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CHAPTER 13

The Effect of At-Large Versus District Elections on Racial Representation in U.S. Municipalities

Richard L. Engstrom and Michael D. McDonald

Whether the members of a city council should be selected through at-large, citywide elections or through geographically designated (usually single-member) districts within a city has been a major election law issue in the United States for many years. Election at large has been one of the central planks in the platform of the American municipal "reform" movement. The first model city charter issued by the National Municipal League in 1899 recommended that this electoral system be adopted in place of the single-member district or ward system used at that time; this recommendation has been retained in all subsequent editions of the model charter. At-large elections, these reformers argued, would attract a "better class" of council members and improve the quality of councilmanic decisions. Successful candidates within this system would have to appeal to more than a particular neighborhood or ethnic group, and therefore were more likely to be people of education and accomplishment (or expressed differently, wealth and social standing). These "better-qualified" councilmanic representatives were in turn expected to make decisions on the basis of what they perceived to be good for the entire city, not just one geographic or social segment of it. This combination of council members with better judgment and a citywide decisional referent,

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these reformers maintained, would improve dramatically the quality of municipal government (see, e.g., Judd, 1979, pp. 87–100).

The municipal reformers were remarkably successful in that their recommended electoral system was widely adopted (often in combination with a nonpartisan ballot). A survey conducted in the early 1970s of cities with populations exceeding 10,000 discovered that in over three fourths of these cities (78.2%) at least some members of the city council were elected at large; in 63.3%, the *entire* council was elected at large (Svara, 1977, p. 168). A more recent survey of the largest central cities within each standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA) has disclosed that in 83.6% of the cities, some of the members of the council are elected at large, and in 47.0% *all* of the members are elected at large.[1] The municipal reform campaign was so successful, in fact, that for many commentators at-large elections, in combination with the nonpartisan ballot and city manager plan, became virtually synonymous with the idea of "good government" itself.

This association with good government has not been accepted by everyone, however. In recent years what might be called "a new wave of reformers" (Grofman, 1982a, p. 124) has been active, attempting to undo much of what the earlier reformers had accomplished. This second generation of reformers, unlike the first, is predominately black, and its activity has been concentrated largely within the American South.

The "new reformers" argue that cities should elect council members from districts within the city because this electoral system is much "fairer" than are at-large elections—a city council elected in this fashion is likely to be more "representative" of the municipal population. Specifically, black opponents of at-large elections complain that citywide elections are discriminatory toward the racial minorities residing within America's cities. Given the racially polarized voting patterns often found in American cities, the black minority has enormous difficulty electing the candidates of its choice, especially black candidates. The white majority, it is argued, effectively controls access to all of the at-large seats on the council, an especially serious matter when the entire council is elected in that manner. White council members electorally accountable to a white majority, they complain, are not likely to be very responsive to the needs of the black minority. If the city is divided into districts, however, the black minority can often take advantage of being residentially concentrated and control the selection of one or more council members, who will be more directly accountable to, and presumably responsive toward, the black electorate.

This new wave of reform has been especially pronounced in the American South, a region in which the municipal reformers had been especially successful (see, e.g., Wolfinger and Field, 1966; Dye and MacManus, 1976). The 1972 survey just noted disclosed that over eight in ten (81.7%) of the cities with a population above 10,000 and located within the southern and border states elected at least some of the council members at large; almost three fourths (74.6%) elected all members of the council at large (Svara, 1977, p. 171). The more recent survey of central cities likewise found that 89.3% of the cities in the South (defined as the 11 states of the Confederacy) elected at least some council members at large, while 59.2% elected all of them at large. The South was the region of the country with the highest proportion of cities utilizing at-large councilmanic elections in the later survey.[2]

The South is also the region in which blacks have been the most severely underrepresented on city councils. The percentage of a city's council members who are black is usually less than the percentage of a city's population which is black. Numerous studies have documented the fact that this is especially true of cities in the South (see, e.g., Jones, 1976; Karnig, 1976; Taebel, 1978; Karnig and Welch, 1980, chap. 4; Engstrom and McDonald, 1982; and Heilig and Mundt, 1983). Much of this underrepresentation, the new reformers maintain, is attributable to the extensive use of at-large elections within the region. Indeed, at-large elections have been at the center of the *vote dilution* controversy in the South.

