

THE *Current*

July 31, 2007

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UCSB Professor Studies Voting Rights Act and Election of Non-White Officials

Despite an increase in the number of non-white officials elected in recent decades, people of color continue to be significantly underrepresented at all levels of government. So concludes a study conducted by Pei-te Lien, a professor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Joined by colleagues at the University of Notre Dame, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of New Mexico, Lien examined the impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on the representation of people of color.

The results of the study were published in the July issue of "PS: Political Science & Politics," a journal of the American Political Science Association (APSA). A news release issued by APSA explains the findings in detail. The text follows:

New Study Explores Impact of Voting Rights Act on Election of Non-White Officials in the U.S.

Washington, DC--New research by political scientists examines the significance of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) for the political representation of people of color and documents "a substantial relationship between the VRA and the election of nonwhite officials at the national, state, and local levels."

The research was conducted by Pei-te Lien (University of California, Santa Barbara), Dianne M. Pinderhughes (University of Notre Dame), Carol Hardy-Fanta (University of Massachusetts Boston), and Christine Sierra (University of New Mexico).

Their article appears in the July issue of PS: Political Science & Politics, a journal of the American Political Science Association (APSA).

At the national level, despite the increase of nonwhite elected officials in recent decades, "nonwhites are still severely underrepresented in Congress," state the authors.

In 2000, nonwhites were 31% of the national population but less than 12% of House members. Whites remained overrepresented in the House--at 1.3 times their proportion in the population--followed by Blacks at 0.7, Latinos at 0.5, Asians at 0.2, and American Indians at 0.1.

The extension of VRA provisions to certain districts and creation of so-called "majority-minority" districts appear to have affected the election of greater numbers of minorities to Congress.

88% of Black congress members were elected from majority-minority districts in 2000 as were 24 of 25 Latino congress members.

Similarly, the vast majority of nonwhite House members were elected from districts covered by the VRA--particularly Section 203 which includes minority language provisions--including every single Latino member in the House.

At the state level, nonwhites are underrepresented and comprise only 12% of the total--or 891 of 7,382 state legislators.

Blacks were the largest group both in numbers (530) and the percent female (37%), followed by Latinos (229 members, 31% female), Asian Americans (85 members, 31% female) and American Indians (47 members, 21% female).

Notably, nonwhite women's percentages are higher than that of white women in state legislatures (21.3%).

The impact of the VRA appears significant here as well, with the vast majority of Asian (66%), Black (61%), and Latino (82%) state legislators being elected from districts covered by VRA provisions.

In contrast to their situation in Congress, and to that of other groups, the authors find that "only Black legislators are elected mostly from state districts in which the majority of the population is of the same race." They also note that "the lower degree of VRA coverage at the state legislative level for Asians and Latinos may help explain the representation deficit for these two groups."

Local officials make up 67% of Asian, 79% of Black, and 82% of Latino elected officials in the United States.

The authors found Latino support for Asian Americans at municipal and school board levels, and observe this could signal "a potentially critical role played by Latinos in deciding on local elections involving Asian candidates."

Black and Latino officials, by contrast, received their largest amount of nonwhite support from within their racial group.

Only a fraction of Black local officials were elected from majority Black counties, while no more than 30% of Black elected officials at the county level, 20% at the municipal level, and 18% at the school board level were elected from majority Black counties.

Only 40% of all local Black elected officials and 30% of Black municipal officials were elected from majority nonwhite counties.

Except for Asians at the county level, the preponderance of the nation's nonwhite officials in 2004 were elected from jurisdictions that protected by VRA provisions.

The authors also note that local officials of Asian descent tend to be elected from counties with a higher share of the foreign-born population.

"We find greater VRA coverage at the congressional than at the state legislative level," observe the authors, and state that "regardless of the level of office, we find that the vast majority of nonwhite elected officials were elected from jurisdictions covered by the VRA, especially Section 203." However, the authors find a very interesting pattern that challenges conventional wisdom--"there is a high correlation between the creation of majority-White districts and the election of Whites into the House of Representatives."

They conclude that "although Blacks were much more likely to be elected from jurisdictions under the coverage of Section 5 rather than Section 203, this was true

only at the state and local levels. We found that a greater share of Black House members were elected from districts with Section 203 coverage, and that Latinos were elected from congressional districts with the highest share of Section 5 coverage. Finally, we find that Asian local elected officials often represent jurisdictions that have a higher share of Latinos than Asians in the local population."

The Voting Rights Act is one of the most important public policies developed over the last half century to increase access to the U.S. political system for people of color.

In conducting this new research, the authors have documented the relationship between the VRA and the election of nonwhite officials in the U.S. today.

The American Political Science Association (est. 1903) is the leading professional organization for the study of politics and has over 14,000 members in 80 countries. For more news and information about political science research visit the APSA media website, www.politicalsciencenews.org.

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