

Winners and Losers: Factors Contributing to Minority Candidates'
Successes and Failures in American Elections, 1990-2006

Charlton McIlwain
New York University
Cdm1@nyu.edu

Stephen Maynard Caliendo
North Central College
smcaliendo@noctrl.edu

Elizabeth Konrad
North Central College



Abstract

Having compiled a heretofore unavailable list of federal election contests involving at least one minority candidate between 1990 and 2006 (both challengers and victors), we now have a unique data set that includes a number of variables such as amount of money raised/spent by the candidates, incumbency status, racial makeup of districts, exit poll data, amount of news coverage, and degree of racialized news coverage. Based on these data, we provide a descriptive composite of minority candidate characteristics and an assessment of what factors tend to relate to minority candidates' success or failure between over the past sixteen years.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2008 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.

We would like to thank Ann Fisher and Gwen Bowman at North Central College for their help with collecting data for this project.

The question about what determines minority candidates' electoral success has been generally seen as moot in the absence of substantive competition due, in part, to racial gerrymandering and the creation of majority-minority electoral districts. However, as minority candidates increasingly vie competitively for seats against other minority candidates, as well as against whites, this is an outdated assumption. Additionally, though “competition” has, until recently, been low in majority-minority electoral districts, both the challengers and victors in these contests have contributed to the electoral dynamics of minority elections and the overall picture of minority elected officials. We reject the assumption that history is (and should be) told by and focus on the victors. This paper presents a unique portrait of minority elections and candidates for federal office by not only providing statistically descriptive data about their characteristics as a group, but by analyzing what factors are related to the success of minority candidates between 1990 and 2006.

Previous Literature

Much of the scholarly work on the electoral success of racial minority candidates is focused on case studies of elected officials,¹ specific candidates,² or of a single geographic area,³ particularly Los Angeles,⁴ other parts of California⁵ and Atlanta.⁶ Other work has centered on the theory of democratic representation and the creation of majority-minority electoral districts.⁷ While most work has centered on African Americans, there are several

¹ See Gerber (1996).

² See Beckler and Heaton (1967), Hahn and Klingman (1976), Jeffries (2000) and Sonenstein (1990).

³ See Kaufmann (2003a), Lieske and Hillard (1984), Liu (2001) and Lovrich, Sheldon and Wasmann (1988).

⁴ See Abrajano, Nagler and Alvarez (2005), Austin and Middleton (2004), Hahn and Almy (1971), Hahn and Klingman (1976), Halley, Acock and Greene (1976), Sonenshein (1989) and Sonenshein and Pinkus (2002).

⁵ See Collett (2005), Barreto, Seguar and Woods (2004), Fong (1998) and Lien (2002).

⁶ See Bullock (1984) and Jennings and Ziegler (1966).

⁷ See Cameron, Epstein and O'Halloran (1996), Epstein and O'Halloran (1999), Gerber (1996), Grofman, Griffin and Glazer (1992), Grofman and Handley (1989) Lublin (1997; 1999) and Morton and Rietz (1998).

studies that examine candidacies of South- and Central Asian candidates.⁸ Most studies are concerned with vote choice (as ours is), but attention has been directed toward voter turnout⁹ and the role of race of voters and candidates with respect to the rate of uncounted votes.¹⁰ The bulk of published studies center – explicitly or implicitly – on white attitudes toward minority candidates,¹¹ but some attention has been paid to the role of minority voters’ support for white candidates,¹² or for other minority candidates.¹³

What is not available in the extant literature is an aggregate portrait of minority candidates’ electoral successes and failures. While it is relatively easy to generate a list of racial minorities who have been elected to office, identifying those who have failed in their bids is much more difficult. There are a number of sources that provide election results (which, necessarily, list losing candidates’ names), but these sources do not include candidates’ race. Without such a list, no data can be examined to identify trends in the numbers of, types of and conditions under which minority candidates who have sought public office throughout U.S. history. This paper is a very preliminary cut at a new dataset that will fill that gap.

Data, Method & Research Questions

The principal purpose of this study is to gain a broad picture of how minority congressional candidates fare in general election scenarios with regard to the election outcome, as well as a variety of factors that might have influenced those outcomes. To

⁸ See Collet (2005), Kurien (2003) and Lien (2002).

