Politics, Groups, and Identities

Stepping up: black political ambition and success

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Stepping up: black political ambition and success

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What compels African-Americans to enter the electoral arena? And what influences their political ambitions for higher office? Few studies have focused on blacks' paths to office and ambition, and thus an empirically tested theoretical framework of minority candidate emergence and political ambition is far from complete. In this paper, I seek to answer a number of fundamental questions: How often do black candidates attempt to seek higher office, and how often are they successful? Does this pattern differ significantly from that visible for white candidates? Using two decades (1990–2010) of data on Louisiana from the *Local Elections in America Project* that allows me to track candidates' paths to office, I develop a theory of black political ambition that hypothesizes that race will play a direct and interactive role in when and where black candidates run for and win office. The results suggest, first, no statistically significant differences between black and white candidates' expressions of static political ambition, and African-Americans expressing desire for higher office (progressive ambition) more often. In other words, race does not seem to play a negative factor in determining political ambition. However, running for office and winning office are not the same, and black candidates are significantly less likely to win these offices. The gap, then, in racially diverse representation is not because African-American candidates are not interested or expressing political ambition, but rather because they are seeking office and losing. I conclude with implications of these findings for issues of representational parity of minorities more generally, and the electoral pipeline of black candidates in particular.

Keywords: elections; black politics; representation; urban politics

Introduction

Although much of the rhetoric of the 2010 Census and recent elections has focused on the expansion of racial and ethnic minorities as voters, their dramatic demographic growth also created remarkable new opportunities for them as *candidates* and *winners* of elected office. Yet, in most places in the USA, racial and ethnic minorities continue to be underrepresented, particularly as we move up the political ladder. A review of currently elected racial/ethnic minority officials illustrates that the majority of black and Latino elected officials serve at the local level, with drastically fewer securing state and federal seats. Yet when asked about their political ambitions, African-American and Latino candidates are often *more* interested in pursuing higher office than white candidates. The current paper is motivated by this puzzle: What explains this contrast in what minority candidates self-report, which suggests more political ambition than their white

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counterparts, and the electoral outcomes that suggest minority candidates have less political ambition?

The lion's share of scholarship assessing this puzzle has focused on the demand side: Why are voters not choosing candidates of color? The majority of research addressing this question has examined white voters' assessment of black candidates, including their perceptions of candidates' demographic characteristics and voter stereotypes (Citrin, Sears, and Green 1990; McDermott 1997; Kam 2007). Thus, the corollary question, given the need to build coalitions with white and "out-group" voters, is how do candidates of color attract cross-over voters? Again, this question has led to a rich research agenda that focuses on racial coalitions among voters (Telles, Sawyer, and Riveria 2011). Following this line of thought, the whittling of minority elected officials as we move up the political ladder can most likely be attributed to the size of the electorate: candidates for mayor and city council may have a large co-ethnic localized voter base to call upon, but candidates seeking state- or federal-level offices must contend with larger white and out-group voters, who most often do not vote for them.

While the demand-side story is indeed an important one, an often-overlooked additional factor that completes the picture is the supply-side narrative: Are racial and ethnic minorities running for office in the first place? Moreover, how often are these candidates seeking higher office? Thus, rather than examine solely the preferences of voters, these questions refocus the inquiry on an understanding of candidate emergence and political ambition among racial/ethnic minorities.

Recent scholarship by Juenke (2014) and Shah (2014) offers a nascent understanding of minority candidate emergence. For example, Juenke (2014) argues that candidate strategy plays an important role in determining when and where minority candidates run for office, constraining the choices given to voters at the ballot box. His assessment of Latino representation among state legislators concludes that if this prior strategy is taken into account, and we assess the likelihood of a Latino legislator *given a Latino ran for office*, Latinos are very often the winner, regardless of the Latino population within the district. Shah (2014) examines black representation in Louisiana's counties, cities, and school districts between 2000 and 2010, arriving at very similar results: the likelihood of a black candidate winning, if one is on the ballot, is greater than 60%. Moreover, she finds that voter strength adds the most value at the first stage of representation – the supply of black candidates – and that once a black candidate has decided to run for office, other electoral and demographic factors are influential.

This paper seeks to build upon this new supply-side theory of descriptive representation by asking the important follow-up question about political ambition among candidates of color. When and where do we see minority politicians expressing political ambition once they have secured elected office? How often do they try to retain their current office (*static ambition*)? How often do they seek higher office (*progressive ambition*)? And when they seek re-election, are they successful?

Using a unique dataset from the *Local Elections in America Project* (Marschall and Shah 2013) of Louisiana elections[1] from 1990 to 2010 across all levels of office that includes race of the candidate,[2] I begin by reviewing the literature on political ambition, focusing on the structural explanations developed by Schlesinger (1966) and Black (1972), and the extant research of political ambition among racial minorities. An interesting puzzle emerges: empirical evidence of black officeholders finds less political ambition than their white colleagues, but survey data of black elected officials find that African-Americans are more ambitious than white elected officials. To unravel this puzzle, I develop a theory of black political ambition that posits two possible ways by which race may influence political ambition – directly or via an interactive effect (Fulton et al. 2006). I then test this theory along three paths to office – winning an initial election, seeking re-election for the same office versus pursuing higher office, and the results from that second attempt – for African-American and white candidates in Louisiana. The results suggest both

strands of previous research are correct: black candidates are at least as ambitious as their white counterparts (Jensen and Martinek 2009; Lawless 2012), and but are less successful than whites in retaining their current office and in attaining higher office. In other words, black candidates are ambitious, but often do not get what they want. The paper concludes with implications of this finding for minority representation in the USA and the electoral pipeline for black candidates.

