

WHITE VOTERS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CANDIDATES FOR CONGRESS

Benjamin Highton

The vast majority of African American officeholders are elected from jurisdictions with sizable numbers of African Americans. The most common explanation for this phenomenon locates the cause among white voters who are reluctant to vote for black candidates, which thereby limits the electoral prospects of black candidates in white constituencies. This study analyzes exit poll data from the 1996 and 1998 House elections in order to test the notion that white voters are averse to black candidates. Despite theoretical expectations that predict the existence of white voter discrimination against African American candidates, remarkably little is apparent. Thus, other explanations for patterns of African American officeholding in the United States need to be pursued.

Key words: African American; black; elections; voting; Congress.

Two observations about the election of African Americans to political office stand out. First, African Americans are underrepresented among elected officials in the United States. At virtually all levels of government the proportion of black elected officials is smaller than the proportion of blacks in the population.¹ Second, when they do win, African American candidates are often elected from jurisdictions with sizable, often majority, black populations. The record of black candidate success in largely white districts is abysmal. For example, Canon (1999) calculates that in House elections held in majority white districts between 1966 and 1996, only 35 (0.52%) were won by African Americans.²

Although the general pattern of black electoral success is clear, its meaning and explanation remain the subject of substantial disagreement. This article focuses on the leading hypothesis invoked to explain patterns of African American officeholding, which locates the cause among white voters who are averse

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to voting for black candidates. This view has been called the “conventional wisdom” (Swain, 1995, p. 209). Moreover, “much of the literature on the Voting Rights Act simply assumes that racial polarization precludes minorities from winning election in white majority districts” (Lublin, 1997, p. 40). Indeed, if white voters are reluctant to vote for black candidates, then African American candidate success will be limited largely to places with large black populations. Thus, assessing the validity of the claim is an important task with implications for debates surrounding racial redistricting, theories of prejudice, and the operation of the American electoral system.

In this article, I provide new empirical evidence regarding the reaction of white voters to African American candidates by analyzing exit polls from congressional elections held in 1996 and 1998. The article proceeds by reviewing previous research and then describing the research design and data for the present investigation. After reporting the results, I consider the limitations and implications of the findings, paying special attention to understanding the patterns of African American electoral success.

AFRICAN AMERICAN CANDIDATES AND WHITE VOTER DISCRIMINATION

A widely accepted truth about African American candidates serves as a good starting point for considering previous research: The success of African American candidates is positively related to the proportion of blacks in the population.³ Where there are more blacks in an electoral jurisdiction, black candidates are more likely to be elected to office. In areas dominated by whites, black electoral success is rare. In a variety of electoral contexts this relationship has been demonstrated (Bositis, 1998; Bullock, 1975; Cameron, Epstein, and O’Halloran, 1996; Epstein and O’Halloran, 1999a; Grofman and Handley, 1989; Handley, Grofman, and Arden, 1998; Lublin, 1997; Lublin and Voss, 2000). The obvious question is, Why? How can this empirical regularity be explained?

The leading hypothesis contends that white voters prefer white candidates to black ones, thereby placing severe limits on the likelihood of black candidate success. Consider:

One manifestation of the racial factor in American politics has been the reluctance of the white electorate to support black office seekers. (Jones and Clemons, 1993, p. 129)

Black electoral success has been limited by the unwillingness of whites to vote for blacks running against whites. (Piliawsky, 1989, p. 6)

The paucity of black officeholders from non-majority-black areas is due in significant

part to the continued racial animus underlying whites' political thinking and voting behavior. (Reeves, 1997, p. 9)

White voters must be held responsible for the low levels of African American elected officials in majority white districts. (Terkildsen, 1993, p. 1050)

The notion is straightforward. Some, arguably many, whites harbor anti-black beliefs and attitudes that make them less likely to support an African American candidate for elective office. In short, white voters discriminate against black candidates. As mentioned above, this "conventional wisdom" informs the thinking about voting rights and racial redistricting. If the hypothesis is correct, then the explanation for patterns of black electoral success lies with white voters who are averse to African American candidates. Because of opposition from whites, black candidate viability remains limited to jurisdictions without sizable numbers of whites. In other words, when African Americans are elected, they will emerge from electoral districts with large black populations.⁴

The hypothesis that white voters discriminate against black candidates derives from theories of prejudice. For the purposes of this article, the particulars of theories such as social dominance, old-fashioned racism, and racial resentment are less important than the observation that most theories of prejudice, by specifying that whites (at least some of them) harbor anti-black views, provide theoretical support for the hypothesis that white voters discriminate against black candidates. Thus, the hypothesis does not exist merely as a convenient explanation for patterns of black officeholding. It has strong theoretical roots, too.

On the empirical side, the key to any hypothesis test rests on some sort of comparison.⁵ For example, consider a white voter facing the choice between a Democratic candidate and a Republican one. Holding other factors constant, the discrimination hypothesis predicts that the probability of voting Democratic will be lower if the Democratic candidate is African American rather than white. Similarly, the hypothesis predicts that the probability of voting Democratic will be higher if the Republican candidate is black rather than white.

Most directly, the discrimination hypothesis relates to the counterfactual condition of a candidate's race being different from what it actually is. Of course it is impossible to observe counterfactual situations, and, therefore, creating other kinds of "controlled" comparisons is necessary. Scholars have done this in a variety of ways. Through a review of this scholarship, I developed a research design that draws on the strengths of previous approaches in order to overcome some of the limitations and provide evidence regarding the response of white voters to black candidates.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Scholars have employed a variety of approaches to assess how white voters react to black candidates. Experimental evidence comes from four leading studies (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994; Reeves, 1997; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walosz, and Nitz, 1995; Terkildsen 1993). Although these studies vary in their design, samples, and stimuli, they are similar in two important respects. First, compared to many experiments that rely on “college sophomores,” these studies have stronger claims for generalization because their subjects are adults of varying ages and backgrounds (i.e., they are more representative of the actual voting population). Second, each experiment randomly assigns the race of a candidate; some experimental subjects are presented with African American candidates and others with white ones.