⁹ See Barreto, Seguar and Woods (2004) and Washington (2006).

¹⁰ See Herron and Sekhon (2005).

¹¹ See Colleau et al. (1990), Highton (2004), Jeffries and Jones (2006), Liu (2001), McDermott (1998), Sigelman and Sigelman (1982), Sigelman and Welch (1984), Sigelman et al. (1995), Sonenshein (1990) and Terkildsen (1993).

¹² See Grofman, Griffin and Glazer (1992).

¹³ See Kaufmann (2003a; 2003b) and McClain and Karnig (1990).

accomplish this, we constructed a dataset that included congressional contests that included at least one racial minority candidate in the general election. The dataset includes contests from 1990 to 2006, and includes only candidates from the two major political parties in the U.S. The backbone of the dataset was comprised from election data from the Congressional Quarterly Statistical Universe database. This provided us a complete electronic database of every general election congressional contest in every state from 1960 to 2006, including the following variables about each separate contest: election year, state and congressional district, the total number of votes cast in the contest, the raw vote totals and percentage vote for both Democratic and Republican party candidates.

For this paper, we narrowed the dataset down to contests that took place in 1990 and subsequent years. We included a *candidate race* variable that identified the racial/ethnic background of each candidate. We comprised these data based on lists of current and past members of Congress and a variety of sources that provided some clue as to the racial identification of both electoral winners and their challengers.¹⁴ This yielded a dataset that includes election contests in which the following racial groups are represented: African American, Caucasian, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern and Native American. To the list of variables included in the original dataset we added a variable for the amount of money each candidate raised in the election contest and the racial composition of the district, which we compiled from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Fast Facts for Congress and related information sources. Table 1 presents some descriptive characteristics of the dataset.

¹⁴ These sources include newspaper articles that may have included a photo of the candidate or referred to his or her race, congressional member profiles, Wikipedia/Congresspedia, the Political Graveyard, and others.

Table 1. Dataset Characteristics

Candidate Race	Republican	Democrat	Total # Cases	Total # Candidates
African American	32	289	.	321
Latino	115	189	.	204
Asian	9	34	.	43
Middle Eastern	7	3	.	10
Indian	2	1	.	3
White	337	67	.	404
TOTAL	502	838	591	1,086 ¹⁵

Research Questions

Our research questions for this paper are, of course, limited by the specific characteristics of the dataset we have constructed to date. Though we will include more variables and data covering a longer time period in the future, the existing data allow us to address a variety of important questions about minority candidates, election outcomes and factors influencing those outcomes that are important to our understanding about the past and future of minority participation in electoral life.

Our first set of questions relate to the demographics of candidates and their electoral populations:

- RQ₁: Are minority congressional candidates clustered in particular states and geographic regions?
- RQ₂: Is such clustering related primarily to the racial composition of the districts in which they run and/or the racial composition of the state population?
- RQ₃: Are there significant differences between racial groups in terms of the number of individual candidates running for office?

¹⁵ Ninety-six contests were uncontested (only featured one candidate).

RQ₄: Is there a significant change in the number of election contests that include minority candidates over the time period under examination?

RQ₅: Are minority candidates’ party affiliations significantly different from one another?

Our remaining questions relate to election outcomes:

RQ₆: To what degree does the racial population of the election district influence electoral success or failure?

RQ₇: To what degree does the amount of money raised by the candidates influence their electoral success or failure?

RQ₈: Are candidates from some minority groups more successful than others in terms of their ability to win the election?

