gender underrepresentation may be a function of partisan recruitment and gatekeeping (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Lawless 2011). Party elites may discourage women from running because of a perception that they are less likely to win and less qualified as candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2006), a perception that may change with the success of women candidates (Broockman 2014; MacManus 1981). With the understanding that minority candidates are less likely to win in heavily white districts, minority candidates may be discouraged. Could perceptions shift if there is evidence that minorities can win?

We build on the emergence-focused literature on racial/ethnic minority representation and add an important contextual factor not included in previous work—the presence of coracial or coethnic higher-office incumbents. We hypothesize that the presence of minority higher-level officeholders influences the perceived chance of minority down-ballot success. Leveraging detailed information about the overlap between congressional and state legislative districts, we demonstrate that the victories of candidates of color for Congress reduce the coethnic/racial demographic thresholds for state legislative candidacy and that the same pattern holds for white incumbents and state legislative candidacies. Indeed, once accounting for both the race of congressional incumbents and the racial/ethnic composition of state legislative districts, nonparametric modeling indicates that white, Latino, black, and Asian American state legislative candidates emerge at similar rates. These results narrow the mechanisms that contribute to the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minority groups, suggesting that perceptions of minority candidate viability are key in structuring disparities in who seeks office.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The data used in this project combine information about the race of politicians, district demographics, and geographic overlap between electoral jurisdictions. We began with a listing of 2012 and 2014 state legislative general election candidates drawn from the State Legislative Elections Returns database (Klarner 2018).[1] The race/ethnicity of state legislative candidates was generated through a combination of voter-file-based modeling conducted by the Women Donors Network's Reflective Democracy Campaign and expert coding conducted by the authors.[2] Then, the candidate-level data were merged with block-level voting age population (VAP) data from the 2010 US Census, reconstructing from the block level each 2012 and 2014 state legislative district's racial/ethnic composition and making sure to account for 2012 redistricting as appropriate.

Using the same block correspondence tables used to reconstruct the demographics of state legislative districts, we determined the proportion of overlap between state legislative districts and each congressional district within a state. To operationalize the presence of an incumbent US House member of a given race for each state legislative district, we computed what proportion of the population had a member of Congress of said racial/ethnic group. The primary unit of analysis is the state legislative district, with separate observations for 2012 and 2014 if the district held an election in each year. In total, we have data on 11,866 unique state legislative candidates contesting 9,716 general elections in 2012 and 2014; 11,344 of these candidates were identified as (non-Hispanic) white, African American, Latino, or Asian American using the aforementioned sources.

If, as we hypothesize, factors separate from the demographic composition of districts are also predictive of candidate emergence, we should observe variation in the ethnoracial composition of the districts candidates emerge from. In other words, we should observe minority candidates running for office in areas where their ethnic group does not make up a majority of the population (Fraga 2016). As expected, a substantial number of black, Latino, and Asian American candidates emerge from majority-minority districts. However, we also observe hundreds of minority candidates seeking office in places where their ethnic group comprises a far smaller share of the electorate. In fact, a majority of Latino candidates sought office in districts where the Latino VAP was less than 50% of the district, and nearly all Asian American candidates seek office where the Asian population is less than 20%.

RESULTS

The analysis we pursue provides separate results for whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Using the state legislative candidate data, we determined whether each district had a general election candidate from the racial/ethnic group in question and had substantial overlap with congressional districts having an incumbent from the same group, as well as

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1. Data for 41 out of 46 states holding elections in 2012 or 2014 are included in our analysis. See app. sec. A1 for details regarding our candidate data.

2. See app. sec. A1 for full race/ethnicity coding details.

the likelihood of seeing a minority candidate on the ballot given different representational contexts.

Previous research has found a robust relationship between the demographic composition of an electoral jurisdiction and the candidates who seek office in said jurisdiction (Canon, Schousen, and Sellers 1996; Fraga 2016; Juenke 2014). However, no concurrent analysis of black, Latino, and Asian state legislative candidate emergence has been conducted. Following this previous research and ignoring the presence of a coracial or coethnic congressional incumbent, we find that all groups have at least a 0.5 probability of having a candidate when their group comprises a majority of the district, but whites require a far lower proportion of a district to achieve 0.5 probability of having a coracial candidate.[3] On average, most state legislative districts are more than 80% white, as are most congressional districts. Thus, in practice, "ignoring" higher-level representational context is the same as assuming the member of Congress is white.