The results of these studies provide some support for the white voter discrimination hypothesis. Terkildsen (1993) finds that whites are “slightly more willing to vote for the white candidate” (p. 1040), an effect that was significantly more pronounced among those who scored high on a scale of racial prejudice. Moskowitz and Stroh (1994) also provide evidence that whites evaluate black candidates more negatively. In contrast Sigelman et al. (1995) find the effect of a candidate’s race to be minor. Finally, Reeves (1997) finds that in one experimental manipulation where the issue emphasis was on the environment, a black candidate was slightly advantaged. In another one where the emphasis was on affirmative action, the vote margin was unaffected by candidate race. However, the proportion of respondents that chose “undecided” increased.⁶

Taken together, the findings from the experimental approaches are mixed; they do not tell a consistent story. Even if they did, additional research would still be required. Because they were experiments and, by necessity, conducted outside actual campaign environments, questions of generality arise.⁷ At the same time, there are two important strengths of these studies on which I base my research design. First, rather than focusing on aggregate outcomes, they directly address the choices of individuals. This is important because the white voter discrimination hypothesis specifies a behavior at the individual level. Thus, keeping an analytic focus on individuals, if possible, is highly desirable. Second, the experimental approach acknowledges that there exist differences across candidates and that ascertaining the effect of a candidate’s race requires that other factors be held constant. Although the method I adopt in this study is not random assignment in the context of an experiment, the motivation is the same. In order to attribute differences in voting to the race of candidates, other factors must be taken into account.

In addition to experimental work, nonexperimental studies have also been conducted. These attempt to estimate white support for African American

candidates and compare it to white support for white candidates in congressional elections (Bullock, 2000; Bullock and Dunn, 1999; Gay, 1999; Voss and Lublin, 2001).⁸ Like the results from the experimental studies, these provide mixed findings and have important limitations. Bullock analyzes precinct-level election returns in Georgia and, using two methods of ecological inference (homogenous precinct analysis and ecological regression), estimates white voter support for two black Democratic incumbent representatives in the 1996 general election, both of whom won their contests. He estimates that Cynthia McKinney and Sanford Bishop received about 30% and 37%, respectively, of the white vote, not all that different from the estimated white support for the two most successful white Democratic candidates in Georgia.⁹ Voss and Lublin employ King's (1997) method of ecological inference on the 1996 Georgia elections and find a similar pattern of results.¹⁰

In contrast to Bullock (2000) and Voss and Lublin (2001) are two studies that find substantially lower support for African American candidates among whites. Bullock and Dunn (1999) employ a variety of ecological inference techniques to analyze the Democratic vote in almost 90 congressional elections in the South between 1992 and 1998. In some of the elections, the Democratic candidate was black; in others the Democratic candidate was white. For each contest they estimate white support for the Democratic candidate. Then, they regress estimated white support on two variables, race of the Democratic candidate and incumbency. Their three methods all lead to the same finding: white candidates received an estimated 10 percentage points more of the white vote than black candidates. Gay (1999) provides a similar result. She analyzed 1994 congressional voting in five states and derived precinct-level estimates of white support for Democratic congressional candidates. Comparing Democratic support for black and white Democratic candidates, and taking into account a variety of precinct-level demographic and political variables along with incumbency, Gay estimates that white support for the eight black candidates, all of whom were incumbents, was, on average 10 percentage points lower than white support for white Democratic candidates.¹¹

Thus the set of ecological findings are inconclusive, too. And, despite the strength of the research that derives from the study of actual elections rather than experimentally created ones, there are some limitations. Specifically, even if one accepts the procedure as valid, techniques of ecological inference do not permit the introduction of individual-level control variables.¹² Testing the discrimination hypothesis requires comparing the support for white and black candidates, holding other nonexplicitly racial factors constant. Ecological approaches allow a researcher to take into account election-level variables like incumbency, but it is also important to take into account the characteristics of voters. Consider the 10-percentage point gap in white support for black and

white Democratic candidates that both Bullock and Dunn (1999) and Gay (1999) reveal. If there are systematic differences (e.g., partisanship or ideology) between white voters in districts with and without black candidates, then one would expect different levels of support for black candidates even if white voters do not discriminate against them. Confidently concluding that white voters discriminate against black candidates requires a model that takes into account election-level and individual-level variables.

To briefly summarize, despite the insights provided by previous research, further study is necessary. Drawing on the strengths of experimental studies and ecological studies, I attempt to provide more convincing evidence on the question of white voter discrimination against black candidates.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

Consider a hypothetical voter who would discriminate against a black candidate. In an election between two white candidates, his probability of voting for the Democratic candidate would not be affected by this characteristic and instead would be determined by usual factors like party identification, economic assessments, and incumbency. However, if the Democratic candidate is African American and the Republican one is not, then because the voter discriminates against black candidates, his probability of voting Democratic will be lower than one expects on the basis of the other factors that influence vote choice. Similarly, if the Republican candidate is black and the Democrat is not, then the probability of voting Democratic will be higher. This logic underlies the design of this study.

White voters in districts where neither candidate is African American serve as a baseline. In elections where the Democratic candidate is black and the Republican one is not, the discrimination hypothesis predicts that a white voter's probability of voting Democratic will be lower. If the Republican is black and the Democrat is not, the probability of voting Democratic should increase.

The difficulty posed by analyzing voting behavior in actual elections is that there are numerous differences other than a candidate's race that vary across the three types of elections and voters. For example, African American Democratic candidates are often incumbents, and the incumbent electoral advantage is substantial. African American Republican candidates, in contrast, are more likely to be underfunded challengers and are expected to receive fewer votes for this reason. Clearly, before concluding that white voters either do or do not discriminate against black candidates, these factors need to be taken into account.

In addition to the election-level variables, individual-level variables should be included in the analysis. Consider party identification. Suppose two Demo-

crats, one who is African American, receive similar proportions of the white vote in their respective elections. If there is a greater percentage of Democratic Party identifiers in the black candidate's district, then after taking into account party identification, the black candidate's level of white support compared to the other candidate's will be lower. This suggests that white voters discriminate against the black candidate, even though the candidates' overall levels of white support are similar.

Validly inferring that there is or is not white discrimination against black candidates requires that variables at both the election and individual level be modeled. Only by considering how other variables influence vote choice can differences in candidate support be attributed to voter discrimination. The goal is to create statistically comparable cases. I do this with a multivariate model of ballot choice among white voters in House elections.