Results

Descriptives

Our first questions are descriptive in nature, addressing “where” and “when” questions about minority candidates for office over the past two decades. We are interested in discovering from what geographical regions minority candidates most frequently come, as well as how the number of minorities running for office has changed over time. Figure 1 gives us a geographical sense of minority

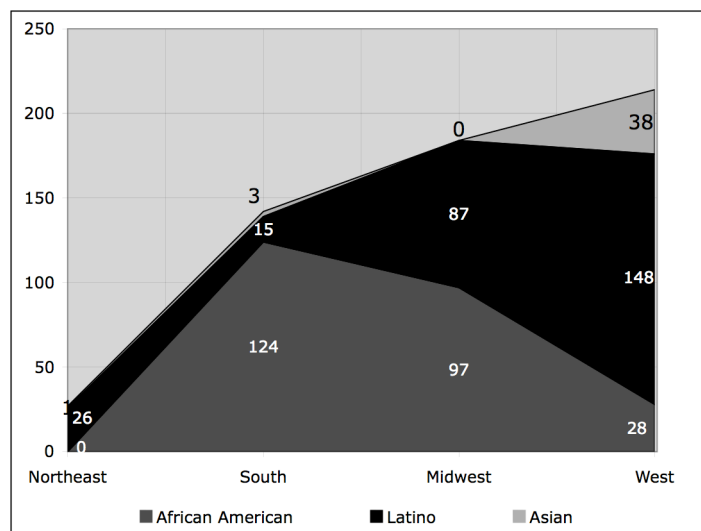


Figure 1. Minority Candidates, 1990-2006 by Region

candidate participation based on the region of the country where the candidates ran for office and the racial/ethnic group to which they belong. Here we see that while African American candidates are spread across the geographical regions of the country, other groups tend to be clustered in particular regions. This is particularly true for Asian American candidates who run almost exclusively on the West Coast (mostly California). This is also characteristic of Latino candidates, though to a lesser degree; the Midwest and West Coast are the regions where they are most represented. California (111) and Texas (70) host the bulk of these candidates.

Latino candidates from the Northeast are almost exclusively from New York, and in the South (mostly Florida). Illinois is home to the bulk of the few Middle Eastern candidates who have run (not represented in this graph).

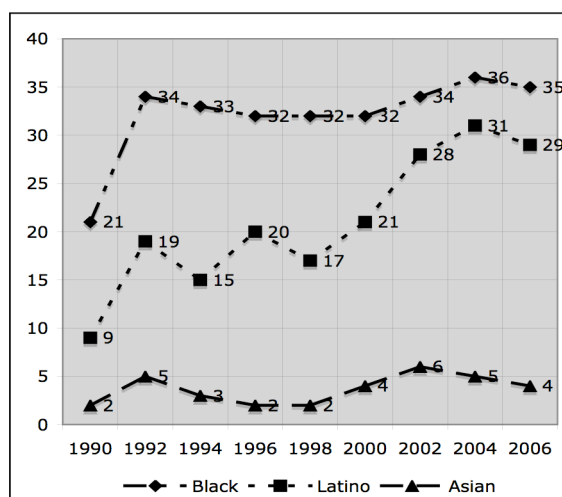


Figure 2. Number of Minority Candidates, 1990-2006

When we look at changes over time in terms of the number of minority candidates running for Congress, we see relative stagnation with African American candidates, while the majority of the changes over time have taken place among Latinos. Looking at Figure 2, we see that the number of African Americans running for Congress – winners and losers – saw their greatest increase between 1990 and 1992 and have remained about the same ever since. The number of Latino candidates shows the most dramatic rate of both increase and volatility over the fifteen-year period.

Table 2. Mean Vote % of Minority Democratic Candidates

	Mean Vote %	SD	N	P<
Black	80.3	16	289	
White	54.2	17	67	.00
Black	80.3	16	289	
Latino	66.5	21	189	.00
Black	80.3	16	289	
Asian	64.3	11	34	.00
Latino	66.5	21	189	
Asian	64.3	11	34	.57

The frequency and geographical representation of minority candidates leads us to ask a natural question: Is the racial composition of election districts related to these phenomena? To address this question, we calculated the mean percentage of the racial population of the district that matched the racial group of the candidate, as well as the total minority population in the district. In Figure 3, we see that both blacks and Latinos tend to run in areas where they are highly represented in the district population, as well as when the percentage of the overall minority population is high. Asian American candidates are less tied to districts where they and other minorities comprise the majority of the population. Of course, this is mitigated by the earlier finding that Asian American candidates generally come from a single area of the country.

