

Transforming Votes into Victories: Turnout, Institutional Context, and Minority Representation in Local Politics

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One of the great hopes of the civil rights movement was that African Americans and other minorities would, by gaining the right to vote, be able to elect representatives of their choice who could ultimately reduce or even eradicate racial inequality. To achieve that end, the main tool put forward by the U.S. government was the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At the heart of the Voting Rights Act were two goals. The first and most pressing goal was to give racial and ethnic minorities full access to the vote. The second and in many ways more complicated task was to try to ensure that institutional barriers did not reduce the quality of that vote. If the act succeeded, minorities in America would obtain equitable and fair representation in American democracy.

The ensuing forty years have been marked by major gains in minority office-holding. The gains have been the most pronounced for African Americans. In 1960, only 280 blacks held office across the entire United States (Jaynes and Wil-

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liams 1989). Today there are over 9,000 black elected officials in America (JCPS 2003). Blacks have won the mayoralty in most of the nation's big cities, there are roughly 600 African Americans in state legislatures nationwide, and blacks now hold about 10% of the seats in the U.S. Congress. Latino and Asian-American representation has, in recent years, also blossomed. The number of Latinos in office has more than doubled in the last two decades, so that today there are over 4,500 Latino elected officials nationwide (NALEO 2005). Asian-American representation, although starting from a much smaller base, continues to grow, and from 1996 to 2000 the number of Asian Americans holding office increased by 10% nationwide (APALC 2001).

These gains, however, tell only part of the story. The underlying truth is that four decades after the Voting Rights Act became law, racial and ethnic minorities remain greatly underrepresented in American democracy. Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans make up over a quarter of the national population, but, by all estimates, they make up less than 5% of the nation's elected officials (NALEO 2004, APALC 2005, JCPS 2004). Blacks have achieved close to proportional representation in the House of Representatives, but at every other level all three groups remain greatly underrepresented.² Ultimately, few would argue that the Voting Rights Act has produced fair and equitable representation (Guinier 1994).³

Why has minority representation stalled? In this chapter we examine two possible barriers to minority representation in American politics: (1) low voter turnout and (2) unfavorable institutional arrangements.⁴ Although the Voting Rights Act sought to address these issues, there is evidence that these factors could continue to be barriers to minority representation. Despite gains in minority participation, voting rates by race remain uneven. In the last few presidential contests, for example, over 60% of white adults voted compared to only about a third of Latinos and Asian Americans. Blacks fell somewhere in the middle (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Also, despite passage of the Voting Rights Act and its extensions, institutional structures remain far from fully reformed. At the local level, for example, most cities continue to employ at-large elections, well over half have not instituted term limits, and the vast majority hold off-cycle elections—all institutional features that could reduce minority influence (Hajnal and Lewis 2002).

² For example, the ICMA reports that only 2.1% of all mayors in the nation are African American and only 1.8% are Latino—despite the fact that blacks and Latinos each make up well over 10% of the national urban population (MacManus and Bullock 1993).

³ There are, however, some critics who see the act as affirmative action for minorities and who believe that American democracy is more than fair to minority voters (Thernstron 1987).

⁴ We do not profess to be able to examine the range of possible reforms. There are, obviously, a long list of possible barriers and solutions. One might also want to address the lack of financial resources in the minority community and ongoing racial discrimination in many facets of American life (Karnig and Welch 1980). Others might focus on America's attachment to a majoritarian democracy and its resistance to broader changes like proportional representation (see Guinier 1994).

In the remainder of this chapter, we show that both low voter turnout and electoral institutions continue to reduce minority representation. Focusing on local elections, we find that higher turnout is associated with more equitable racial and ethnic representation for Latinos and Asian Americans on city councils across the country. For African Americans, turnout matters little but modifying local electoral institutions can help. In particular, a move to district elections and on-cycle elections could help to further expand black representation.

Is Uneven Voting a Problem?

The Voting Rights Act has led to important increases in minority participation. Between 1964 and 1970 alone, the percentage of black adults registered to vote in the South increased from 42% to 67% (Parker 1990). Among the Asian-American and Latino population, turnout rates have also increased (Lien 2001, Hero 1992). But the bottom line is that participation is still greatly skewed by race and ethnicity. In the last presidential contest, for example, white adults were twice as likely to report voting as Asian American and Latino adults. Some 66% of whites reported voting compared to just under 30% for both Asian Americans and Latinos (US Census Bureau 2005). Blacks were more involved than Latinos and Asian Americans, but still lagged behind whites with only 56% of African-American adults reporting voting. This trend is not isolated to national elections. Turnout by race is as skewed or even more skewed in state and local contests (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005, Hill and Leighley 1992).

Is this nonvoting by such a large proportion of the minority community a problem for minority representation in American democracy? At first glance, the answer seems to be yes. Given that the vote is arguably the main tool for determining democratic outcomes, uneven turnout across race would seem to be an important barrier for minority representation. Moreover, everyone involved in politics, from candidates, to parties, to campaigns, acts as if turnout of different groups is critical. After any close contest, candidates and commentators are likely to agree that “turnout emerged as a decisive factor in [the] elections” (Bumiller and Nagourney 2002). The notion that the electorate will tilt to the left if the electorate expands has, in fact, been one of the core principles behind Democratic Party efforts to make the vote more accessible and Republican efforts to oppose any such changes.