In the following analysis I examine voting for the U.S. House (1996 and 1998). The data comes from exit polls conducted on election day across the country by Voter News Service (VNS), an association of major news organizations, and made available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The analysis is limited to 1996 and 1998 because these are the only years in which the VNS data include congressional district identifiers.¹³ Combined, these surveys sampled about 18,000 non-Latino white voters from 43 states in 357 contested House elections.¹⁴

The dependent variable in the multivariate analysis indicates whether white respondents reported voting for the Democratic (1) or Republican candidate (0). If there is systematic misreporting associated with the race of candidates, then this is obviously problematic. But, it does not appear to be the case. For the reasons I explain below, misreporting is unlikely to be a source of error in the data.

To measure race of the candidates, I employ two dummy variables. The first is coded 1 if the Democratic candidate is black and the Republican is not. The second is coded 1 if the Republican candidate is black and the Democrat is not. Given this specification, each coefficient will provide an estimate of the effect of the specified electoral context on voting for the Democratic House candidate compared to the baseline of two nonblack candidates. The discrimination hypothesis predicts that the estimated effect of the first variable will be *negative*; white voters will be less likely to vote Democratic if the Democratic candidate is black. In contrast, the estimated effect of the second variable is hypothesized to be *positive*; white voters will be more likely to vote Democratic if the Republican candidate is black.

To take into account other differences across voters and elections, additional independent variables are added to the models.¹⁵ At the individual level, variables that measure party and ideological identification are included. The surveys also include a question that asks whether one's family finances have

improved. Given that both the 1996 and 1998 elections occurred under a Democratic president, positive answers should make one more likely to vote Democratic. Finally, demographic variables measuring age, income, and gender are included. At the election level, one variable measures incumbency. A second measures the “quality” of nonincumbent candidates by indicating whether candidates have previously held electoral office. Campaign spending, distinguished by candidate type (incumbent/nonincumbent), is also added. To acknowledge the growth of the Republican Party in the South, a variable indicating whether the election was in 1 of the 11 former Confederate states is included.¹⁶ Last, to allow for election-year effects, a variable that distinguished respondents in 1998 from those in 1996 is included.

RESULTS

The top panel of Table 1 reports the percentage of whites who voted for the Democratic candidate in contested House elections in the two election years. In elections where neither candidate was African American, 44% of whites voted Democratic. In those contests where the Democratic candidate was African American and the Republican was not, white Democratic voting was 14 percentage points higher. This result is at odds with the discrimination hypothesis, which specifies that white Democratic voting would be lower in elections with an African American Democratic candidate. But, in many of the elections where a black Democrat faces a white Republican, the Democrat is an incumbent and the district is largely Democratic and often (outside of the South) more liberal. Democratic candidates from this type of district are expected to do better, irrespective of their race.

TABLE 1. Race of Candidates and Vote Choice in Contested House Elections Among Whites (1996, 1998)

Race of Democratic Candidate	Race of Republican Candidate	Percentage Voting Democratic
<i>All Elections</i>		
Nonblack	nonblack	44
Black	nonblack	58
Nonblack	black	56
<i>Elections with Democratic Incumbents</i>		
Nonblack	nonblack	59
Black	nonblack	62
Nonblack	black	60

Sources: VNS National Exit Polls, 1996 and 1998.

In elections where the Republican candidate was African American and the Democrat was not, white Democratic voting is also higher, compared to the baseline election type where neither candidate is African American. This finding is consistent with the discrimination hypothesis (white Republican voting decreases when the Republican is black), though given that in many of these contests the black Republican is overmatched by a strong Democrat, it is premature to conclude that the disparity reflects aversion of white voters to the black candidates.¹⁷

Some of the confounding effects of the underlying differences in election context are evident when comparing the top panel of Table 1 with the bottom panel, which reports Democratic voting rates in elections with Democratic incumbents. In elections without black candidates, white Democratic voting increases 15 percentage points, from 44% to 59%. But, because elections with African American candidates (both Democrats and Republicans) are commonly ones with Democratic incumbents, the increases for these are much smaller, just four percentage points. The result is much less apparent variation in Democratic voting in the bottom panel of Table 1. White Democratic voting in elections with black Democratic incumbents is 62%, in elections with black Republican challengers it is 60%, and Democratic voting in elections with Democratic incumbents and no black candidates is 59%.

The multivariate analysis takes into account incumbency and the rest of the potentially confounding factors. Table 2 reports the estimates from five logit models of vote choice. Variables indicating the two types of elections with black candidates are included with white voters in elections between two non-black candidates serving as the baseline. The first set of estimates (Model 1) essentially reproduces the results in the top panel of Table 1. Compared to contests with two nonblack candidates, in elections with either a black Democratic or a black Republican candidate, white Democratic voting was higher.

The second set of estimates is based on a model that includes the other election characteristics—incumbency, candidate quality, and campaign spending. Their inclusion substantially reduces the apparent size of the estimates for the race of the candidates. This confirms that African American Democratic candidates benefited from incumbency and campaign spending while black Republicans were generally disadvantaged as a result of these factors. However, notice that the estimated coefficient for an African American Democrat facing a nonblack Republican remains positive, which is inconsistent with the white discrimination hypothesis.