Outcomes

Beyond describing some of the important characteristics of minority candidates’ participation in electoral politics at the congressional level, we are interested in how these candidates

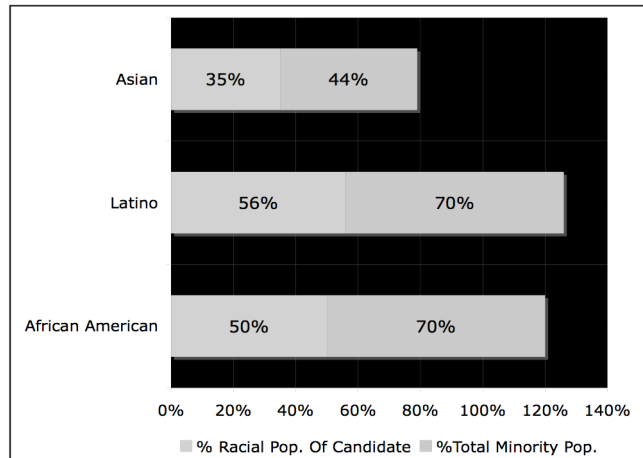


Figure 3. Minority Candidates & Racial Composition of District

fare in general and some of the factors contributing to electoral success.

For some initial evidence about such outcomes, we compared the mean vote percentage garnered by candidates from the different racial groups and party affiliations to see whether certain candidates were more successful overall – both in terms of being elected, but also in terms of the relative amount of vote support they received. Tables 2 reflects evidence that black Democratic candidates maintain a sizeable share of voting support when compared to each of the other groups. This includes the overall support received across all election contests, not only candidates from these particular groups running against each other. Among minority candidates who run under the banner of the Republican Party, the story is a bit different.

Each minority group’s share of the vote is dramatically and uniformly lower than those affiliated with the Democratic Party. These results, in conjunction with those reported earlier in Figure 3, bear out the stronghold that minority candidates (blacks more than Latinos and Asians) have on districts where they comprise a majority of the population.

Table 3. Mean Vote % of Minority Republican Candidates

	Mean Vote %	SD	N	P<
Black	36.3	15	32	
White	31.3	17	337	.11
Black				
Black	36.3	15	32	
Latino	41.1	22	115	.25
Asian				
Black	36.3	15	32	
Asian	36.4	22	9	.95
Latino				
Latino	41.1	22	115	
Asian	36.4	22	9	.54

Finally, we wanted to ascertain some indication, with the data available to us, of what might be some of the principal factors influencing these voting totals garnered by minority candidates.¹⁶ In order to do this we ran a series of regressions with each racial group individually. We tested three predictor variables (stepwise) in each case: the

¹⁶ For these tests we include only Democratic Party candidates and used Democratic Vote Percentage as the dependent variable.

percentage of the population matching the racial identity of the candidate; the total percentage of the district that is minority; and the amount of money raised.

Table 3. Factors Relating to Minority Candidates’ Success

Black Candidates	1	2	3
Black % in population	1.542 (.050)	.375 (.126)	.370 (.128)
Total % minorities in population		.898 (.093)	.890 (.098)
Money Raised			1.106 (.000)
F	962.602 (p<.00)	962.602 (p<.00)	1053.192 (P<.00)
Adj. R ²	.919	.961	.961
Latino Candidates			
Latino % in population	1.11 (.042)	-.285 (.243)	-.262 (.237)
Total % minorities in population		1.159 (.199)	1.089 (.197)
Money raised			5.180 (.000)
F	706.304 (p<.00)	561.459 (p<.00)	394.621 (p<.00)
Adj. R ²	.919	.948	.950

While each of these factors individually are strong predictors of the percentage of votes garnered for both black and Latino candidates, money clearly matters here (as it does more broadly). Even controlling for money raised, though, the greater the percentage of racial minorities in the population, the greater the share of the vote. It should be noted that the percentage of the population of the same race as the candidate matters significantly, but not as much as the overall percentage of racial minorities.