Since passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the barriers to black people registering to vote and actually casting ballots have been largely removed throughout the American South, and as a consequence black registration and electoral participation have increased significantly (see, e.g., Engstrom, forthcoming). Despite these gains, however, the issue of racially discriminatory electoral laws continues to be an important legal and political issue within that region. The nature of that issue has changed, however; as the black electorate has grown, the previous preoccupation with denial of the vote has shifted to a more contemporary concern, dilution of the vote. Blacks have become acutely aware of the fact that when voting patterns are polarized along racial lines, the actual impact of the votes they cast may well be dependent upon the way in which electoral competition is structured. Placing electoral decisions in the hands of a white citywide majority is commonly cited as one of the major techniques for reducing the potential impact of the black vote. Blacks in the South, there-

fore, have launched an aggressive campaign against the continued use of at-large elections, seeking through referendum and/or litigation the substitution of single-member districts.[3]

A survey conducted by Peggy Heilig and Robert Mundt in 1980–1981 of cities with populations exceeding 10,000 and in which at least 15% of the population was black in 1970 has documented the southern focus to this latest "reform" activity. Their survey disclosed that 93% of the cities in which attempts were made to switch from at-large to single-member districts during the 1970s were located in the South. Such efforts, which were almost invariably initiated by black groups, occurred in 55% of the southern cities which in 1970 used at-large elections to select council members (Heilig and Mundt, 1983, p. 394; see also Claunch and Hallman, 1978). Efforts to switch to districts were especially likely to have occurred, not surprisingly, in the southern cities in which blacks were the most severely underrepresented on the council (Mundt and Heilig, 1982, pp. 1042–1043). These more recent "reform" efforts have not been without success, as 33% of the southern cities employing at-large elections in 1970 were found to have switched to geographic districting by 1980.[4]

This new reform movement, as just noted, is premised upon two important propositions: (1) that the black minority will be better able to convert its voting strength into the selection of black representatives if elections are conducted within districts rather than at large, and (2) that councilmanic decisions (and municipal policies generally) will become more responsive to the needs and interests of the black community as the percentage of black council members increases. Considerable empirical research has addressed the first proposition, and efforts to verify the second have been reported recently. The following section reviews and evaluates the evidence for these propositions.

Election Systems and Descriptive Representation

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of whether blacks are more likely to be elected to city councils if districts rather than at-large elections are used. The central concept in virtually all of these studies has been what Hanna Pitkin has called "descriptive representation," the correspondence between the black percentage of a city's population and the percentage of seats on that city's council to which black people have been elected (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 60–91). The focus of inquiry has been to account for why blacks are more or less proportionately represented across city councils.

Despite the tremendous variation of sampling criteria employed in these studies (e.g., cities with different size populations and having various proportions of black residents) and the variety of analytic designs applied, there is an overwhelming consensus among the researchers that when blacks are a citywide minority, their presence on the city council is likely to be less proportionate when elections are held at large rather than through districts (see, e.g., the review of these studies by Grofman, 1982b). Black candidates, these studies suggest, are simply much less likely to be elected if forced to compete citywide. Indeed, few generalizations in political science appear to be as well verified as the proposition that at-large elections tend to be discriminatory toward black Americans.

There is not, however, unanimity among researchers on this issue. A dissenting view has been put forward which maintains that the electoral framework through which city council members are selected is actually little more than a relatively unimportant intervening variable—a structural dimension which happens to intervene between more explanatory socioeconomic factors and the level of black representation. The degree to which blacks are elected is far better accounted for, according to this view, by the socioeconomic characteristics of a city's population than by the city's electoral structure. We will focus on those studies which we believe offer the most persuasive evidence of the discriminatory impact of the at-large format, studies utilizing both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, and also on those studies which have formed the basis for the dissenting viewpoint.