In contrast, the direction of the estimate of the effect of a black Republican remains in line with the white discrimination hypothesis. When the Republican is African American, white voters are less likely to vote for that candidate; they are more likely to vote Democratic. But, the magnitude of the coefficient is quite small and cannot confidently be distinguished from zero ($p = .24$). In

TABLE 2. Logit Models of Voting for the Democratic House Candidate Among Whites

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Race of candidates					
Black Democrat	.58**	.13	-.04	-.13	.12
Nonblack Republican	(.10)	(.10)	(.12)	(.16)	(.22)
Nonblack Democrat	—	—	—	—	—
Nonblack Republican					
Nonblack Democrat	.49**	.15	-.18	—	—
Black Republican	(.12)	(.13)	(.17)		
Incumbency		1.19**	1.68**	1.61**	1.19
		(.44)	(.60)	(.75)	(1.84)
Candidate quality		.12**	.09*	.12*	.07
		(.04)	(.05)	(.07)	(.20)
Incumbent spending		-.005	-.06	-.06	.03
		(.04)	(.05)	(.06)	(.15)
Nonincumbent spending		.06**	.04**	.04**	.05
		(.01)	(.01)	(.02)	(.04)
South			-.30**	-.25**	-.29
			(.06)	(.07)	(.24)
Election year			-.09*	.03	.27
			(.05)	(.07)	(.18)
Party identification			1.71**	1.74**	1.75**
			(.03)	(.05)	(.11)
Ideological identification			.99**	.87**	1.02**
			(.04)	(.05)	(.03)
Financial situation			.42**	.41**	.58**
			(.04)	(.05)	(.12)
Age			.03*	.05*	-.06
			(.02)	(.02)	(.06)
Family income			-.13**	-.13**	-.14*
			(.02)	(.03)	(.08)
Female			.13**	.12*	.17
			(.05)	(.06)	(.15)
Constant	-.26**	-.15**	.13	-.01	.24
	(.02)	(.02)	(.08)	(.13)	(.37)
Log-likelihood	-12371	-11943	-7502	-3928	-664
Pseudo R^2	.003	.037	.395	.386	.421

Notes: The first three models are estimated for all white (non-Latino) voters ($n = 18,069$). Model 4 is estimated for white voters in states where at least 10% of the population is black ($n = 9,388$). Model 5 is estimated for white voters in congressional districts where at least 20% of the population is black ($n = 1,655$). Standard errors are in parentheses. See text and appendix for coding details.

** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Sources: VNS National Exit Polls, 1996 and 1998.

short, the results in Model 2 provide inconsistent evidence in one case and very weak evidence in the other for the white discrimination hypothesis.

Of course other factors need to be taken into account, too. The third model does this by adding party identification, ideological identification, one's assessment of the family financial situation, age, family income, gender, region, and election year.¹⁸ The results provide no evidence for the white voter discrimination proposition. The hypothesis predicts that white voters would be less likely to vote for an African American Democrat facing a nonblack Republican. However, the logit estimate is virtually zero ($-.04$). Given the large p value (.73), the reasonable conclusion seems to be that African American Democratic candidates were neither favored nor discriminated against by white voters. The same conclusion appears warranted for African American Republican candidates. The discrimination hypothesis specifies that a white Democrat facing a black Republican should do better with white voters than a white Democrat facing a candidate who is not black. However, the logit estimate in Model 3 is negative, not positive, as the hypothesis predicts.¹⁹

The baseline condition in Models 1, 2, and 3 includes many white voters who are unlikely (at least in the near future) to have the opportunity to vote for black House candidates because they live in states or districts with scant numbers of African Americans.²⁰ The voting behavior of these respondents may be less relevant, and their inclusion in the baseline might obscure the response of white voters to black candidates. To address this issue, I reestimated the logit model for two subsamples of respondents. Model 4 presents the results from limiting the analysis to white voters in states where the population is at least 10% African American. Model 5 is more restrictive, based on white voters in congressional districts where blacks comprise at least 20% of the population. Comparing the results across Models 3, 4, and 5, the coefficients change somewhat, but none of the ones for white voters in elections with black Democratic candidates are substantively large or statistically significant.²¹ Thus, it does not appear that the finding of no discrimination depends on how the baseline is specified.

DISCUSSION

The results provide little support for the hypothesis that white voters discriminate against black candidates in House elections. In the 1996 and 1998 congressional elections, white voters were not less likely to vote Democratic when the Democratic candidate was black. Nor were white voters more likely to vote Democratic when the Republican candidate was African American. In short, neither of the two predictions of discrimination hypothesis received support. This section considers various caveats and implications of the results,

paying explicit attention to how the results contribute to our understanding of whether, and if so to what degree, white voters discriminate against black candidates.

One potential limitation should be addressed first. Because the analysis relies on self-reports of voting behavior, the possibility that there is bias due to misreporting arises. If voters systematically misreport their opposition to black candidates, then the findings reported in this article are flawed and probably understate the degree of white voter aversion to black candidates. This is a question that should be addressed given the difficulties sometimes encountered with accurately measuring support for African American candidates with surveys.

Several factors suggest that misreporting may not pose a problem for the results reported in this article. First, there is an important design feature of the VNS surveys to consider. The surveys were self-administered and confidential, thereby providing voters with maximum privacy and anonymity to express their actual ballot choices. Like in the voting booth, there is minimal motivation for “social desirability bias” to creep in.

The significance of the self-administered feature of VNS surveys has been demonstrated by Traugott and Price (1992). They report that a face-to-face exit poll of over 3,500 people overestimated Douglas Wilder’s vote share by nearly five percentage points in a 1989 Virginia election when he, an African American, was elected governor. In the vote for attorney general, which did not have a black candidate, the poll was off by less than 1%. Traugott and Price analyzed a second exit poll, which was self-administered and did not inflate Wilder’s vote margin. After considering a variety of potential explanations, they conclude that the problem with the first poll “likely stemmed from the use of face-to-face interviews conducted in person. . . . It seems clear to many respondents in our racially sensitized electorate that the ‘socially desirable’ response when asked about a vote for a white and black candidate facing each other is to indicate support for the black” (p. 252). Thus, a self-administered survey, like the one used in the VNS 1996 and 1998 surveys, seems to be a good solution to the problem. Indeed, comparing the actual election results to the self-reported votes of respondents in the exit polls reveals barely noticeable differences (less than a percentage point) across election types.²²

Another approach to investigating the possibility of misreporting is to consider whether voters loath to report voting against a black candidate instead leave the survey question blank. As Reeves (1997) and Berinsky (1999) suggest, voters “who are apprehensive about voting for black candidates may ‘vacate the field’ . . . rather than come out and say they oppose a black candidate” (Berinsky, 1999, p. 1221). In the case of the VNS surveys, it is not clear that this would happen, given that the hypothesized motivation to misreport is provided by a survey situation that places respondents in an socially uncom-

fortable position of revealing to an interviewer (either face-to-face or over the phone) a “socially undesirable” behavior. Because the exit polls allow respondents to report their ballot choices in private, the motivation to “opt out” is diminished.