The intersection of political ambition and race: previous research

Schlesinger's (1966) seminal book, *Political Ambition*, put forth a compelling argument for understanding when and why candidates seek office. He hypothesized that political careers are dependent on the structural conditions of the political system and political opportunity. Black (1972) reframed this theory within the rational choice paradigm and argued more explicitly that candidates evaluate and calculate their decision to run for office by weighing the benefit of attaining that office, conditional on the probability of attaining that office, and the costs required to run a campaign. Thus, politicians are expected to behave in ways that maximize their likelihood of attaining higher office or maintaining their current seat, and to strategically assess how the electoral conditions, demographics of the voters, and electoral competition will impact the likelihood of success. Since Schlesinger and Black's pivotal works, a number of scholars have examined the role of incumbency, open seats, term limits, prestige of the office sought, composition of the constituency and party congruence with constituents as key explanations of when candidates seek elected office or decide to run for higher office (see, e.g., Goodliffe 2001; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Maestas et al. 2006).

The majority of these previous political ambition studies has not examined race in particular, however, and thus implicitly assume that expected calculations of political opportunity structures do not vary by individual characteristics like race. In other words, race is seen as exogenous to the calculus of running for higher office. Recent research has called this assumption into question, but the results are inconclusive.

For example, Johnson, Oppenheimer, and Selin's (2012) study asks why so few African-American House members run for Senate seats? Their analysis of African-American House members between 1992 and 2008 suggests that both the structural conditions and political opportunities of minority candidates do, in fact, differ in ways that impact political ambition. First, even when the chances of winning office seem as great as those of their white competitors, black candidates pursue higher office less often if they believe being black will reduce their chances of winning white voters (see also Highton 2004; Washington 2006). Second, they find that Member of Congress (MC) race is linked to contextual variables that also influence likelihood of winning Senate seats: state populations, ability to raise campaign funds, and more liberal voting patterns harm black House member's structural opportunities for advancement. Thus, the African-American House members rarely become US Senators because their race influence their strategic assessments of voter turnout, as well as important contextual conditions that are difficult to change.

On the other hand, researches based on surveys of minority preferences toward political ambition suggest high levels of ambition. The first is Stone's (1980) analysis of a 1974 random survey of 199 blacks holding elective office in Michigan. Looking across levels and sectors of government, Stone concludes that a majority aspires for either the same office (35%) or higher office (39%). In addition, a "significant minority (26%) is uninterested in reelection," a statistic Stone interprets as an indication that black officeholders are slightly more unambitious than their white counterparts. To be sure, without comparable statistics from other racial or ethnic

groups, these results must be assessed with caution. And in addition, many black elected officials gained office in the late 1970s and 1980s, limiting the generalizability of Stone's work further.

In her analysis of potential candidates, Lawless (2012) finds black respondents to be statistically more politically active than their white/Latino counterparts (61). Her examination of potential candidates reveals that black respondents are 25% more likely than white respondents and 50% more likely than Latino respondents to report having seriously considered running for office (66). Empirical analysis of the relationship between race and nascent political ambition, however, find no statistical relationship.

Jensen and Martinek's (2009) recent study of state trial court judges in New York corroborates this finding that racial minorities are more ambitious than their white counterparts. More specifically, they find that justices of color (and women) are statistically more progressively ambitious than white, male justices. The authors conclude that these findings correspond to Schlesinger's opportunity structure argument: they move up when their chances of winning are maximized, which they define as "a political process that values diversity on the bench" (388).

Toward a theory of black political ambition

Together, then, the previous research leads to a number of conclusions. First, there is reason to believe that the models proposed by Schlesinger (1966) and Black (1972) are not true solely for white men, but that race of the candidate is influential in determining the outcome of these strategic decisions. Second, when surveyed about their desires for higher office, currently elected black justices (Jensen and Martinek 2009) and potential black candidates (Lawless 2012) report significant levels of political ambition, but we have no studies linking this desire to move up the political ladder with election outcomes. And last, when we examine actual pathways to office, we find few African-American candidates running for higher office, and even fewer winning.

These conclusions lead me to develop a theory of black political ambition that explores two possible pathways for the influence of race on political ambition – direct and interactive. As I detail more explicitly in the following, I hypothesize that these effects differ along the pathway to office: winning the initial election, seeking the same office (static ambition), and seeking higher office (progressive ambition).

The direct effect of race

Blacks and whites may hold different preferences for officeholding and moving up the political ladder. In other words, race may have a direct effect on political ambition. Indeed, the recent survey-based research suggests this is the case, with at best, African-Americans having greater political ambitions than their white counterparts, and at worst, not differing significantly from others in their desire for higher office. Given the previous research on voter bias against black candidates and the descriptive reality of black underrepresentation (Highton 2004; Shah 2014), *ceteris paribus* I expect black candidates to be less likely to win their initial election. Additionally, the direct effect of race may mean the decision calculus of black and white candidates are different. Both may see the benefits of attaining higher office, but black candidates may view their probability of winning as lower. Given running for office is tied to winning office, I therefore expect black candidates to be less likely than white candidates to running for the same or higher office.

Interactive effects of race

If candidate race alters the impact of other salient variables that influence political ambition, this would constitute an interactive effect. Building upon previous political ambition research, in the

following I examine how candidate race may condition the demographic context (gender, partisanship, and co-racial voting strength) and political opportunity structure (influence of open seats and challengers) in which blacks run for office.