However compelling arguments about turnout may be, the empirical evidence to date suggests otherwise. Research on recent American elections has almost unanimously found that turnout does not greatly affect outcomes. Two sets of studies undergird this finding. First, studies show that the preferences of nonvoters do not differ markedly from the preferences of voters (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Bennett and Resnick 1990, Gant and Lyons 1993, Norrander 1989, Verba, et al. 1995). Indeed, according to Elcessor and Leighley, “one of the least contested conclusions in the study of political behavior is that voters’ political attitudes and policy positions are fairly representative of nonvoters” (2001: 127).

In other words, voters and nonvoters may look very different but they do not think all that differently.

More importantly, there is little evidence to suggest that altering turnout would change who wins and loses. Although some studies have found that increasing turnout might alter the margin of victory slightly in some contests, the findings are often highly variable and the effects are never large (Citrin et al. 2003, De Nardo 1980, Nagel and McNulty 1996, Shields and Goidel 1997, Erickson 1995). There is even a prolonged debate over whether marginal benefits would accrue to Democrats or Republicans if turnout expanded (De Nardo 1980, Tucker and Vedlitz 1986, Nagel and McNulty 1996, Petrocik 1987). Most importantly, few of the elections examined would have ended with a different victor. “Simply put,” say Highton and Wolfinger, “outcomes would not change if everyone voted” (2001: 179). If this is true, it may be that low turnout rates are not the principal barrier to minority representation.

Why Turnout Might Still Matter

In this chapter, we challenge this conclusion. We argue that the nonimpact of a skewed electorate stems in part from the narrow focus of the existing empirical research. Nearly every study that looks at the effect of voter turnout on electoral outcomes focuses on the national electorate in presidential and congressional elections.⁵ This narrow focus reduces the possibility of finding bias for two reasons.

First, simple logic dictates that the *possible* extent of any skew produced by uneven turnout decreases as overall turnout levels increase. As detailed in Tingsten’s (1937) “law of dispersion,” the chances of skew are inversely proportional to overall electoral participation. If almost everybody turns out, there can be very little skew. If, however, only a small fraction of the population turns out, skew can be severe. Thus, if we are interested in revealing just how much turnout matters, we should not confine our research to national elections where turnout is relatively high. Bias could certainly exist at the national level where only about half of all eligible voters turn out, but it could be much worse at the local level, where turnout averages half or less than half that of national elections (Karnig and Walter 1983, Hajnal et al. 2002).

Second, by looking at the national electorate as a whole, one ignores substantial variation in group size across geographic boundaries and almost necessarily diminishes the role that small minority groups can play. In national contests, only a few very large groups can have a significant effect on the outcome of the vote. For example, while Asian Americans are the third largest racial and ethnic minority group, they make up well under 4% of the total national population. As such,

⁵ Exceptions are Nagel and McNulty’s (1996) research on gubernatorial elections; Hill et al.’s (1995) study of turnout across states; and a number of accounts of local elections (e.g., Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Pinderhughes 1994; and Wright 2000).

whether or not Asian Americans vote is almost immaterial to the outcomes of national contests.

The same is not true for smaller geographic localities. Because people are distributed unevenly across geographic boundaries, groups that are small minorities and largely insignificant at the national level can be major players within many states, cities, or districts. This is especially true for race and ethnicity.⁶ African Americans, for example, make up about a third of the population in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago and almost two-thirds of the population in New Orleans, Atlanta, and Washington. In fact, segregation by race and ethnicity is the rule rather than the exception. Although the national population is only 12% African American, 12% Latino, and 4% Asian American, data from a recent nationwide survey (the American Citizen Participation Study) indicate that the average Latino lives in a city that is 39% Hispanic, the average African American in a city that is 35% black, and the average Asian American in a city that is 7% Asian American.

Thus, if we are concerned about the effects of a skew in the electorate we need to look not only at the national electorate as a whole, but at a series of smaller political units where the effect of different groups may be more pronounced.⁷ Only by examining each of these smaller units separately will we begin to get a second, perhaps more revealing look at the effects of uneven turnout on electoral outcomes. Unfortunately, although there are strong reasons to suspect that turnout is critical at the local level, there is, to date, little empirical evidence addressing this question. Leighley (2001) and Verba, et al. (1995) briefly report on participation rates for different racial, ethnic, and demographic groups in local elections, but there appears to be no research that looks systematically across cities at the *consequences* of a skewed electorate at the local level.⁸ Thus the question of whether turnout matters remains largely unanswered.

Are Electoral Institutions the Problem?

There is evidence to suggest that electoral structures could be an ongoing barrier to minority representation. Reforms have led to changes in electoral structure in many American cities and states, but institutional arrangements that have been

⁶ In addition, segregation by income, education, and other measures of well-being also occurs.

⁷ Studies that disaggregate electoral results by each individual Senate or House elections at least partially address this problem (e.g., Black and Black (1987) and others demonstrated how relatively large minority populations at the state level (e.g., 20%–25%) can affect electoral outcomes if they turn out and vote cohesively.