Described by Grofman as "the best of the cross-sectional studies" (Grofman, 1982b, p. 7), Engstrom and McDonald (1981) treat the electoral format as a specifying variable which affects the rate at which blacks are able to convert their voting strength into the election of black council members. The major independent variable, the variable expected to have the greatest effect on the black percentage of council members, is the percentage of the population which is black (in only a few cities is the race of registered voters recorded). The study attempts, by regressing the black council percentage onto the black population percentage, to assess how the relationship between these two variables will differ, depending on the electoral structure being employed. The results of this analysis, based on a 1976 survey of the largest central city within each SMSA ($N = 239$), are displayed in Figure 13.1.[5]

In cities in which all of the members of the council are elected from districts, the relationship between the black population and the black membership on the council is virtually proportional. Although excep-

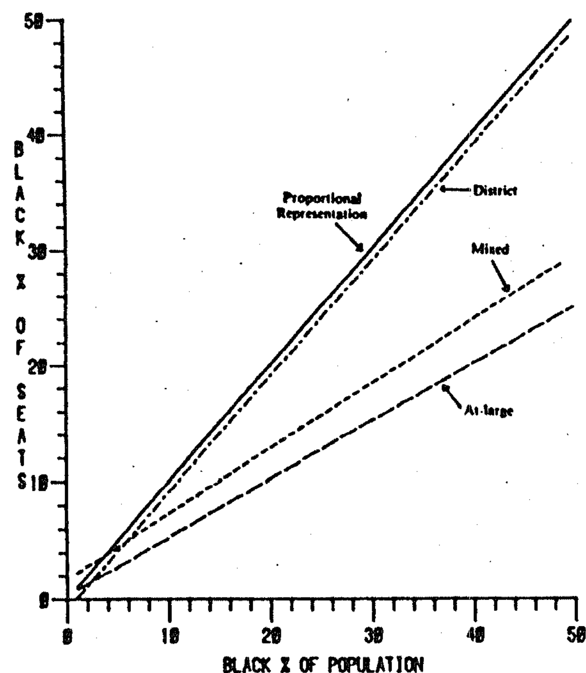

FIG. 13.1. Relationship between black percentage of population and black percentage of city council in different electoral formats. (From Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 348.)

tions can always be cited, as a general matter blacks can be expected to be almost proportionally represented if districts are the exclusive medium through which council members are selected. If at-large elections are used, however, blacks can be expected to be underrepresented. The correspondence between the population percentages and council percentages drops dramatically if some councilmanic seats are filled through citywide contests (the mixed category), and even further if all of the council members are elected in that manner. The electoral format, according to this analysis, has a major impact on how black electoral strength translates into black elected officials.

It is further estimated in this study that this differential impact will be present even when the black percentage of the population in a city is quite small. In Figure 13.2, 90% confidence bands have been added to the regression lines for cities employing either districts or at-large elections exclusively (i.e., we can be 90% confident that the actual

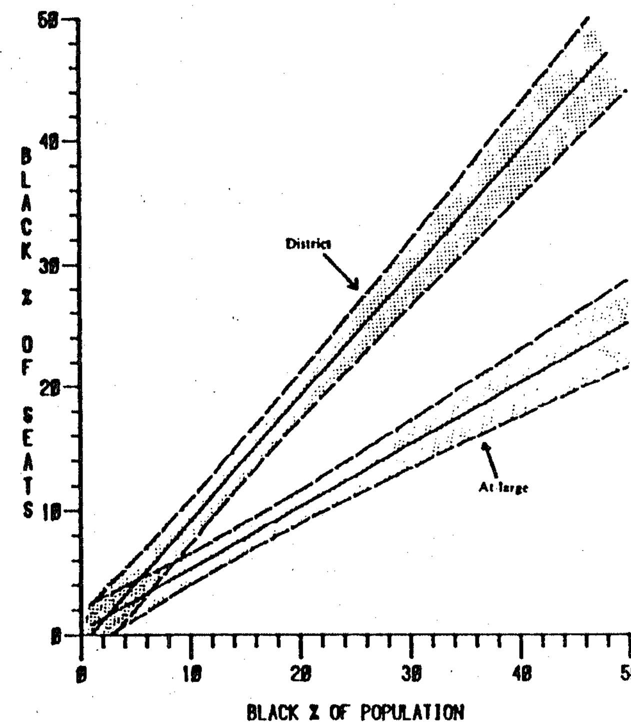

FIG. 13.2. Estimated seats/population relationships with 90% confidence bands in districted and at-large electoral formats. (From Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 349.)

seats/population relationship lies within the band). Because these bands separate completely at a point below 10% black population, the authors argue that the 10% figure can be (conservatively) considered to be a threshold or critical point – whenever blacks constitute 10% or more of the population, at-large elections are likely to have an adverse impact on how proportionately they are represented. The differential impact of election structures was not affected in this study when statistical controls were applied for a variety of socioeconomic factors which other researchers have suggested might relate to the election of blacks (such as the educational, occupational, and income characteristics of the cities' populations).