Nevertheless, one can empirically test for the phenomenon. If voters opt out rather than report voting against black candidates, then the rate of nonresponse to the vote choice questions should be higher in elections with black candidates. Table 3 reports the results of a simple model of nonresponse to the VNS House vote question. Respondents who left the question blank were coded 1, and those who provided an answer were coded 0. The results show that more competitive elections and those held in the midterm election year (1998) have lower rates of nonresponse, as one would expect. Also, nonresponse is higher among political independents. With regard to nonresponse and the presence of an African American candidate, there does not appear to be any appreciable effect. The estimated effect is negative and trivially small. Thus the notion that voters opt out by not reporting their ballot choices when there are black candidates does not appear to apply to the VNS data.²³

Given that the potential problems with using self-reported data do not seem manifest in the data, the next question to consider is the generality of the

TABLE 3. Logit Estimates of Nonresponse to the Vote Choice Question Among Whites

Variable	Parameter Estimate
Black candidate	-.003 (.14)
Midterm election	-.31** (.08)
Election competitiveness	-.24** (.10)
Political independent	1.06** (.07)
Constant	-2.87** (.09)
Log-likelihood	-4,678
Pseudo R^2	.04
Number of observations	19,706

Notes: The dependent variable was coded 1 for respondents who did not answer the vote choice question and 0 for those who reported voting for a candidate. Uncontested races are not included. Standard errors are in parentheses. See appendix for coding details.

** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Sources: VNS National Exit Polls, 1996 and 1998.

results reported in Table 2. One issue relates to the characteristics of elections where a black Democrat faces a white Republican, the most frequently observed kind of biracial contest. The African American Democratic candidates in these elections were usually incumbents from districts with large African American populations. If either of these characteristics diminished the level of discrimination by white voters, then generalizing the nondiscrimination results to black Democratic nonincumbent candidates seeking election in largely white districts would not warranted.

With regard incumbency, if it is the case that African American incumbents do not suffer from white voter aversion because they have managed to diffuse white fears while in office, then the lack of discrimination against black Democratic candidates may say little about black challengers or black candidates seeking open seats. This possibility derives from work like that of Hajnal (2001), which shows that racial attitudes are less negative among whites living in cities with black mayors. The applicability of the argument in the present context may be limited, however. If incumbency is a valuable resource in this regard, then African American Republican candidates (who are usually challengers) should have experienced white voter discrimination. However, the results indicate that they did not. Further, black elected officials are no longer the rarity they once were. With numerous examples of African American politicians, the fears that they may have once inspired among whites, due to lack of information about them, may have dissipated. One does not need to have an African American member of Congress from one's own district in order to feel less threatened by the possibility of black elected officials.

Ultimately, until African American candidates regularly challenge incumbents and seek open seats, definitive answers are not possible. But, this question about the relationship between incumbency and white voter aversion to black candidates does suggest an avenue for future experimental research. A research design that systematically varied the amount and type of exposure to competing candidates could provide insight into the ways that name recognition, media coverage imbalances, and other variables tapping aspects of incumbency influence the reactions and vote preferences of white voters faced with African American candidates.

Another aspect of "racial threat" suggests a promising implication for black candidates in white majority districts. Beginning with Key (1949), scholars have suggested that white voters are more likely to perceive racial threat in areas with larger black populations. In contrast, "when the number of black voters represents no significant threat to a white socio-political dominance, politics is not framed in racial terms and the opportunities for racial polarization are reduced" (Strickland and Whicker, 1992, p. 205).²⁴ If true, then in areas of smaller black populations, black candidates—incumbents or otherwise—would fare better among white voters.

Aspects of the electoral context (incumbency and district racial composition) provide some possible limitations to generalizing the findings from this study. Another relates to this study's focus on general elections. In these contests, it is possible that nonexplicitly racial factors, like partisanship and ideology, that typically distinguish candidates dominate voters' ballot decisions. In other circumstances they may not. Consider a primary election where candidates are all of the same party. In these campaigns, absent other cues, a candidate's race could play a more substantial role than that which is observed in general elections. A suggestive example comes from the 1992 Illinois senatorial primary where the level of racially polarized voting was substantial. An African American (Carol Moseley Braun) won the Democratic primary with an estimated 83% of the black vote and 26% of the white vote.²⁵ Without a comparable election with only white candidates, it is impossible to tell if Braun's level of support among whites suffered because she was black. However, one would probably not want to assume that it did not.²⁶ In any event, this suggests another avenue for future research. One could trace if and how the race of a candidate shapes voters' initial impressions and under what circumstances race is or becomes secondary.²⁷

If white voters are more likely to discriminate against black candidates in primary elections, then the hurdle to black candidates being elected from white constituencies remains. At the same time, it is not nearly as great as it would be if there is discrimination in general election voting. The reason is simple. Because most black voters are Democrats while white voters are more evenly split between the parties, a district that is just 20% black, but evenly split overall between Democrats and Republicans, could have a primary electorate that is about 35% black.²⁸ Thus, although discrimination in primary voting might be a hurdle, it is a lower one than would be apparent in a general election because of the relative balance between white and black voters. This provides a reason to advocate increasing the number of "black influence" districts by removing African Americans from majority, and even supermajority, black districts and boosting the black populations in others.²⁹

A final issue to consider is heterogeneity among voters. The findings reported in Table 2 suggest that, on the whole, black candidates were not disadvantaged among white voters. It is possible, however, that some voters may have discriminated against them while others may have favored them. If this is the case, then the finding of no discrimination would be better characterized as no "net" discrimination. For instance, Carmines and Stimson (1989) argue that racial issues structured a partisan realignment with racial liberals finding a home in the Democratic Party, while racial conservatives located themselves among Republicans. Thus, it is possible that the effect of black candidates on white vote choice will vary by party identification with white Democrats being more likely to vote for them and white Republicans being

less likely to do so. To investigate this possibility, I reestimated the full multivariate vote choice model and included interactions between the two race of candidate variables and party identification. The interaction between the presence of a black Republican and party identification was small and insignificant ($p = .40$). But, the interaction between party identification and an election between an African American Democrat and a white Republican was more substantial. White Democratic Party identifiers were more likely to vote Democratic when the Democratic candidate was black while Republican identifiers were less likely to vote Democratic when the Democratic candidate was black. Substantively, the effects were modest. Among Democrats the probability of voting Democratic increased by about three percentage points with a black Democratic candidate; among Republicans, Democratic voting decreases between four and five percentage points with a black Democrat.³⁰ Thus, there does appear to be some aversion to African American Democratic candidates on the part of Republicans that is balanced by a bit of favoritism among white Democrats.³¹