A long line of literature has explored the political ambition of women, examining in particular the gender gap in political office (see, e.g., Palmer and Simon 2003; Fulton et al. 2006; Lawless and Fox 2010). These studies argue that the gender gap in political ambition is due to a number of factors, including more negative perceptions among candidates about likelihood of winning and qualifications for running for office. Black female candidate may be "doubly bound" then, facing racial and sexual discrimination, making it more difficult for them to be elected than black men or white women (Philpot and Walton 2007; Anzia and Berry 2011). On the other hand, a number of scholars have noted that women of color are more successful than white women in acquiring office (Bejarano 2013), despite the significant barriers posed by race and gender. Given these divergent findings, a priori I have no expectations as to how race and gender will influence the initial success in securing office, or likelihoods of winning successive office.

The second variable of interest is partisanship or ideology. The phenomenon of red state and blue city (Kron 2012) has focused specifically on the stark divide among urban and rural voters in a state, but this divide often reaches to the party identification of elected officials and candidates as well. More specifically, in many states, the party identification of subnational elected officials is different than those who seek higher office. I find this pattern in Louisiana, where Democrats hold many of the local and county offices, and many of the state and federal offices are held by Republicans. Given that black candidates are overwhelmingly Democrat, then, black Democratic candidates may be significantly more hampered in their quest and success in attaining higher office.

The role of racial context is perhaps less straightforward. Recent scholarship finds co-racial population size to be tied to candidate emergence (Shah 2014), and thus it is not surprising that black candidates often run in jurisdictions that have larger black populations than white candidates. However, these same racial dynamics may be less advantageous for black candidates seeking re-election or higher office. For one, some research suggests that black empowerment (Bobo and Gilliam 1990) wanes over time, leading to demobilized black voters with little incentive to continue to participate (Spence and McKlerking 2010). These effects may be particularly deleterious for black incumbents seeking to retain their office. Second, relying solely on a co-racial voting block is often not a possibility as black candidates seek higher office. As the size of the jurisdiction increases from school district to the whole state, the size of the black population decreases. That is, there are majority black school districts, cities, and counties, but no majority black state legislative districts or states (yet). Thus, black candidates must court and win over more "cross-over voters," which continues to be challenging, particularly in the South (Keele, Shah, and White 2014). Together, then, this research suggests that racial context may negatively influence black progressive political ambition.

Turning to the political opportunity structure for black candidates, I start with what is perhaps one of the least contested findings from accumulated research on elections and ambition: incumbents are very likely to win re-election at all levels of government (Trounstine 2011). Much like the paucity of research on black political ambition, however, studies of black incumbents are few and far between. Watson (1984) studied black mayors seeking their second term in a few cities and found that in general, the total number of challengers was reduced the second time around, and voter turnout (black and white) declined. Others have argued that over time, blacks are elected with more white support (Hajnal 2001).

Looking toward the research on women incumbents for guidance, coupled with the scholarship on racial stereotypes, leads me to posit that black candidates will gain less than their white candidates from the "incumbency advantage." To begin, incumbency has long been recognized as one of the primary barriers limiting female representation (see, e.g., Burrell 1988; Darcy, Welch,

and Clark 1994) because of the chicken and egg problem: women are less likely to be elected, and therefore less likely to be incumbents. This same dynamic may hamper the incumbency advantage for African-American candidates. As Fox and Lawless conclude: "without role models and a track record, other black potential candidates might not feel like the political system is open to them" (17). In other words, belonging to a group that is typically excluded from successful candidacy may decrease the likelihood of seeking to retain a seat (static ambition), or seek higher office (progressive ambition).

Another crucial component of the political opportunity structure is competition. Studies of female candidates find women are seen as more vulnerable and "easier" to beat, both in primaries and general elections (Palmer and Simon 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Lawless and Pearson 2008). Again, I expect a similar dynamic to apply to the intersection of race and ambition. A large body of research finds that many whites continue to hold negative stereotypes of blacks, including lazy, ignorant, and irresponsible (Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997; Schneider and Bos 2011). These stereotypes have been found to influence how voters evaluate black candidates as well. For example, Sigelman et al. (1995) find that white adults are skeptical of minority candidate's competence in office. Similarly, Williams (1990) finds that a white politician is perceived as more experienced and knowledgeable about a greater number of policy issues, while black politicians are relegated to helping the poor and needy. Perhaps more importantly, Williams (1990) finds that black voters hold many of the same stereotypes of black candidates. Together, these stereotypes may lead potential challengers to view African-American candidates as vulnerable, and thus stimulate competition against both incumbents and black candidates seeking higher office.

Present study

Although Jensen and Martinek (2009) and Lawless (2012) make important contributions to our understanding of political ambition among racial minorities, their samples along with their survey methodology limits their ability to examine fully when and where minority candidates run for and win higher office. That is, while we have important information about preferences and attitudes regarding political ambition, we cannot use these survey data to fully ascertain when and where minority candidates run, and the important subsequent question of their likelihood of victory. Did the candidates who expressed a desire for higher office run? And if they did run, did they win? Similarly, Johnson, Oppenheimer, and Selin's (2012) examination of emergence provides one of the only explicit examinations of when minority candidates seek higher office, but their focus on Congressional elections limits the number of minority candidates they can follow for analysis. Indeed, between 1992 and 2008, only three black house members sought a senate nomination (389).