⁸ Several urban scholars do, however, note the importance of group mobilization for political incorporation (Dahl 1961; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Erie 1988; Bridges 1997). This is especially true in accounts of the civil rights movement (Lee 2002, Parker 1990).

identified as limiting minority influence remain in place in most areas of the country. The institution minority rights advocates have most concerned themselves with—at-large elections—remains in effect in most cases (Grofman and Davidson 1994, Engstrom and Mc Donald 1982). Nationwide, 64% of cities continue to use at-large elections to elect city council members, and only 18% use a pure district system (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Moreover, council size, a feature of local government structure that may be related to minority representation, has changed little in response to reform efforts (Bullock and MacManus 1987). There has been, in fact, little trend toward increasing the number of council members, and the standard five-member city council remains in effect in a plurality of cities. Term limits, a procedural reform that some maintain could be a key to further expanding minority representation, are still rare at the city council level (Copeland 1997, Donovan and Snipp 1994). Only about 10% of the nation's cities have instituted term limits for city council elections (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Finally, a set of structural factors, often called reform institutions, that tends to lower turnout and thus may reduce minority influence remains in place throughout the country (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Roughly 80% of American cities hold off-cycle elections, 76% hold nonpartisan elections, and 52% use a city manager form of government. Accordingly, institutional reform appears to have real potential to expand minority representation.

Despite the seeming promise of institutional reform, recent empirical tests have cast some doubt on the ability of this kind of institutional strategy to rectify minority underrepresentation. Some of the most recent studies of black representation have found that institutional structure is less linked to black success than it once was (Welch 1990, Bullock and MacManus 1987). In addition, research into Latino and Asian-American representation has often failed to find a link between local electoral institutions and the representation of these two communities (Segura 1999, Bullock and MacManus 1990, Welch 1990, Alozie 1992, Alozie and Manganaro 1992). A good deal has changed in American politics since the Voting Rights Act was initially passed, and there is at least a real possibility that relationships that once governed minority politics no longer exist. For example, if America is more open to Latino and Asian-American interests than it has been to African-American interests, then the changing racial demographics of the country could be contributing to a new political world where institutional structure is largely irrelevant.⁹

⁹ Another reason to revisit this question is a basic flaw in most of the existing empirical research. Most of the existing studies focus on only one or two institutional features of local government and do not simultaneously include controls for other basic features of the local electoral structure. Given that the presence of many of these structures is at least somewhat correlated, any study that does not control for the range of potentially relevant institutions may reach flawed conclusions about the impact of any single institution on representation.

Data and Methods

To determine if turnout and institutions affect who wins in local elections, we focus on arguably the most central election in local politics: city council elections.¹⁰ For each city, we use aggregate voter turnout, since data on the racial composition of the local electorates are simply not available. We expect that as turnout in city council elections expands, the vote will be less skewed by race and less-advantaged interests will have more say in determining outcomes. There is ample evidence that turnout is, in fact, less skewed as it increases. Both Hill and Leighley (1992) and Jackson, et al. (1998) have, for example, shown that class bias in turnout across states in presidential elections declines as aggregate state turnout increases. Others have similarly found that higher-turnout national elections are more representative of the class and racial makeup of the population (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Our own analysis of the state-wide initiative vote in California suggests that the vote becomes substantially more representative by income, race, age, and other socioeconomic characteristics in higher-turnout elections (analysis not shown, but available from authors). It is also worth noting that turnout is much less skewed for political activities that incorporate large shares of the population, e.g., voting, than it is for those that involve smaller shares, e.g., working on a campaign or attending a protest (Verba et al. 1995).

Aggregate turnout is likely to be an imprecise proxy for racial skew. Given the noise in our measure, our results should, if anything, underestimate the magnitude of the effects of racial skew on minority representation. If this noise is too severe, or if we are wrong and there is no underlying relationship between local voter turnout and the skew of the electorate, our tests should reveal no relationship between turnout and representation.

To assess the relationships between turnout, institutions, and minority representation, we utilize data from the 1986 International City/County Manager's Association survey (ICMA), which was mailed to city clerks in every city in the United States with over 2,500 residents.¹¹ Although there are more recent ICMA surveys, the 1986 survey is the only ICMA survey that asked specifically about local voter turnout. The 1986 ICMA survey reports figures for registration and turnout in the most recent city council election, the number of city council mem-

¹⁰ Most U.S. cities have a council/city manager form of government, and even in cities with mayors, the mayor seldom has veto power or unilateral control over the budget (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Thus, council elections are almost always central to local policymaking (Krebs and Pelissero 2003).

¹¹ The ICMA has a response rate of 65.6%. Analysis comparing the socio-economic status and racial demographics of ICMA cities with the population of all U.S. cities indicates that the ICMA is representative of the nation as a whole (Aghion, Alesina, and Trebbi 2005). Similar analysis comparing cities that responded to the survey with cities that did not indicates that there is no obvious response bias (Aghion, Alesina, and Trebbi 2005).

bers who are white, African American, Latino, and Asian American; and the institutional and electoral structure of the city. For the turnout data, clerks provide the percentage of eligible voters who are registered to vote and the percentage of registered voters who voted in the most recent city wide election.¹² In the subsequent analysis we focus primarily on turnout of registered voters.¹³

We focus on six sets of institutions that prior research has identified as being potentially related to minority representation. To examine the impact of district elections, we include a dummy variable that singles out all cities that elect all city council members through districts.¹⁴ To assess the role of election timing, we include a dummy variable for cities whose most recent council election was in November of an even year.¹⁵ The ICMA survey also asked whether candidates' party affiliation was included on the ballot. Cities that included party labels were identified as partisan. To test for the effects of term limits, we included another dummy variable singling out cities that limit the number of terms a council member may serve. The actual number of city council seats was included to determine if council size played a role in determining minority representation. Finally, city clerks were asked about the current form of government and were asked to distinguish between the mayor-council form of government and the council-manager form of government.¹⁶ Cities with the mayor-council form of government likely had more at stake in local elections (since elected officials had more say in local affairs) and were thus expected to have higher turnout and perhaps more equitable representation.