Another dimension that might structure the response of white voters to black candidates is region (South/non-South). The results shown in Table 2 indicate that white voters in the South are less likely to vote Democratic than white voters in the rest of the country. Whether this tendency is magnified when the Democratic candidate is black or diminished with a black Republican candidate may be determined by including interactions between region and the candidate race variables. The interaction of region with the presence of a black Republican candidate was virtually indistinguishable from zero ($p = .90$). The interaction between region and the presence of a black Democratic candidate indicated that Democratic voting among southern whites was an estimated 6.6 percentage points lower when the Democratic candidate was black. But, the p value for the interaction (.21) suggests not placing much confidence in this result.

CONCLUSION

Reluctance among white voters to cast ballots for African American candidates is one explanation for the dominant pattern of black officeholding in America—namely, that black candidates tend to be elected from jurisdictions with substantial numbers of African American voters. The results reported in this article suggest that a shift in attention may be required. In the general elections analyzed here, there appears to be little aversion of white voters to black candidates. Thus, one conclusion of this study is that explanations for the prevailing patterns of African American electoral success ought to be sought elsewhere. Future research that keeps the analytic focus on voters is one path to pursue. In this regard, a promising direction would be to focus on primary

elections. Also, experimental designs offer the possibility of providing additional insight and testing some of the propositions that remain untestable with survey data and election results.

At the same time, it is important to examine factors beyond the behavior of white voters that may play an important role in influencing African American candidate success. For instance, in white districts, African Americans not only rarely win elections, they rarely emerge as candidates. If white voters were reluctant to vote for black candidates, then this absence could be interpreted as a rational response to the strategic situation. But, previous research suggests that the dearth of black candidates in majority-white districts may have other causes. Potential black candidates may be discouraged by party leaders, campaign donors, and other political activists. Commenting on the campaigns of Alan Wheat and Ron Dellums, two African Americans elected to Congress from majority-white districts, Swain (1995) writes “they were both discouraged by others from running for Congress in majority-white districts” (p. 141). Also, Sonenshein (1990) analyzed three campaigns where black candidates sought statewide elective office (Edward Brooke’s for senator of Massachusetts, Tom Bradley’s for governor of California, and Douglas Wilder’s for lieutenant governor in Virginia) and found “all three black candidates were initially discouraged by party leaders” (p. 237). Indeed, if this phenomenon is widespread, it could be especially disadvantageous for potential black candidates, because in addition to lacking the support of party elites, continued racial disparities in wealth make it less likely that a black candidate would have the personal resources to self-finance a competitive political campaign.

Why would black candidates be discouraged by others from seeking office? To the extent that the “discouragement” was motivated by racist beliefs or stereotypes, then the source of the problem appears to be party leaders and other political activists, rather than voters (Voss, 1999). Importantly, the process may not be deliberate in the sense that political elites may not overtly or consciously plan to hamper the prospects of African American candidates. Political elites may hold unconscious stereotypes of blacks that lead them to focus their candidate recruitment efforts elsewhere.³² At this point, this possibility is speculation that could serve as the focus of future work.

To conclude, although African American “victories [in majority-white areas] attract attention precisely because of their exceptional nature” (Lublin, 1995, p. 112), one should not automatically assume that their rarity results from discrimination by white voters. Given the evidence presented here, the barrier presented by white voters in general elections does not appear especially daunting, especially in relation to the barrier it is often perceived to be. If the hurdle is indeed lower, then a host of new issues arise. One of the most important concerns the need to develop and test new explanations for the dominant pattern of black officeholding in America.

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APPENDIX

I. Variable Coding

For the multivariate analysis reported in Tables 2, 3, and A1, the variables were coded as follows:

House vote choice: (0) Republican, (1) Democrat.

House vote choice nonresponse: (0) reported vote choice, (1) no answer to vote choice question.

Incumbency: (-1) Republican incumbent, (0) open-seat, (1) Democratic incumbent.

Candidate quality: (-1) Republican quality advantage, (0) no advantage, (1) Democratic quality advantage.

Incumbent campaign spending: \ln (incumbent expenditures) multiplied by -1 if incumbent is Republican. (This variable receives a value of zero if there is no incumbent in the election, i.e., it is an open seat.) This variable generally ranges from -14 to +14.

Nonincumbent campaign spending: \ln (Democratic candidate expenditures) - \ln (Republican candidate expenditures). If the Democratic (Republican) candidate is an incumbent, then the value of Democratic (Republican) expenditures receives a value of zero. This variable generally ranges from -14 to +14.

South: (0) nonformer Confederate state, (1) former Confederate state.

Election year: (0) 1996, (1) 1998.

Party identification: (-1) Republican, (0) independent, other, (1) Democrat.

Ideological identification: (-1) conservative, (0) moderate, (1) liberal.

Family financial situation (compared to 2 years ago): (-1) worse, (0) the same, (1) better.

Age: (1) 18-29, (2) 30-39, (3) 40-49, (4) 50-59, (5) 60+.

Family income: (1) under \$30,000, (2) \$30,000-\$50,000, (3) \$50,000-\$75,000, (4) \$75,000+.

Female: (0) male, (1) female.