Discussion

The findings above provide a first cut at a new dataset that will prove to be valuable in identifying trends in the candidacies of racial minorities who have sought public office. After constructing a dataset that includes both successful and unsuccessful

racial minorities who have sought public office between 1990 and 2006, we found that while black candidates tend to run in areas throughout the United States, Asian and Middle Eastern candidates are limited in the geographic areas in which they run. Over the period of time under examination, there is a stagnation of African American candidacies, but a notable increase in the candidacies of Latinos. Both Latinos and African Americans tend to run in majority-minority districts; while Asian Americans are not similarly inclined, their candidacies are centered in California. It is no surprise that minority candidates receive a greater share of the vote when they run as Democrats as compared to Republicans. Further, those Democrats are more successful when the district in which they run has a high percentage of minorities in the population.

Clearly, there is much more that needs to be examined with these newly collected data. We are nearly finished compiling data back to the 1960 elections, which will give us an even wider snapshot of racial minority candidates' bids for elected office in the United States. Additionally, we have been examining newspaper coverage in each of these races to ascertain the type and quantity of news coverage given to contests that feature at least one racial minority candidate. As Barack Obama moves closer to securing the Democratic presidential nominee (by winning substantial proportions of the white vote in most states), there is significant potential to get a clearer picture of the trajectory of racial minority candidates' wins and losses throughout history.

References

Abrajano, Marisa A., Jonathan Nagler, and R. Michael Alvarez. 2005. “A Natural Experiment of Race-Based and Issue Voting: The 2001 City of Los Angeles Elections.” *Political Research Quarterly* 58: 203-218.

- Austin, Sharon D. Wright, and Richard T. Middleton. 2004. “The Limitations of the Deracialization Concept in the 2001 Los Angeles Mayoral Election.” *Political Research Quarterly* 57: 283-293.
- Barreto, Matt A., Gary M. Segura and Nathan D. Woods. 2004. “The Mobilizing Effect of Majority-Minority Districts on Latino Turnout.”
- Becker, John F., and Eugene E. Heaton, Jr. 1967. “The Election of Edward W. Brooke.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 31: 346-358.
- Bullock, Charles S. III. 1984. “Racial Crossover Voting and the Election of Black Officials.” *The Journal of Politics* 46: 238-251.
- Cameron, Charles, David Epstein, and Sharyn O’Halloran. 1996. “Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress?” *American Political Science Review* 90: 794-812.
- Collet, Christian. 2005. “Block Voting, Polarization, and the Panethnic Hypothesis: The Case of Little Saigon.” *The Journal of Politics* 67: 907-933.
- Colleau, Sophie M., Kevin Glynn, Steven Lybrand, Richard M. Merelman, Paula Mohan, and James E. Wall. 1990. “Symbolic Racism in Candidate Evaluation: An Experiment.” *Political Behavior* 12: 385-402.
- Epstein, David, and Sharyn O’Halloran. 1999. “Measuring the Electoral and Policy Impact of Majority-Minority Voting Districts.” *American Journal of Political Science* 43: 367-395.
- Fong, Timothy P. 1998. “Why Ted Dang Lost: An Analysis of the 1994 Mayoral Race in Oakland, California.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 1: 153-171.

- Gerber, Alan. 1996. "African Americans' Congressional Careers and the Democratic House Delegation." *The Journal of Politics* 58: 81-845.
- Gerber, Elisabeth R., Rebecca B. Morton, and Thomas A. Rietz. 1998. "Minority Representation in Multimember Districts." *American Political Science Review* 92: 127-144.
- Grofman, Bernard, and Lisa Handley. 1989. "Black Representation: Making Sense of Electoral Geography at Different Levels of Government." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 14: 265-279.
- Grofman, Bernard, Robert Griffin, and Amihai Glazer. 1992. "The Effect of Black Population on Electing Democrats and Liberals to the House of Representatives." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17: 365-379.
- Hahn, Harlan. 1971. "Ethnic Politics and Racial Issues: Voting in Los Angeles." *The Western Political Quarterly* 24: 719-730.
- Hahn, Harlan, and Timothy Almy. 1971. "Ethnic Policies and Racial Issues: Voting in Los Angeles." *The Western Political Quarterly* 24: 719-730.
- Hahn, Harlan, and David Klingman. 1976. "The First Bradley-Yorty Election: A Reanalysis of a Reconsideration." *The Western Political Quarterly* 29: 645-646.
- Halley, Robert M., Alan C. Acock, and Thomas H. Greene. 1976. "Ethnicity and Social Class: Voting in the 1973 Los Angeles Municipal Elections." *The Western Political Quarterly* 29: 521-530.
- Herron, Michael C., and Jasjeet S. Sekhon. 2005. "Black Candidates and Black Voters: Assessing the Impact of Candidate Race on Uncounted Vote Rates." *The Journal of Politics* 67: 154-177.