In contrast, in the present study, I utilize a candidate-level dataset that spans two decades (1990–2010) of Louisiana elections that consequently enables me to uniquely examine when and where black candidates run for office, when they run again, and when they win. The dataset includes a variety of office types (legislative, executive, judicial, and administrative) at five different levels of government – school district, municipal, county, state, and federal. These data were then merged with (a) a candidate-level database that included individual variables, including race, gender, and partisanship and (b) Census data at the appropriate jurisdiction and year (interpolated when necessary). The resulting dataset includes 12,077 unique candidates running for at least one election between 1990 and 2010, and 2670 (a sizeable 22.1%) of these unique candidates were black.[3]

Table 1 presents the relationship between percent black population in a jurisdiction, the percent of black candidates in the dataset, and the percent of black elected officials (winners),

Table 1. Parity between percent black, black candidates, and black elected officials in Louisiana, 1990–2010.

Jurisdiction	Percent black population	Percent black candidates	Percent black elected officials
School district	39.8	28.1	44.6
Municipal	36.8	26.2	42.6
County	35.6	22.9	26.4
State legislative	34.4	18.8	20.9
Federal	31.5	5.9	10.0

between 1990 and 2010. Are black candidates truly underrepresented in Louisiana? Not surprisingly, school districts and municipalities are more segregated across the state, and have a larger average percent of black population. And as the size of the legislative geography increases, the size of black population decreases incrementally. Consistent with other research that argues racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to win local office, I find that the greatest percentages of black candidates run and win in school district and municipal elections, and the fewest for federal-level offices. Taking parity with population proportions as the standard, however, the data presented in Table 1 illustrate the racial gap associated with higher political office for black candidates.

Table 2 presents the variables used in this analysis and reports racial differences along these various dimensions across the two period considered in this analysis: the first time a candidate appears in the data (t_1)[4] and his/her subsequent run for office (t_2). I find the black candidates tend to be substantively different than white candidates, in terms of their demographics, the political opportunity structures, and their ambitions and success. Black candidates are more likely to be women, Democrats, and run in places with large black populations. As noted earlier, each of these characteristics may influence their political ambitions and success. The comparison of means presented in Table 2 also suggests that black candidates are more likely to run initially when there is an open seat and are more likely to draw competition from additional candidates

Table 2. Comparison of means.

	Initial run for office (t_1)		Second run for office (t_2)	
	Black candidates ($n = 2670$)	White candidates ($n = 9407$)	Black candidates ($n = 893$)	White candidates ($n = 3376$)
Female	0.24***	0.13	0.16***	0.10
Democrat	0.91***	0.65	0.93***	0.69
Percent black	49.3***	33.0	48.0***	33.2
Number of candidates	3.58	3.51	3.05***	2.77
Open seat	0.37***	0.30		
Office rank	28.45	29.94***	29.81	30.80***
Won?	0.33	0.35**		
Ran again?			0.36***	0.31
Same office			0.77	0.82***
Higher office			0.14***	0.10
Won same office?			0.67	0.69
Won higher office?			0.43	0.48***

*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.

when they run again. Last, I find that white candidates are more likely to win the initial election, but that black candidates are statistically more likely to seek another term. Moreover, they are more likely than whites to run for higher office (progressive ambition), whereas white candidates are more likely to run for the same office (static ambition). That said, white candidates are more likely to win when they run again, particularly for higher office. Office rank is included as a control, and ordinally ranks offices by level of jurisdiction and type of office.[5] The results in Table 2 illustrate that white candidates are more likely to run for "more prestigious" seats, both initially and in their second attempts.

Descriptively, how often are black candidates winning elections and demonstrating ambition by running again for either the same seat or a higher seat? How successful are they in winning office again? And are these patterns different or similar across the two racial groups? In Figure 1, I plot the paths to office of the 12,077 unique candidates for office in Louisiana between 1990 and 2010, and their subsequent attempts at re-election or higher office,[6] providing first the number of candidates at each stage by race and the relative proportion. In addition, I utilize simulations to estimate uncertainty, depicted via the 95% confidence intervals shown in Figure 1. These numbers provide the expected distribution under the null hypothesis that at each stage (winning at t_1, running again, and winning at t_2), the probability is the same for black and white candidates.[7]

First, we see that black candidates comprise a sizable portion of the dataset (22%). Moreover, 33% of these are winners in the initial election. Importantly, if we had not taken selection in account (i.e., determined if a black candidate ran), it would appear that less than 10% of black candidates were winners ($893/12,077 = 7\%$). And, although almost four times as many white candidates (9407) ran for election between 1990 and 2010 as did black candidates in Louisiana, their initial success rate did not differ from that for blacks: 36% won their first election. However, the number of black candidates winning is less than would be predicted if the distributions of white and black candidates were the same ($p < .018$).