Election competitiveness: $1 - [\text{abs}(\text{Democratic candidate expenditures} - \text{Republican candidate expenditures}) / (\text{Democratic candidate expenditures} + \text{Republican candidate expenditures})]$. In an election where both candidates spend equal amounts,

TABLE A1. Logit Models of Voting for the Democratic House Candidate Among Whites

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Race of candidates					
Nonwhite Democrat	.36**	-.02	-.02	-.04	-.12
White Republican	(.08)	(.09)	(.11)	(.13)	(.17)
White Democrat	—	—	—	—	—
White Republican					
White Democrat	.42**	.07	-.22	—	—
Nonwhite Republican	(.12)	(.12)	(.16)		
Incumbency		1.31**	1.72**	1.63**	2.84*
		(.44)	(.60)	(.70)	(1.59)
Candidate quality		.12**	.09*	.05	.03
		(.04)	(.05)	(.07)	(.16)
Incumbent spending		-.012	-.07	-.06	-.17
		(.04)	(.05)	(.06)	(.13)
Nonincumbent spending		.06**	.04**	.03**	.03
		(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.03)
South			-.29**	-.27**	-.35**
			(.06)	(.07)	(.15)
Election year			-.09*	-.04	.12
			(.05)	(.07)	(.16)
Party identification			1.71**	1.73**	1.72**
			(.03)	(.05)	(.09)
Ideological identification			.99**	.96**	1.11**
			(.04)	(.05)	(.11)
Financial situation			.41**	.45**	.68**
			(.04)	(.05)	(.11)
Age			.03*	.03	-.04
			(.02)	(.03)	(.05)
Family income			-.13**	-.13**	-.08
			(.02)	(.03)	(.06)
Female			.13**	.11*	.25*
			(.05)	(.06)	(.13)
Constant	-.26**	-.14**	.13	.12	.13
	(.02)	(.02)	(.09)	(.12)	(.26)
Log-likelihood	-12384	-11945	-7501	-4717	-899
Pseudo R^2	.002	.037	.395	.403	.434

Notes: The first three models are estimated for all white (non-Latino) voters ($n = 17,945$). Model 4 is estimated for white voters in states where at least 10% of the population is black or Latino ($n = 11,553$). Model 5 is estimated for white voters in congressional districts where at least 20% of the population is black or Latino ($n = 2,272$). Standard errors are in parentheses. See text and part I of the appendix for coding details.

** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Sources: VNS National Exit Polls, 1996 and 1998.

the value of this variable is 1. As inequality in candidate expenditures increases, the value of this variable decreases (the election is less competitive). The minimum theoretical value is 0.

Political independent: (0) Democrat or Republican, (1) independent/other.

II. Nonwhite Candidates

The primary purpose of this article has been to investigate the response of white (non-Latino) voters to African American candidates for Congress. Another approach would have been to investigate the response of white voters to nonwhite candidates for Congress. I chose the former approach because of the longstanding theoretical, historical, and legal questions about the election of black candidates to political office. To be sure, there are important and related questions about other minority groups, too. This is especially true about Latinos who are now the largest and one of the fastest growing minority groups in America.

In order to check the sensitivity of the results reported in Table 2 to the presence of other minority candidates, I attempted to reestimate the models using a white/nonwhite distinction rather than the nonblack/black distinction. Identifying all minority candidates was not practical, but I could identify all the Latino candidates. Thus, rather than using dummy variables to identify elections where black candidates ran against a nonblack ones, I created dummy variables to identify elections where nonwhite (i.e., black or Latino) candidates ran against white (i.e., nonblack and non-Latino) ones. The results are reported in Table A1. Comparing these results to those reported in Table 2, it is evident that the patterns of results are quite similar. As the numbers and diversity of minority candidates continues to grow, analyzing the response of white voters to each group separately will be an important avenue for future research.

NOTES

1. According to the 2000 Census, 12.9% of the U.S. population is African American (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). In the U.S. House of Representatives, 8.5% (37 of 435) of House elections in 2000 were won by African Americans (Amer, 2001). At present there are no black members of the Senate. In fact, during the entire twentieth century only two African Americans were elected to the Senate. Edward Brooke, a Republican from Massachusetts was elected in 1966 and reelected in 1972. Carol Moseley Braun, a Democrat from Illinois, was elected in 1992.
2. To be sure, black electoral success in majority-white areas is not as uncommon as it once was, especially in municipal and local elections (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). But, most of the time, in most elections, black candidates are not elected from jurisdictions that are majority white. Moreover, black candidates rarely seek election in majority-white areas, a point I return to in the conclusion.
3. The "population" has been defined in a variety of interrelated ways. Sometimes it is the overall proportion of blacks in the electoral district; sometimes it is the proportion of blacks in the voting age population; sometimes it is the proportion of blacks among registered voters; sometimes it is the proportion of blacks among voters. For the purpose of the present discus-

sion, the key point is that African American candidates are more successful where the proportion of blacks in the population—however it is defined—is larger. Although there is disagreement over the precise nature of the relationship (Epstein and O'Halloran, 1999b; Lublin, 1999), no one questions that black candidates have greater success in areas with substantial black populations.

4. To the extent that African American voters prefer black candidates to white ones, this relationship will be reinforced.
5. Simply noting that some black candidates have managed to win in majority-white districts is not sufficient to disprove the hypothesis. It merely demonstrates that all white voters do not automatically vote against any black candidate, a proposition that scholars do not seriously consider. As Voss and Lublin (2001) put it, "no one claims that Black victories are impossible in White districts, just terribly unlikely" (p. 144).
6. Reeves (1997) interprets the larger number of undecided voters as evidence of white discrimination against the black candidate. However, this conclusion rests on the application of the "Pettigrew rule of thumb" (p. 88) that prescribes adding the entire undecided vote to the white vote to know the actual outcome. Whether or not this conjecture is valid, one should note that the conclusion of white discrimination depends on moving well beyond the experimental results. Thus, Reeves' conclusion that "I have displayed the smoking gun—an obscure but nevertheless strong disinclination on the part of some whites to support the black . . . candidate" (p. 89) appears overstated.
7. One question relates to partisanship. None of the experiments appears to provide the candidates with partisan affiliations. This is clearly the case for Moskowitz and Stroh (1994), Sigelman et al. (1995), and Reeves (1997). Terkildsen (1993) makes no mention of whether the candidate descriptions in her study included party affiliation. Consequently, whether or not the findings apply to general elections, where candidate partisanship is a central feature, remains unknown. However, they may be relevant for understanding the role of race in primary elections where partisanship plays little role because it does not vary across candidates; they are all of the same party.
8. Citrin, Green, and Sears (1990) focus on the 1982 California gubernatorial election between an African American (Tom Bradley) and a white (George Deukmejian), comparing the level of racial voting in that contest to others on the ballot.
9. Georgia elected no white Democrats to the House in 1996. The two white Democrats who came closest to winning were in the eighth and tenth districts. In the eighth district, Jim Wiggins lost to the incumbent, Saxby Chambliss, by six percentage points, and Bullock (2000) estimates that he received about 34% of the white vote. In the tenth district, David Bell lost to the incumbent, Charlie Norwood, by four percentage points, and Bullock's estimate of white support was 30%.
10. Voss and Lublin's (2001) investigation is more extensive than Bullock's (2000), focusing on turnout, voting in House elections, and voting in statewide elections. They also cross-validate their results with an analysis of a congressional contest in Florida.
11. This calculation is based on Gay's (1999) Table 4.11. I excluded Alan Wheat's Missouri district from the calculation because he did not seek reelection in 1994, and, as a result there was not a black candidate seeking election from the district.
12. An interesting scholarly debate has emerged concerning ecological inference in general, and King's EI procedure (King, 1997) in particular. The fundamental question relates to the difficulty of drawing inferences about individual behavior from aggregate patterns (Robinson, 1950). Recent contributions include Cho (1998), Rivers (1998), Herron and Shotts (2003a, 2003b), and Adolph and King (2003a, 2003b).
13. The National Election Studies biennial surveys provide too few cases of white voters in congressional districts with African American candidates for meaningful analysis.