¹² City clerk turnout reports have been validated elsewhere (Hajnal et al. 2002). When we compared city clerk turnout figures to actual election returns reported by the board of elections for a sample of elections, we also found that the city clerk reports were quite accurate.

¹³ Since different jurisdictions have used a range of registration requirements to exclude or include different segments of the population (Parker 1990, Davidson and Grofman 1994), one might want to focus exclusively on the turnout of eligible voters. The problem is that city clerks have to estimate the eligible population. There is no data source that provides yearly data on local eligible populations. Since cities and counties (often city clerks themselves) must compile and record data on total voter turnout and voter registration for every election, reports of registered voter turnout are more accurate. In the end, it does not matter which measure we use. Turnout of registered and turnout of eligible voters are closely correlated ($r=.87$). Also, when we repeat the analysis with the percent of eligible voters, we get similar results.

¹⁴ Several cities had some combination of at-large and single-member districts. Alternate tests indicate that these mixed systems were no more or less likely to produce minority representation than district or at-large cities.

¹⁵ This is obviously an imprecise measure of concurrent elections since it does not specify whether the election was actually held on the same day as a national or statewide contest. Additional tests, however, indicate that cities that held elections in November of even years generally held them concurrently with national or state level elections.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, although recent analysis suggests that more and more cities are becoming hybrids in their governing structure, the ICMA survey only distinguishes between the two extremes.

To ensure that our analysis of local institutions and voter turnout is not biased by differences in demographic characteristics across cities, we merged the ICMA data with data on various city-level demographic measures from the 1990 census. Because willingness to vote for minority candidates has at times been linked to socio-economic status and education as well as region, we include measures of educational attainment (percentage of college graduates), income (median household income), and region in our analysis (Sears and Kinder 1971, Williams 1990, Handley and Grofman 1994). In addition, we include controls for the racial and ethnic makeup of the population and the percentage of noncitizens in each city. Like previous research on minority representation, we restrict our analysis to cities where the group being assessed makes up at least 5% of the city population and thus has at least a nominal chance of winning a seat on the council. Using the ICMA data and census data, we can then determine the relative effects of voter turnout, the institutional structure of a city, and city demographics on racial and ethnic minority representation on city councils.

Minority Representation on City Councils

Can we do something about minority underrepresentation on city councils? In Table 4.1 we begin to answer this question by assessing the effects of voter turnout and institutional structures on minority representation. The table reports the results of four separate O.L.S. regressions with the proportion of city councils that are white, African American, Latino, and Asian American, respectively, as the dependent variables.

The results for voter turnout are clear. As the first row of Table 4.1 shows, higher turnout in local elections leads to significantly greater numbers of Latinos and Asian Americans on city councils. For whites, higher turnout appears to reduce representation on city councils, although the relationship is not quite statistically significant. For African Americans, on the other hand, there is no clear relationship between aggregate turnout and council representation. In other words, the more people who vote, the better Latinos and Asian Americans fare and the worse off whites are. As we will see shortly, these effects can be substantial.¹⁷

¹⁷ Two other important findings that emerge from Table 4.1 concern the role of citizenship and the nature of intergroup relations. First, across all four models, increases in the size of the noncitizen community are associated with decreased representation of racial/ethnic minorities and increased representation of whites. In short, citizenship is an important barrier to representation at the local level. Second, the results in Table 4.1 shed some light on the degree to which different minority groups appear to cooperate with each other in local elections (see also McClain and Tauber 1998). Black and Asian-American representation tend to increase as the size of the Hispanic population increases. This could indicate that African Americans and Asian Americans are gaining at the expense of low Hispanic participation, but it could also be a sign of interminority coopera-

Table 4.1. The Determinants of Racial Representation on City Councils

	Whites	Blacks	Latinos	Asian Americans
Turnout	-.04 (.02)	.03 (.03)	.05 (.02)*	.05 (.02)*
District Elections	-.01 (.01)	.03 (.01)*	.00(.01)	-.00 (.01)
Concurrent Elections	.00 (.01)	.03 (.01)*	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Partisan Elections	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)
Term Limits	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	-.04 (.01)*
Mayor (vs city manager)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	.02 (.01)	.01 (.02)
Council Size	-.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)
Population (log)	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.01)
Percent Poor	-.33 (.08)*	.38 (.12)*	.16 (.12)	-.01 (.11)
Median Income	.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Percent College Grads	-.12 (.05)*	.15 (.08)	.22 (.07)*	.05 (.06)
Percent Latino	-.78 (.06)*	.31 (.09)*	.79 (.05)*	.20 (.08)*
Percent Asian	-.54 (.10)*	.10 (.15)	.06 (.08)	.60 (.06)*
Percent Black	-.55 (.04)*	.58 (.04)*	-.02 (.04)	.13 (.08)
Percent Noncitizen	.81 (.10)*	-.37 (.15)*	-.58 (.08)*	-.39 (.11)*
West	.01 (.01)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.02)
Midwest	-.01 (.01)	.02 (.01)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)
Northeast	.00 (.01)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)
Constant	1.16 (.05)*	-.18 (.06)*	-.18 (.06)*	-.02 (.06)
Adj. R-squared	.33	.29	.51	.40
N	1695	567	570	223

Source: ICMA Survey 1986, Census 1990. Figures are coefficient and their standard errors

*p<.05

The pattern in Table 4.1 fits well with what we might have expected had we simply compared the turnout rates of different racial and ethnic groups. Since Af-

tion and in particular of fairly widespread Hispanic support for black and Asian-American candidates.

rican Americans vote at rates just below whites, one would not expect them to gain or lose substantially from an increase or decrease in turnout. Instead, the two groups likely to gain the most from expanded turnout are the two groups that normally vote the least—Latinos and Asian Americans.