Second, the overtime nature of the data also allows me to examine incumbency effects. In Louisiana between 1990 and 2010, around half of the winners from the initial election ran
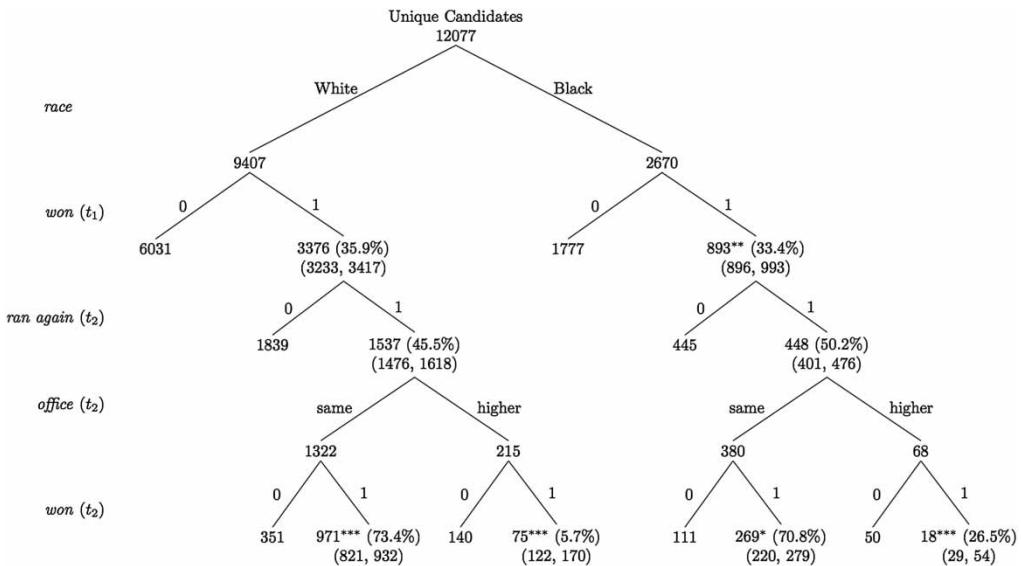

Figure 1. Path to office for Louisiana candidates, 1990–2010.

again (50% of black candidates ran a second time, and 45% of white candidates). Across both racial categories, the vast majority ran for the same office: 85% of the black candidates and 86% of the white candidates who win the initial election have static ambition, or run for the same office in subsequent elections. Moreover, they often win; greater than 70% won re-election, corroborating this incumbency effect.

Third, far fewer candidates seek higher office: 14% of white candidates and 15% of black candidates chose to run for higher office. And, perhaps more importantly, this reach for higher office was much less secure, regardless of race: only 35% of white candidates won and only 26% of black candidates won. Interestingly, the observed number of white candidates who ran for and won the same office is higher than predicted if the distributions are the same. On the other hand, the observed number of black candidates running for the same office is lower. And both black and white candidates fare worse than predicted when they seek higher office.

In sum, the descriptive analysis leads me to three conclusions. First, African-Americans represent a large proportion of the population in Louisiana, but as we move up the political ladder, disproportionately fewer number of candidates and elected officials. Second, I find that both in terms of demographics and the political opportunity structures, black and white candidates are different. Last, I find that although black candidates represent a sizable portion of the initial candidate pool, their numbers quickly diminish along the path to office. That black candidates are often not different in the *percentage* of winners, however, also strongly support's Lawless' (2012) and Shah's (2014) argument that in part the underrepresentation of minority elected officials stems directly from the supply of initial candidates. In other words – it takes a candidate.

Predicting ambition and success: empirical analyses

Building upon the literature and descriptive patterns reviewed earlier, I next explore what factors, including race, predicts initial candidate success and political ambition at three points (dependent variables): winning office the first time a candidate runs (Win t_1), his/her decision to run again (Run Again t_2), and the outcome of his/her second attempt at office (Win t_2). Each of these are coded as $0 =$ No, $1 =$ Yes, and three independent logit models are estimated.[8] I hypothesized that race would have a direct and interactive effect, and thus for each point along the path I include race as an independent variable, as well as test the conditional effects on demographic and political opportunity variables.

Column 1 of Table 3 presents the results for the first stage along the pathway to higher office – winning the initial seat.[9] To begin, I find evidence of a direct effect of race of candidate: all else equal, black candidates are 6.1% less likely to win their initial election. Of the other variables included, Democrats and vying for an open seat are positively related to winning. And as expected, as the number of candidates increases, the likelihood of winning decreases. For example, the probability of winning office when two candidates are running is 0.43, and this decreases to 0.36 with the addition of another candidate in the race.

The race interaction variables are reported at the bottom of column 1. Given the difficulty in directly interpreting the coefficients presented in Table 3 because of the interactions, I present the predicted values and change in values in Table 4 for black and white candidates.[10] A number of patterns emerge. First, the predicted probabilities for black candidates are consistently lower than those for white candidates. For example, *ceteris paribus*, a white Democrat has a 38.3% probability of winning this initial election, whereas black Democrats are only 30.9% likely to win. That said, the individual effects of being a Democrat are greater for black candidates; in other words, identifying as a Democrats boosts the chances of winning more for African-American candidates than white candidates (an increase of 0.112 compared to 0.079). Similarly, although white women candidates are not significantly different than black female candidates in their predicted

Table 3.   Estimating the success along the pathways to office.