14. Because patterns of voting behavior among Latinos and non-Latinos are different, and given that this has important implications for patterns of black electoral success (Lublin, 1997, 1999), my analysis is limited to white non-Latino voters.
15. Details of the variable coding are provided in the appendix.
16. In preliminary analyses, I also included a variable to indicate the presence of a Latino candidate to see if white voters were less likely to vote for them compared to other white candidates. The coefficient was substantively tiny and statistically insignificant.
17. J. C. Watts was the only black Republican to win House elections in 1996 or 1998; he won in both years. His 1996 contest is included in the VNS data. In the remaining contests that featured black Republican candidates, they were significantly outspent, by four to one, on average.
18. All of these variables are related to vote choice in the generally expected way. Non-southerners, Democrats, liberals, those whose family's financial situation had improved, older people, women, and the less well off were all, to varying degrees, more likely to vote for a Democratic House candidate.
19. The p value (.28) suggests that one probably should not conclude that black Republican candidates are favored by white voters, either.
20. Black candidates rarely seek election in overwhelmingly white areas, a topic I address later.
21. Estimating the effect of the presence of black Republican candidates on white voting behavior in these two contexts is not possible because in each there is only one election included in the VNS data that meets the requirement.
22. Moreover, another common phenomenon observed in survey data—overreporting for the winner—is not evident, presumably because the data were collected on election day, before the media began reporting on winners and losers.
23. It is important to note that these results are not inconsistent with the opt-out theories. Rather, they confirm (in my view) that the setup of the VNS surveys avoids the problem through the self-administered, confidential nature of the surveys.
24. Citrin, Green, and Sears (1990) concur: "Among the factors that seem to enhance such sentiments [feelings of racial threat] are the size of the black population" (p. 76).
25. These figures are based on my own analysis of the Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) 1992 Illinois Democratic primary exit poll. For comparison, according to the VRS 1992 Illinois general election exit poll, Braun received 95% of black vote and 48% of the white vote. (Note: The primary was a three-way race among Braun and two white candidates. The general election was a two-candidate race between Braun and a white Republican.)
26. Similarly, one would not want to assume that Braun did not benefit from higher support among black voters than she would have received if she were white.
27. This sort of research could also illuminate how voters come to distinguish between perceptions of groups and individuals, which would address one of the limitations of previous work on black candidate success:

Broader studies on the electability of black candidates running in white constituencies tend to focus on the attitudes white Americans hold toward blacks as a group. . . . They fail to take account of a key electoral fact: candidates run as individuals and not as categorical groups. This is a crucial distinction. It is possible for someone to dislike a group, but to make exceptions for individual group members. (Swain, 1995, p. 209)

28. Assume that 20% of the district is black and that 90% of blacks are Democrats. Also assume that 80% of the district is white and that 40% of whites are Democrats. These two sets of assumptions produce a hypothetical district that is 50% Democratic and 50% Republican. Assuming equal turnout rates, blacks would comprise 36% of Democratic primary voters.

- Grofman, Handley, and Lublin (2001) more thoroughly work through how the two-stage electoral process interacts with constituency characteristics to determine how white and black voting behavior contribute to the probability of electing black candidates.
29. In *Georgia v. Ashcroft*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that increasing the number of influence districts by unpacking majority-black districts does not violate Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which guards against retrogression in minority voting strength. The analysis reported here substantiates the notion that influence districts can enhance black representation. If the primary election is the key, an influence district could easily produce a black majority among primary voters. For example, to create a black majority among Democratic primary voters in a district where 40% of whites are Democrats (see note 28), one would only need a district that was 31% black (assuming that 90% of blacks are Democrats).
 30. In the logit model, the coefficient for interaction between the presence of a black Democratic candidate opposing a white Republican and party identification was .34. The baseline estimate was $-.07$. Given the coding of party identification (Republicans as -1 , independents as 0 , and Democrats as $+1$), the estimated effect for Democrats is $.34 - .07 = .27$. The estimate for Republicans is $-.34 - .07 = -.41$. After setting the other independent variables at their median values, the estimated effect, in percentage points, of the Democrat being black is to increase Democratic voting by 3.3 percentage points. Among Republicans, the estimate is to lower Democratic voting by 4.5 percentage points.
 31. Although there are only modest differences between the responses of Democrats and Republicans to black candidates, racial attitudes may still be important. If racial attitudes cause party or ideological identification, then voting for and against any candidates (black or white, Democrat or Republican) may reflect their influence.
 32. In a similar vein, Gilens (1996) found that despite their racially liberal views, photo editors for national news magazines consistently overrepresented blacks in photographs depicting poor people while simultaneously underrepresenting them among the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor (i.e., the elderly and working poor).

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