To help ensure that these results do in fact measure the underlying relationship between turnout and representation, we undertook a series of additional tests [analysis available from the authors]. First, we reran the analysis using turnout of the eligible population rather than turnout of registered voters. All of the significant relationships remained intact. Second, we included all cities in the analysis rather than just cities where the target racial/ethnic group was over 5% of the population. This reduced the magnitude of the effects in most cases, but the overall conclusions were the same. Increased turnout substantially increased Latino and Asian-American representation.

One concern with the results presented thus far is that they may be outdated. The data, in fact, are derived from elections that occurred two decades ago. In the interim much has changed in America. To see if turnout still matters, we repeated the analysis focused on city council elections in California in the years 1997—2000. As a majority-minority state, California, in many ways, represents the future of America and therefore makes for an important test case. City clerks in every incorporated city in the state were polled in 2000 to acquire data on voter turnout in the most recent city-level election and the institutional structure in each city.¹⁸ These data were merged with census data on each city so that we could conduct a nearly identical analysis to that in Table 4.1. The analysis (not shown) indicates that voter turnout continues to shape electoral outcomes. In these recent California elections, low turnout is once again associated with significantly lower representation for Latinos and overrepresentation of white Americans.

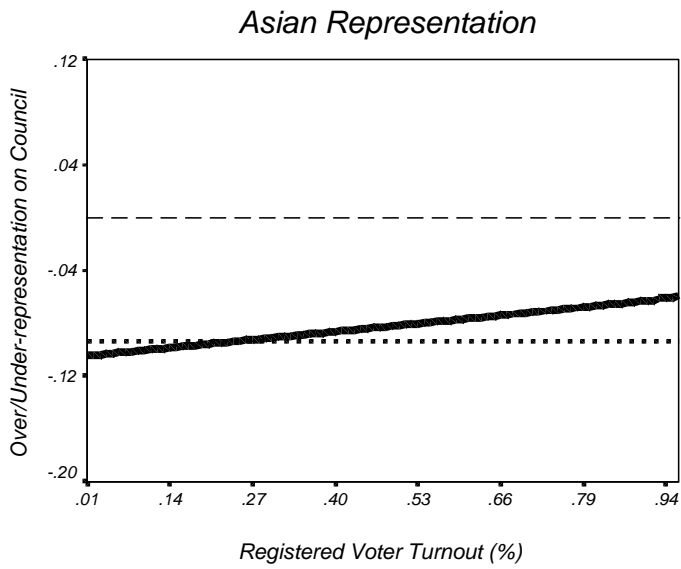
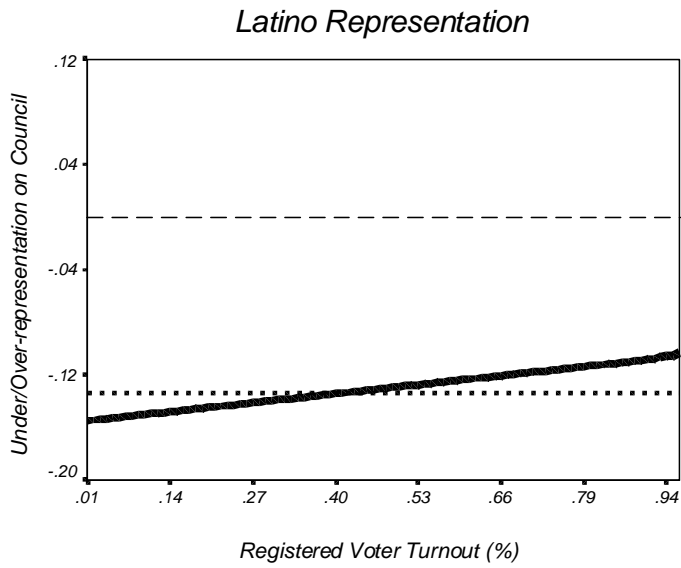
Equity in Representation

To gauge the substantive effects of turnout on racial/ethnic representation on city councils better, Figure 4.1 illustrates the relationship between turnout and proportional representation on city councils for each of the four racial/ethnic groups. To create Figure 4.1, we reran the analysis in Table 4.1, substituting a measure of the over/underrepresentation of each group (the percentage of a given racial/ethnic group on the council minus the percentage of that racial/ethnic group in the city's voting age population) as the dependent variable and then calculated predicted representation rates at a given turnout level for each group.¹⁹ For comparison purposes, each of the four graphs has a dotted line