If we vary the higher-level representational context, does this change the minority percentage necessary to get a minority state legislative candidate? Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the racial/ethnic composition in a state legislative district and the probability that a general election candidate from that group seeks office. This relationship shifts under two conditions: substantial overlap with a congressional district having a coracial/ethnic incumbent currently in office or no substantial overlap with such a district.[4] Our analysis separates the relationship between incumbency context and candidate emergence by group, composing each of the four panels of figure 1.[5]

Figure 1A indicates the probability of a white general election state legislative candidate emerging, depending on the percentage white in the district. The dashed line indicates the probability of a white candidate in districts that overlap with congressional districts that have a white incumbent; as most members of Congress are white, this constitutes most of the state legislative districts in our data set. The solid line shows the relationship between the demographic composition of state legislative districts and white candidate emergence in districts that are not overlapped by areas with white members of Congress. Comparing the lines to each other, we see that in the (rare) circumstance that there is no white member of the House of Representatives in the area covered by the state legislative district, the threshold at which the likelihood of a white candidate running is reached only at 43% white VAP and drops to 30% white VAP for state legislative districts with white higher-level representatives.

Similar changes in the district composition to black candidacy relationship manifest when the congressional representational context is modified (fig. 1B). Again, the solid line corresponds to the probability of seeing a black state legislative candidate in the subset of districts that do not overlap with African Americans, which, unlike for white candidates, is relatively common. In this scenario, equal likelihood is reached at virtually the same point as for whites (45%).[6] The dashed line, corresponding to the estimated probability of emergence in state legislative districts subsumed by districts with black congressional incumbents, denotes 50:50 odds of having a black candidate when the state legislative district is only 36% black. Note that the deviation from contexts without black incumbents is largest in the middle range of black district percentage, suggesting that having a higher-level coracial may signal to latent candidates the potential to win office. It is in these "influence" districts where such signals should have the greatest effect.

Figure 1C plots the relationship between Latino candidate emergence and percentage Latino VAP in state legislative districts.[7] As with African Americans, the probability of having a Latino candidate emerge reaches 0.5 at a lower percentage Latino (42%) when the state legislative district is subsumed by a congressional district with a Latino incumbent. In the more usual circumstance of not having a Latino congressional incumbent, the percentage Latino required is 52%. This again points to mechanisms concordant with perceived viability as key in shaping underrepresentation; when whites have the most common higher-level context found by potential minority candidates (no coethnic congressional incumbent), rates of emergence are similar.

Finally, figure 1D examines Asian American candidate emergence. While there is too much uncertainty in the results for Asian Americans to allow us to make strong claims about the effect of higher-level coethnic incumbents on candidate

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3. See app. sec. A2 for this analysis.

4. Upper and lower House contests are combined in this analysis. Here "substantial overlap" is 25% or more of the district's population. The results are robust to varying this threshold, as described in app. sec. A2.3.

5. We model this relationship using a nonparametric local linear regression, or loess (Fox 2000). As we discuss in the appendix, our analysis seeks to understand the conditional bivariate relationship between district composition and candidate emergence, not to account for the entire host of factors driving minority candidacy and success. For more details, see app. sec. A2. Table A3 (tables A1–A5 are available online) also provides raw estimates of the point of equality and measures of uncertainty.

6. Table A3 indicates that the 95% confidence interval for the point of equal likelihood for African Americans overlaps the 95% confidence interval for the equal likelihood estimate for whites, when both groups do not have a congressional incumbent.