- Highton, Benjamin. 2004. "White Voters and African American Candidates for Congress." *Political Behavior* 26: 1-25.
- Jeffries, Judson L. 2000. *Virginia's Native Son: The Election and Administration of Governor L. Douglas Wilder*. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Jeffries, Judson L., and Charles E. Jones. 2006. "Blacks Who Run for Governor and the U.S. Senate: An Examination of their Candidacies." *The Negro Educational Review* 57: 243-261.
- Jennings, M. Kent, and Harmon Ziegler. 1966. "Class, Party, and Race in Four Types of Elections: The Case of Atlanta." *The Journal of Politics* 28: 391-407.
- Kaufmann, Karen M. 2003a. "Black and Latino Voters in Denver: Responses to Each Other's Political Leadership." *Political Science Quarterly* 118: 107-125.
- Kaufmann, Karen M. 2003b. "Cracks in the Rainbow: Group Commonality as a Basis for Latino and African-American Political Coalitions." *Political Research Quarterly* 56: 199-210.
- Kurien, Prema. 2003. "To Be or Not to Be South Asian: Contemporary Indian American Politics." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6: 261-288.
- Lien, Pei-Te. 2002. "Public Resistance to Electing Asian Americans in Southern California." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5: 51-72.
- Lieske, Joel, and Jan William Hillard. 1984. "The Racial Factor in Urban Elections." *The Western Political Quarterly* 37: 545-563.
- Liu, Baodong. 2001. "Racial Contexts and White Interests: Beyond Black Threat and Racial Tolerance." *Political Behavior* 23: 157-180.

- Lovrich, Nicholas P., Jr., Charles H. Sheldon, and Erik Wasmann. 1988. "The Racial Factor in Nonpartisan Judicial Elections: A Research Note." *The Western Political Quarterly* 41: 807-816.
- Lublin, David. 1997. *The Paradox of Representation: Racial Gerrymandering and Minority Interests in Congress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lublin, David. 1999. "Racial Redistricting and African-American Representation: A Critique of 'Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress.'" *American Political Science Review* 93: 183-186.
- McClain, Paula D., and Albert K. Karnig. 1990. "Black and Hispanic Socioeconomic and Political Competition." *The American Political Science Review* 84: 535-545.
- McDermott, Monika L. 1998. "Race and Gender Cues in Low-Information Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 51: 895-918.
- Sigelman, Lee, and Susan Welch. 1984. "Race, Gender, and Opinion Toward Black and Female Presidential Candidates." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 48: 467-475.
- Sigelman, Lee, and Carol K. Sigelman. 1982. "Sexism, Racism, and Ageism in Voting Behavior: An Experimental Analysis." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 45: 263-269.
- Sigelman, Carol K., Lee Sigelman, Barbara J. Walkosz, and Michael Nitz. 1995. "Black Candidates, White Voters: Understanding Racial Bias in Political Perceptions." *American Journal of Political Science* 39: 243-265.
- Sonenshein, Raphael J. 1989. "The Dynamics of Biracial Coalitions: Politics in Los Angeles." *The Western Political Quarterly* 42: 333-353.

Sonenshein, Raphael J. 1990. “Can Black Candidates Win Statewide Election?” *Political Science Quarterly* 105: 219-241.

Sonenshein, Raphael J., and Susan H. Pinkus. 2002. “The Dynamics of Latino Political Incorporation: The 2001 Los Angeles Mayoral Election as Seen in *Los Angeles Times* Exit Polls.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35: 67-74.

Terkildsen, Nayda. 1993. “When White Voters Evaluate Black Candidates: The Processing Implications of Candidate Skin Color, Prejudice, and Self-Monitoring.” *American Journal of Political Science* 37: 1032-1053.