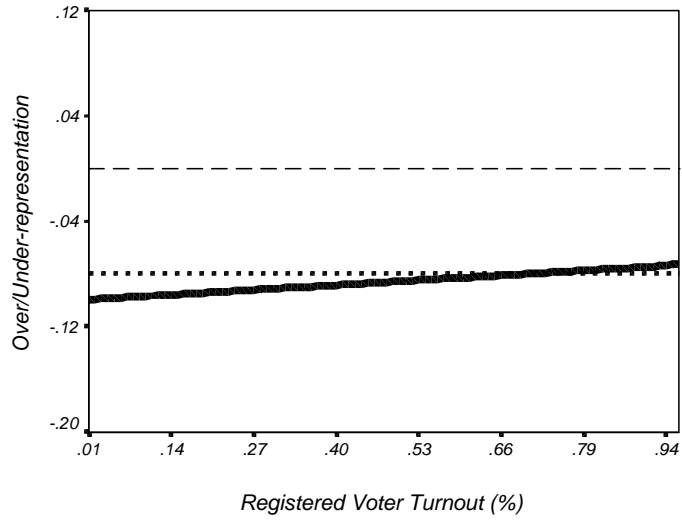
¹⁸ Of the 474 California cities in existence at the time of the survey, 397 clerks returned surveys. Our sample of cities is generally representative of all cities in the state of California.

¹⁹ The regression results, which essentially repeat Table 4.1, are available from the authors.

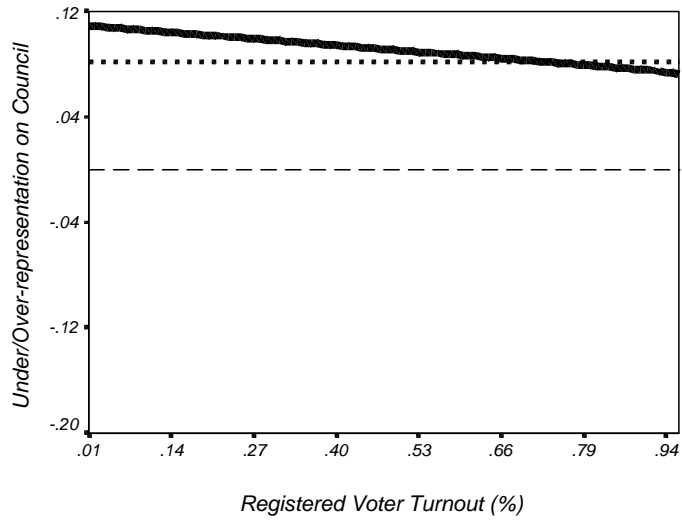
Figure 4.1. How Turnout Effects Racial/Ethnic Representation on City Councils



African American Representation



White Representation



Note: The solid line represents predicted values of over/under-representation. All independent variables other than turnout are held at their mean value. The dotted line represents the mean value of over/under-representation for a given racial/ethnic group. The dashed line indicates equity or proportional representation.

indicating the mean level of over/underrepresentation for each racial/ethnic group and a dashed line indicating parity or equity in representation.

It is worth re-emphasizing that nonwhites are greatly underrepresented on city councils nationwide. Latinos are the most underrepresented of any group. In cities where they represent 5% or more of the population, Latino representation averages 13% below parity. Thus, for example, if Latinos were 30% of the city population, one might expect Latinos to hold 17% of the city council seats. Asian Americans average nine points below parity, and African-American council representation averages eight points below parity. Also, for Latinos and Asian Americans, underrepresentation greatly increases as the size of each group grows. In cities where they represent at least a quarter of the population, Latinos are twenty-five points below parity and Asian Americans are twenty-two points below parity.

The question then becomes whether increased turnout can substantially reduce minority underrepresentation. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, the answer is a qualified yes. Increased turnout does not bring Latinos, Asian Americans, or African Americans to equity in representation on city councils, but for Latinos and Asian Americans, it has the potential to reduce underrepresentation considerably. For Latinos, moving from a city where 10% of registered voters turn out (the 10th percentile in terms of turnout) to a city where 69% of registered voters turn out (the 90th percentile) would decrease Latino underrepresentation on city councils by 3.2 percentage points, roughly eliminating one quarter of the thirteen-point underrepresentation. A similar increase in turnout could reduce Asian-American underrepresentation by 2.8 percentage points, roughly accounting for a third of the nine-point average underrepresentation of Asian Americans. Likewise for whites, a similarly large increase in turnout would eliminate roughly a quarter of white overrepresentation on city councils. In short, if we seek to expand descriptive representation for Latinos and Asian Americans, voter turnout is a critical factor to consider.²⁰

It is not unreasonable to expect large changes in turnout at the city level. Relatively small and easy to enact changes to local electoral structures appear to have dramatic effects on turnout. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) have, for example, demonstrated that one change—moving the dates of local elections to coincide with national and state elections—can greatly increase turnout. In California, changing from off-cycle elections to elections that coincide with national elections increased registered voter turnout by thirty-six percentage points (Hajnal, et al. 2002).

At the same time, Figure 4.1 tells us that turnout can rectify only part of the problem of minority underrepresentation. Clearly, there are other barriers to minority representation like citizenship, local electoral institutions, the costs of run-

²⁰ Descriptive representation and proportional representation obviously have both merits and shortcomings that are discussed in some detail in Guinier (1992), Thernstrom (1987), and Tate (2003). Judging by minority voting preferences in our mayoral contests and other past research, minority voters generally prefer minority candidates (McCrary 1990, Hero 1989, Hajnal n.d.).

ning a campaign, finding candidates with the requisite political experience, and internal group divisions that also need to be considered.