	Initial success	Static ambition		Progressive ambition	
	Win? (t_1)	Run again (same office?)	Win? (t_2)	Run again (higher office?)	Win? (t_2)
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
Black	−0.973***	0.439	−1.123**	0.365*	−1.958*
	(0.223)	(0.793)	(0.407)	(0.163)	(0.918)
Female	−0.042	−0.058	−0.069	−0.708*	0.149
	(0.067)	(0.265)	(0.137)	(0.297)	(0.329)
Democrat	0.349***	0.232	0.317***	−0.399*	0.343
	(0.048)	(0.180)	(0.093)	(0.169)	(0.205)
% black	−0.002*	0.008*	−0.003	−0.006	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Open seat	0.138**			0.389*	0.096
	(0.050)			(0.167)	(0.179)
Number of candidates	−0.153***	0.158**	−0.144***	−0.089*	−0.300***
	(0.013)	(0.056)	(0.025)	(0.048)	(0.055)
Office rank	−0.031***	0.049***	−0.005	−0.073***	−0.017
	(0.003)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Black * female	0.163	0.642	0.262	−0.378	−1.536*
	(0.120)	(0.516)	(0.246)	(0.491)	(0.731)
Black * democrat	0.247	0.849	0.750*	−0.004	−0.999
	(0.176)	(0.646)	(0.351)	(0.631)	(0.813)
Black * % black	0.008**	−0.023*	0.009*	0.019*	−0.006
	(0.003)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Black * open seat	0.035			0.085	0.657*
	(0.102)			(0.316)	(0.350)
Black * number candidates	0.026	−0.098	−0.006	0.066	0.005
	(0.025)	(0.100)	(0.035)	(0.079)	(0.065)
Constant	0.642***	−0.322	0.475*	0.882*	0.627
	(0.105)	(0.369)	(0.199)	(0.361)	(0.432)
n	12,077	1985	1702	1985	283

Note: All tests are two-tailed.
*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.

Table 4.   Initial success – predicted probabilities of winning (t_1).

	White candidate		Black candidate	
Variable	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ[a]	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ[a]
Female	0.373 (0.342, 0.404)	−0.010	0.335 (0.293, 0.378)	+0.026
Democrat	0.383 (0.367, 0.399)	+0.079	0.309 (0.281, 0.337)	+0.112
% black	0.388 (0.372, 0.403)	−0.100	0.297 (0.266, 0.328)	+0.025
Open seat	0.416 (0.395, 0.437)	+0.031	0.347 (0.312, 0.383)	+0.038
Number of candidates	0.385 (0.367, 0.399)	−0.072	0.309 (0.281, 0.337)	−0.051

[a]For dichotomous variables (female, democrat, open seat), change is calculated from 0 → 1. For % black and number of candidates, it is from −1 standard deviation to +1 standard deviation (20–40% black; 2–4 candidates). CI, confidence intervals.

probability, black women are 2.6% more likely to win than black men. At this stage along the path to office, I also find co-racial voting pool to improve the likelihood of a black candidate winning office, although her probability is still significantly lower than her white counterpart. Indeed, at the mean percent black (30%), white candidates are 9% more likely to win the election than black candidates.

In addition to the demographic factors, I examined the interactive effects of race on the political opportunity structure. As the baseline model demonstrates, open seats are generally a boost for all candidates. However, I find that these effects are muted for African-American candidates, who win only 34.7% of the time, as opposed to white candidates who win 41.6% of the time when there is an open seat. Similarly, while the competition of additional candidates affects all candidates negatively, the incremental impact on African-American candidates is greater than that for white candidates.

Once candidates have an elected seat, what predicts their political ambition? To answer this question, I examine static and progressive ambition separately. Columns 2 and 3 in Table 3 present two models of the likelihood of a candidate who won an initial seat (t_1) to retain the same seat (static ambition), and to win a second term (t_2).[11] The non-significant coefficient for *black* suggests that black and white candidates are not different in their desire to stay in office; race does not directly influence static ambition. Wanting to keep your elected position and keeping it, however, are two different processes. As column 3 of Table 3 shows, while black candidates may have displayed equal static ambition, they were significantly less likely to win the second election. And the substantive effects are not trivial: the re-election rate for black candidates is 48%, compared to 64% for white candidates. Thus, as hypothesized, African-American candidates do not enjoy the same incumbency advantage as their non-black counterparts. Table 5 provides the predicted probabilities from the interaction model, as well as the independent effects of each variable, and illustrates the direct negative effect of candidate race.

Three points are noteworthy. First, again, although the probability of winning for a white woman and a black woman is not significantly different, this is the one scenario in which the black candidate is more likely to win. Moreover, black female candidates are 4.8% more likely to win than black male candidates. This pattern is reversed for white candidates, for whom women are 1.4% less likely to win. Second, the interactive effect of party identification (Democrat) and candidate race (black) is particularly strong for incumbents seeking to stay another term. Specifically, black Democrats are 22% more likely to win a second term than black Republicans. Last, the results illustrate the positive interactive effect of racial context for black candidates. Similar to the conclusions from previous research, the results for static ambition confirm the positive influence of a strong co-racial voting pool on ensuring descriptive representation.

Table 5. Static ambition: predicted probabilities of winning (t_2).

Variable	White candidate		Black candidate	
	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ[a]	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ[a]
Female	0.507 (0.440, 0.573)	−0.014	0.527 (0.432, 0.622)	+0.048
Democrat	0.524 (0.490, 0.550)	+0.079	0.479 (0.432, 0.525)	+0.220
% black	0.531 (0.505, 0.557)	−0.016	0.468 (0.413, 0.523)	+0.024
Number of candidates	0.524 (0.498, 0.550)	−0.072	0.479 (0.432, 0.525)	−0.075

[a]For dichotomous variables (female, democrat, open seat), change is calculated from $0 \rightarrow 1$. For % black and number of candidates, it is from −1 standard deviation to +1 standard deviation (20–40% black; 2–4 candidates). CI, confidence intervals.

Table 6.   Progressive ambition: predicted probabilities of winning (t_2).