7. Citizenship data are not available for Census blocks. If citizen voting-age population (CVAP) was used instead of VAP, the percentage Latino required would likely be similar to African Americans.
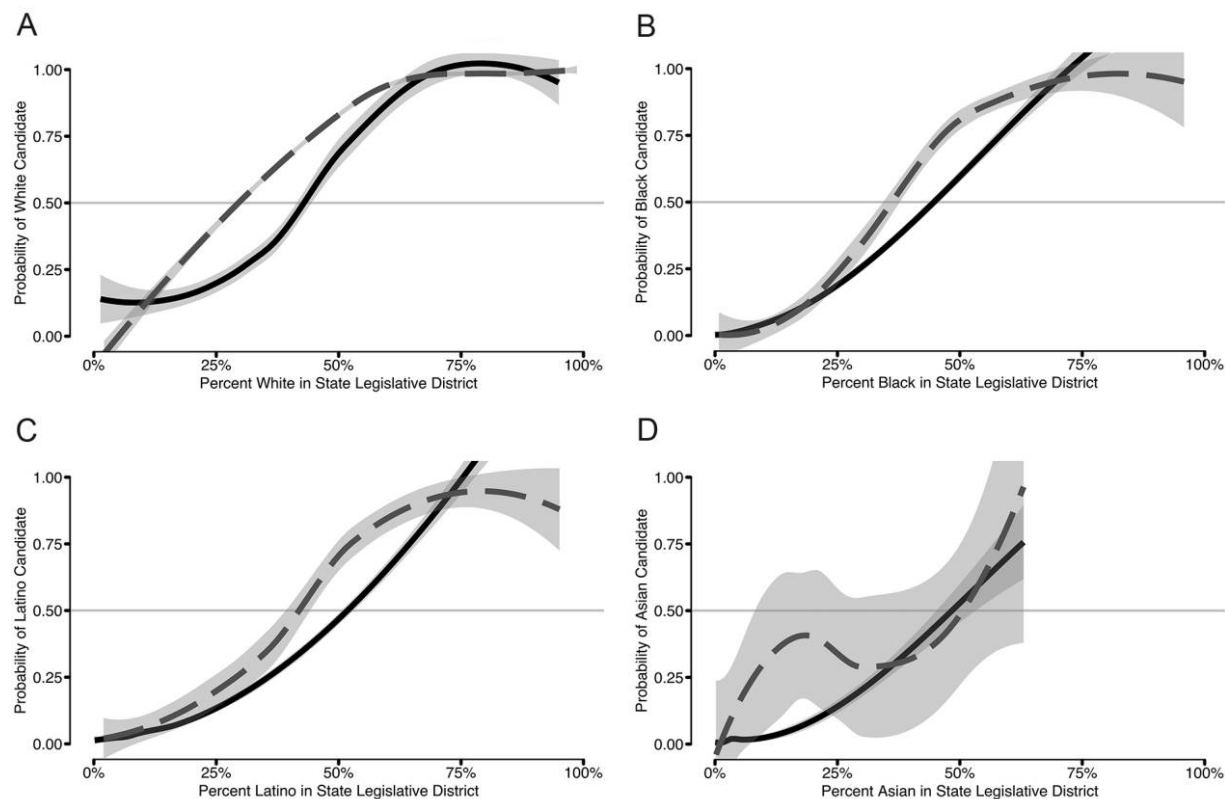
Figure 1. Candidate emergence by district composition and congressional incumbent race. Each panel displays the probability of at least one candidate from the indicated racial/ethnic group contesting the general election, given the specified state legislative district demographic composition. Solid line is fit to state legislative districts where coethnic US House incumbents represented less than 25% of the state legislative district. Dashed line is fit to elections with a coethnic representing more than 25% of the state legislative district. Lines depict a tricubic weighted local linear regression fit to the binary outcome data, with a 95% confidence interval depicted in gray shading.

emergence, we see two patterns worth exploring in future work. First, the percentage Asian needed to reach 0.5 probability of having an Asian American candidate in the incumbent and no incumbent conditions is approximately equal and similar to other groups. Second, there is a distinct "boost" provided by having a higher-level Asian incumbent at approximately 20% Asian VAP, which is notable as there are few Asian-majority state legislative districts in the country. Together, these findings suggest that non–Asian American voters may be more likely to elect Asian American representatives when they have already experienced Asian American representation at the congressional level.

DISCUSSION

We offer a novel analysis of racial/ethnic minority candidacy. Examining the effects of higher-office incumbents on down-ballot candidate emergence, we show that victorious minority candidates in higher-level offices may encourage minority candidate emergence down the ballot, particularly in more heavily white districts where the conventional wisdom is that minority candidates are not viable. In analyzing white candidate emergence as well, our findings suggest that overrepresen-

tation of whites in political office may, in part, be due to the fact that the vast majority of higher-level jurisdictions (in this case, congressional districts) have non-Hispanic white incumbents. These findings also complicate the consensus understanding of minority-opportunity demographic "thresholds," majority-minority districting, and court-ordered solutions to the lack of choices offered to minority voters across the country. In fact, higher-level incumbent effects appear strongest in exactly the types of districts where we would expect the largest substantive effect: minority "influence" districts that are the focus of ongoing litigation regarding strategies of increasing minority representation.

Future work should examine the specific mechanisms producing this effect. If upper-office incumbents influence candidate emergence, representation scholars should develop a more robust theoretical and empirical strategy examining the role of elites in creating a more diverse candidate pipeline. It is also possible that state legislators form the pool of congressional aspirants (Moncrief 1999), such that individuals who aspire to congressional office instead seek state legislative office when a coethnic holds the congressional seat. Alternatively, higher-office incumbents may inspire more minority

candidates to run for office, a process that has some support from research on women (Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018; but see Broockman 2014), or they may help recruit and professionalize latent minority candidates (Grose, Mangum, and Martin 2007). Researchers should also examine how the presence of large populations of multiple minority groups may foster coalition building and make minority candidate emergence more likely.[8] Finally, the results could be due to a change in how party elites and latent candidates perceive voter demand for minority candidates in overlapping districts (Canon et al. 1996; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019).[9] In short, our findings suggest that research on what produces underrepresentation must account for both the pipeline of candidates and the presence or absence of minority incumbents higher up the political ladder. The benefits of descriptive representation may pay dividends across the political landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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8. Appendix sec. A2 indicates that the demographics of a group are the main driver of candidate emergence for that group.

9. Appendix sec. A3 examines differential impacts by candidate and congressional incumbent party, where we find a consistent pattern of higher-level incumbents expanding the range of possible districts where coethnics are likely to emerge.