To test the robustness of these findings, we reran the analysis using two different measures of representational equity. In one set of tests, rather than look at small changes in representation, we calculated and used as the dependent variable the number of council seats that a given group was below racial parity. Given that it is impossible to win a proportion of a council seat, simply counting up the number of additional council seats that a group should have to achieve proportion representation in some ways more meaningfully captures the nature of electoral competition in cities. In another set of tests we reran the analysis with a logged representation ratio measure developed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995: see pages 571–77 for a description and explication of the measure). Although the logged representation ratio is harder to interpret, it has the advantage of being unaffected by the size of the group. Both alternate dependent variables led to similar conclusions about the effect of turnout on equity in council representation [analysis available from the authors].

Institutions and Representation

If we go back to Table 4.1 we can also learn about the relationships between institutional structure and minority representation. The table shows that changes in local institutional structures, an oft-cited alternative avenue to expanding minority representation, would only help one of the three minority groups: African Americans. Specifically, the coefficients in Table 4.1 indicate that moving from at-large to district elections and changing the dates of local elections to coincide with the dates of national elections would increase the proportion of blacks on city councils by a little over 6%, all else equal.²¹ Since black underrepresentation averages around 8% in our cities, these two institutional reforms could substantially reduce black underrepresentation. Moreover, given that most cities still retain at-large elections and off-cycle elections, it is clear that these two institutional changes could greatly influence black representation nationwide. None of the other proposed institutional solutions such as term limits, partisan elections, larger council size, or the mayor-council form of government is significantly related to African-American city council representation.

For Latinos and Asians Americans, these institutional changes seem—at least at first glance—to offer less hope in addressing inequalities in electoral outcomes. The absence of a clear link between institutional structures and Latino and Asian-American representation fits well with recent studies that have found little connection between local institutional structure and Asian-American and Latino representation (Segura 1999, Alozie 1992, Bullock and MacManus 1990). We suspect that part of the reason why these institutions matter less directly for Latinos and Asian

²¹ This simulation and others in the rest of the paper were calculated using Clarify holding all other independent variables at their mean or modal value.

Americans than for African Americans is that both groups face lower levels of segregation and vote less regularly against the majority of whites in racially polarized contests (Massey 2001, Hajnal and Trounstine 2005).

At the same time it is important to note that several of these institutional levers can have at least an indirect effect on racial/ethnic representation on city councils. Past research has shown that if we focus on registered voter turnout as the dependent variable, all of these institutions (except term limits) do affect voter turnout (Hajnal et al. 2002). This suggests that institutional reform may help each minority group by offering an avenue to expand turnout.²²

The Contingent Effects of Turnout

While one of the main goals of this research has been to show that the effects of turnout on minority representation are pronounced at the local level, this is, in many ways, only part of the story. There are also different contexts at the local level in which we would expect turnout to matter more than in others. Obviously, one of the biggest determinants of how much turnout matters for any given group is how large that group is.²³ Put very simply, one would expect increases (or decreases) in turnout to affect minority representation more in cities where the minority in question makes up a larger share of the population. If Asian Americans, for example, make up only a tiny fraction of the population in a given city, it doesn't really matter whether they turnout at a rate of 100% or 10%. Thus, in Table 4.2, we attempted to determine how the effects of turnout on representation vary by the size of the minority population. To do so we repeated the analysis in Table 4.1 adding interaction terms for turnout and the size of the relevant minority population.

²² Further, there is some indication that at least some of these institutional reforms could increase minority representation more directly when the group in question represents a large enough fraction of the local population. Adding interaction terms for institutional design and each group's population proportion led to some interesting but inconsistent results. In particular, as the size of the Asian-American and Latino population grows, a mayor-council form of government appears to increase Latino and Asian-American representation (and reduce white representation). However, other interactions revealed that as the size of these two groups increased, on-cycle elections appear to decrease Latino and Asian-American representation. Since these effects are inconsistent and not particularly robust to different model specifications, they are not presented in detail here. More work will have to be done to sort out these effects more clearly.

²³ A second set of factors that could mediate the effects of turnout are the electoral institutions of a city (Trounstine 2004). To see if institutions mediated the effects of turnout, we repeated the analysis in Table 4.1 adding interaction terms for turnout and each of the electoral institutions (district vs. at-large elections, term limits, partisan vs. nonpartisan elections, concurrent vs. nonconcurrent election timing, and mayor-council vs. city manager form of government). The results indicate that turnout effects are not significantly contingent on the type of electoral system (analysis not shown).

Table 4.2. Turnout Matters More When Groups Are Larger

	Whites	Blacks	Latinos	Asians
Turnout	-.21 (.09)*	.02 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.00)*
% white*turnout	.20 (.10)*	---	---	---
% black*turnout	---	-.04 (.07)	---	---
% latino*turnout	---	---	.29 (.07)*	---
% asian*turnout	---	---	---	.57 (.06)*
Districts	.00 (.01)	.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Concurrent	.00 (.01)	.03 (.01)*	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)
Partisan	.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.00)
Term Limits	.01 (.02)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.02)	-.01 (.00)*
Mayor	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Council Size	-.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)
Pop (log)	-.00 (.01)	.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)
Percent Poor	-.36 (.08)*	.39 (.12)*	.06 (.03)*	-.02 (.01)
Med. Income	.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.00)*
College Grads	-.12 (.05)*	.03 (.02)	.09 (.02)*	.00 (.01)
% Latino	-.71 (.06)*	.09 (.03)*	.58 (.03)*	.04 (.01)*
% Asian	-.40 (.11)*	.01 (.05)	.06 (.04)	.13 (.03)*
% Black	-.50 (.05)*	.58 (.03)*	-.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)
% Noncitizen	.81 (.10)*	-.15 (.05)*	-.51 (.04)*	-.39 (.11)*
West	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Midwest	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Northeast	.00 (.01)	.02 (.01)*	.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Constant	1.13 (.05)*	-.11 (.02)*	-.02 (.02)	.02 (.01)*
Adj. R2	.35	.54	.52	.33
N	1699	1699	1699	1699