Variable	White candidate		Black candidate	
	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ^a	Point estimate (95% CI)	Δ^a
Female	0.436 (0.275, 0.597)	+0.036	0.122 (0.020, 0.264)	−0.191
Democrat	0.400 (0.335, 0.464)	+0.008	0.207 (0.134, 0.348)	−0.001
% black	0.398 (0.335, 0.461)	−0.003	0.223 (0.197, 0.350)	−0.023
Open seat	0.423 (0.345, 0.501)	+0.023	0.217 (0.177, 0.457)	+0.170
Number of candidates	0.400 (0.335, 0.464)	−0.143	0.213 (0.103, 0.323)	−0.125

[a]For dichotomous variables (female, democrat, open seat), change is calculated from $0 \rightarrow 1$. For % black and number of candidates, it is from −1 standard deviation to +1 standard deviation (20–40% black; 2–4 candidates). CI, confidence intervals.

Recalling Figure 1, much fewer candidates run for higher office. Do black candidates differ from their white colleagues in their expression of progressive ambition, and their success in attaining higher office? I examine this last question with two additional models and present the results in last two columns of Table 6.[12] Consistent with the survey results from Lawless (2012), the baseline model of progressive ambition finds that black candidates are more likely than their white elected colleagues to seek higher office. Substantively, the direct influence of race is 5%: the probability of African-American candidates running for higher office is 19.5%, compared to 14.4% for white candidates. As hypothesized, I also find women and Democrats are less likely to seek higher office: women are 10% less likely to demonstrate progressive ambition and Democrats in Louisiana run for a higher level office 3.4% often than Republicans. The interaction coefficient, however, presents a picture similar to that of static ambition: race is no longer a significant factor in determining progressive ambition. The exception, however, is the racial context. As the proportion of the black population in the higher office increases, the likelihood of a black candidate revealing progressive ambition increases. Substantively, moving from 20% African-American to 40% African-American in the higher level jurisdiction increases the likelihood of running 3%.[13]

The probability of winning the higher office is presented column 5 of Table 3. Corroborating the evidence that finds fewer minorities in higher office, the results presented show that race negatively related to winning. Moreover, I find evidence of both a direct effect and an interactive effect. All else equal, black candidates are 9.3% less likely to win when they run for higher office. These effects are retained when I examine how race of candidate conditions other demographic and political opportunity structure variables as well. Table 6 presented the predicted probability and change in probability for the interaction model (column 4). Perhaps most noteworthy is that each predicted probability places the black candidate at a 20–30% disadvantage in winning the higher seat. For example, the likelihood of securing the higher level office is 40% for a white Democrat, but only 20% for the black Democrat. Further, the multiplicative positive effects of gender and race are reversed here: the coefficient for black times female is significant and negative, and as Table 6 shows, black women are at a 19% disadvantage compared to their black male counterparts.

Discussion

There are many who see the election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the USA as a sign that new doors are opening for black politics in general, and black candidates who desire to run for (and win) political office, and climb the political ladder, in particular. However, the descriptive data on black elected office holding continue to show a racial gap: in most places, blacks are under-represented (as measured by representational parity to population size), and, this

underrepresentation grows as we climb the political ladder. Yet many black elected officials express political ambition when asked. In this paper, I ask: What explains this puzzle?

Examining 20 years of elections and attempts at pursuing office among black and white candidates in Louisiana, a few conclusions can be made. First, black politicians are ambitious. Indeed, the findings from this project suggest that black politicians seek to retain their office as often as their white counterparts, and seek higher office in greater numbers. These findings directly refute Stone's (1980) conclusions that blacks are less interested in a political career. Thus, the caveat in the path to office for black candidates is *once they decide to run*, their initial paths are not so different than their white counterparts.

Running for and winning office, however, are two different steps, and as this paper shows, African-American (male) candidates experience a smaller incumbency advantage than white candidates. In particular, I find some support for the vulnerability expectation: the number of candidates who run against an incumbent is greater for black incumbents than white incumbents. Given how little is known in general about black incumbents for office, this finding is noteworthy, and begs additional questions about how the expectations of incumbency differ for black candidates: Are mayoral incumbents facing the same challenges as state legislators? Do we find challengers referring to race in their campaigns? How do incumbents fight to keep their seats? Each of these questions deserves further review.

Although black incumbents face formidable challenges in keeping their seat, progressive political ambition is an especially hard road for black candidates, despite the fact that they seek these offices more often than their white counterparts. Most telling from the models that examine this for black and white candidates was the stark differences in predicted probabilities: even under the most favorable conditions, African-Americans running for higher office were likely to lose 75–90% of the time. These findings bring us full circle to the voter-driven models of descriptive representation that focus on racialized voting. That is, although the supply side of minority representation completes the puzzle of why we find fewer African-Americans in higher office, the demand-side arguments are still quite salient. Again, these findings beg additional research on cross-over voting and campaigning among candidates seeking state- and federal-level offices.

The results from this project also add to the new literature on the intersection of race and gender in political ambition. Contrary to expectations of a "double disadvantage," black female candidates fared better in the initial election and were more likely to keep their position as incumbents. This finding speaks to the more recent work of Bejarano (2013) who suggests women of color, while perhaps doubly bound by racist and sexist presumptions, can actually benefit from multiple identities and utilize these to court a more diverse voter base. Little is known specifically about black female candidates or incumbents, but this research suggests additional work is needed to unravel the independent and multiplicative effects of race and gender on the path to political office.