Source: ICMA Survey 1986, Census 1990. Figures are coefficient and their standard errors

*p<.05

The results are clear. For all groups except African Americans the interaction terms are positive and significant, indicating that the effects of turnout on representation increase significantly as the group's proportion of the population of a city increases. In short, expanded turnout matters much more to Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites when their populations are large enough to affect the outcome of the vote substantially.

Conclusion

Our analysis has led us to identify two important barriers to minority representation in local politics. The first is voter turnout. The less regular voting participation of groups like Latinos and Asian Americans leads to their systematic underrepresentation on local governing bodies. The fact that minority candidates regularly fail to win because of turnout has important implications for democracy. Given that past studies have shown that minority representation has consequences not only for improving racial and ethnic relations but also for the distribution of public goods in cities, there is a real possibility that minorities are losing out due to low voter turnout (Hajnal 2001; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Eisinger 1983). In an era of policy devolution, as more and more policies are initiated and implemented at the local level and as the problems of many urban areas become more acute, the decisions that local voters make are taking on growing importance (Sellers 2001). While presidential and congressional elections get much of our attention, they are only one element of American democracy. The vast majority of elected officials emerge from local contests, and more votes are cast in the multitude of local elections than in national contests. In short, it matters who wins and who loses in a political arena that touches regularly on the lives of residents.

There is also the possibility that things will get worse before they get better. As Latinos and Asian Americans become ever larger portions of the urban electorate, their potential influence will increase but so will the odds that they regularly lose out due to lower turnout. Latino and Asian American nonvoting may be only symbolically important in places where Latinos and Asian Americans make up a tiny fraction of the electorate, but it is likely to be critical to the outcomes of elections and the distribution of public goods as these two groups begin to make up larger shares of the electorate.

Unfortunately, identifying the problem is likely to be easier than solving it. Solutions that increase overall local voter turnout rates are not difficult to find. As Hajnal and Lewis (2003) have shown, relatively minor changes to local electoral structures can have dramatic effects on overall turnout. One reform—moving local elections from off-cycle to on-cycle elections that coincide with the dates of national elections—increases local turnout by an average of thirty-six percentage points. This particular solution is especially appealing for three reasons. First, national surveys indicate that the vast majority of all municipal elections in the U.S. are not held concurrently with presidential contests (ICMA 1986, Wood 2002). Thus, changing the timing of local elections could affect turnout in the vast majority of cities. Second, this reform is relatively easy to enact, requiring, in most cases, only a change to local ordinances and in others, only alterations to city charters or state law. Finally, many cities are already actively considering changes to the timing of their elections, and there are strong incentives—aside from increasing minority representation—to switch to concurrent elections. In fact, the primary motivation for this move has usually been cost savings. In many states, municipalities typically pay the entire administrative costs of stand-alone elections, but

only a fraction of the costs of on-cycle elections.²⁴ In short, local institutional change is a feasible and potentially productive solution that could improve overall turnout.

But identifying feasible reforms that would specifically rectify the low turnout of racial and ethnic minorities is much more difficult. As Wong and Ramirez (2006) have shown, directly mobilizing racial and ethnic minorities with face-to-face contact can help. Others point to the presence of minority candidates and the establishment of majority-minority districts as critical (Barreto et al. 2004). Still others advocate a streamlined citizenship process, proportional representation, cumulative voting, universal registration, and a host of other solutions (Shaw et al. 2000, Guinier 1992). Each of these reforms has potential, but all are either costly or difficult to enact. Given the limited participation of minorities in the local political arena and the critical role that turnout plays in local elections, we need more work to determine the most cost effective and feasible solutions. This is clearly an important area for future research.

The other important conclusion to emerge from the research presented in this chapter is that local institutions can present an important barrier to minority representation. In line with past studies, we find that at-large elections and off-cycle local elections significantly reduce African-American representation. In this case, identifying the solution is easy. Moving from at-large to district elections and moving the dates of local elections to coincide with national contests could substantially reduce black underrepresentation at the local level. While there has sometimes been stronger opposition to moving to district elections than there has been to moving to on-cycle elections, both reforms are feasible.

At the same time, it is important to note that institutional change does not always work. Each of the electoral features that we examined was less obviously linked to Latino or Asian-American success in city council elections. This suggests that institutional structure may be much more important when a group is larger, more residentially segregated, more likely to vote as a block, and more likely to vote for candidates that are opposed by the white majority. For groups with a less-united vote and a less-clear place in America's racial hierarchy, solutions will undoubtedly be more complex.

²⁴ In some states, change is already occurring. One survey in California, for example, found that more than 40% of cities had changed the timing of municipal elections in recent years, with the vast majority of those switching from stand-alone elections to elections concurrent with statewide contests (Hajnal and Lewis 2003).

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