Undoubtedly, research on the pathways to office for racial and ethnic minorities has been hampered by lack of data. This project capitalized on the *only* current dataset that includes race of candidates running for office that includes overtime information about their subsequent attempts at office. In some ways, Louisiana is not an "average" state in the USA: it has a large black population (10th largest in the USA (US Census Bureau 2010)) and is covered under the Voting Rights Act because of a history of voter dilution and disenfranchisement practices. Louisiana also has the second most number of black elected officials (after Mississippi), but blacks are still underrepresented in elected positions (Adegbile 2008). These statistics, however, suggest that Louisiana may be the harder test for assessing political ambition: a large black population that continues to struggle for representation. Therefore, the findings that clearly show the difficulties black candidates face in winning (but not expressing desire for) higher office provide a good basis for additional research.

As this is the one of the first attempts at estimating these relationships between race and political ambition with a large dataset, there are a number of next steps to pursue. At this point, due to small cell sizes, I have not differentiated between a black candidate currently in a school board seat seeking a city council position, and a black candidate currently serving as mayor seeking a state legislative position, although the argument could be made that the progressive ladder is not equal across the two cases. A corollary question that has yet to be answered is what is the electoral pedigree of most higher level black officeholders? Anecdotal evidence suggests a two-tiered system, one contained on the substate level and another at the state and federal levels. Perhaps we see little ambition because the new generation of black candidates skips the lower level offices all together.

The question of how other racial/ethnic minority groups (Latinos and Asians) express their political ambition and the likelihood of their success also remains unanswered. A number of recent research projects have concluded that Latinos and Asians have had an easier time moving up the political ladder (see, e.g., Fraga et al. 2003; Dougherty 2007), suggesting that the dynamics of political ambition and representation may be dependent on race/ethnicity. The growth of multiracial cities also means that it is likely we will find ballots including candidates from many racial/ethnic backgrounds. How do these demographic shifts influence when candidates of color decide to run, and if they win?

And of course, last is the question of individual characteristics. While previous researches by Jensen and Martinek (2009) and Lawless (2012) fall short of being able to answer the question of when and where to black candidates run and win office, they are able to provide insights into the individual-level motivation and behaviors of candidates. As Stone (1980) concludes, there may be a selection mechanism at work which causes potential losers to self-select out of attempting to win higher office, based on characteristics such as education, employment history, ability to generate campaign funds, etc. Thus, filling in the questions regarding candidate quality, motivations, and perceptions with the overtime elections data would allow for a more complete picture of black political ambition.

Disclosure statement

Notes

1. This project capitalizes on the *only* current dataset that includes race of candidates running for office and overtime information about their subsequent attempts at office, which happens to be Louisiana. That said, there are other cities and elections across the USA with similar demographic contexts and political structures. Thus, while I am careful to not over-generalize these findings, they do speak to how the process of political ambition may unfold across cities outside of Louisiana.
2. Although there have been Latino and Asian candidates who ran in Louisiana between 1990 and 2000, their numbers are too small to include in any empirical analyses (Latino = 45 and Asian =2). Thus, for this paper, the candidates are restricted to white and black candidates.
3. Coding for unique candidates was an iterative process and utilized candidate name (first, middle, nick, last, and surname) and place. Additional hand-coding was required to catch changes in last name due to marriage (including hyphenated names) and changes in first name (Liz to Elizabeth) or use of a nickname (Gene "The Coach" Smith = Gene Smith).
4. To be sure, there is a chance that some of the candidate flagged as first-timers in 1990 are incumbents running for re-election or higher office. Unfortunately, pre-1990 data are unavailable, precluding me from capturing a larger slice of time. As a result I code the first-time candidates run for office in my dataset as their first attempt at office. This is less problematic given the crux of the paper focuses on running again.

5. Specifically: federal offices>state offices>county offices>municipal offices>school district offices, and executive seats>legislative seats> judicial seats>administrative seats.

6. Some candidates ran for both higher and same office over the course of the 20-year span. In this analysis, I restrict my analysis to the next instance of running only.

7. The simulation fixed the number of white candidates at 9407 and the number of black candidates at 2670. Probabilities of winning at t_1, running again, and winning at t_2 were then calculated. Assuming a normal binomial distribution, 10,000 simulations were calculated and predicted.

8. I also estimated sequential logit models and obtained similar results. For ease of exposition, I default to reporting the three independent model estimates here; sequential logit estimates are available from the author upon request.

9. Overall, the model is statistically significant and correctly predicts 76.6% of the cases. Compared with a naïve model predicting all cases would fall in the modal category, the interaction model produces a proportional reduction in error (PRE) of .21.

10. Predicted probabilities are calculated using margins in Stata 12. Unless otherwise stated, all values are held at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (dichotomous variables).

11. Overall, the static ambition model is statistically significant and correctly predicts 72.3% of the cases. Compared with a naïve model predicting all cases would fall in the modal category, the interaction model produces a PRE of .18. In addition, the winning at t_2 model is also statistically significant and correctly predicts 71.6% of the cases. Compared with a naïve model predicting all cases would fall in the modal category, the interaction model produces a PRE of .19.

12. The progressive ambition model is statistically significant and correctly predicts 78.7% of the cases. Compared with a naïve model predicting all cases would fall in the modal category, the interaction model produces a PRE of .23. In addition, the winning at t_2 model is also statistically significant and correctly predicts 74.6% of the cases. Compared with a naïve model predicting all cases would fall in the modal category, the interaction model produces a PRE of .20.

13. In these models, the percent black is calculated using the district of the office the candidate is running for (at t_2), rather than the percent black in the current district.

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