Another cross-sectional study which complements the Engstrom-McDonald analysis very well is that by Albert Karnig and Susan Welch (1982). This study, based on a 1978 survey of all cities with

TABLE 13.1. Representational Indices for Mixed Cities by Electoral Format

	Representa-tional Ratio	Representa-tional Deficit	Percent of Cities Without Any Black Council Member
A. Districts + At-large ($N=50$)			
District seats	.952	−2.4	14.0
At-large seats	.499	−11.6	72.0
B. Districts + At-large with Residency Requirement ($N=6$)			
District seats	1.047	+ 1.4	12.0
At-large seats	.478	−12.0	50.0

Source. Karnig and Welch (1982, p. 105).

populations greater than 25,000 in 1970 and in which black people constituted at least 10% of the population ($N=264$), focuses special attention on the representational situation in cities employing mixed electoral arrangements. This approach was adopted because in those cities, differences in how proportionately blacks have been elected to the at-large seats and how proportionately they have been elected to the seats allocated to districts can be attributed directly to the different electoral contexts. Other variables which may be expected to have an impact on the election of black council members are "naturally controlled" in this approach.

> When comparing two election forms within the same city, socioeconomic, demographic, political context, and other variables are controlled, since aggregate indicators of income, education, percent blacks, region, partisanship, form of government, and so on, are precisely the same for both the at-large and the district parts of the election in the same municipality (Karnig and Welch, 1982, pp. 103–104).

In this analysis, the dependent variables are two measures of the deviation from proportional racial representation in each city. One measure, the representational ratio, is simply the quotient obtained when the black population percentage is divided into the percentage of council members who are black. This ratio is, of course, zero when no blacks serve on the council and 1.0 if the two percentage figures are equal. If the percentage of black council members is higher than the population percentage, then the ratio will exceed 1.0. The other measure, the representational deficit, is the result obtained when the popu-

TABLE 13.2. Representational Indices for Single Format Cities by Electoral Format

	Representa-tional Ratio	Representa-tional Deficit	Percent of Cities Without Any Black Council Member
District Elections	.922	-1.3	10.0
At-large Elections	.616	-9.6	44.0
At-large Elections with Residency Requirements	.443	−14.0	45.0

Source. Karnig and Welch (1982, p. 107).

measure, a score of zero reflects perfect proportionality, and scores above or below zero register the relative degree of over- or underrepresentation respectively.[6] Different electoral arrangements are then treated as independent variables affecting the scores for various cities on these measures.

Reported in Table 13.1 are the average scores within the districted and at-large components across cities in which both of these electoral mechanisms were used to select council members. In 50 of the cities, a combination of districts and "pure" at-large elections (i.e., candidates residing in any area of the city may compete for any at-large seat) were used. In 6 others, a residency requirement was attached to the at-large component (i.e., only candidates residing in specified areas of the city were permitted to compete for certain at-large seats). It is disclosed in Table 13.1 that blacks come very close to winning a proportional number of district-based seats in these cities, while winning a disproportionally low number of the at-large seats (including those in which council members are required to live in dispersed areas throughout the city). One reason why the representational indexes reflect such a greater deviation from proportional representation within the at-large components is apparent in the third column of the table; blacks are often excluded completely from election to the at-large seats, while winning at least one of the districted seats in almost every city.

Although the evidence from the cities with mixed electoral systems is quite impressive, Karnig and Welch find additional evidence for the differential impact thesis in their analysis of those cities using only one electoral format as well. Reported in Table 13.2 are the representational indexes for those cities in which only district elections are used to select council members, those in which only "pure" at-large elec-

residency requirements. Once again, blacks are close to being proportionally represented when districts are employed but are considerably "underrepresented," and often excluded completely, when elections are held at large. These differences between electoral systems remained when statistical controls for a number of demographic and other variables were applied.

Most of the evidence which has been marshaled in support of the argument that at-large elections have a racially discriminatory impact has been cross-sectional in nature (see also Kramer, 1971; Jones, 1976; Karnig, 1976; Taebel, 1978; Robinson and Dye, 1978; Latimer, 1979; and Engstrom and McDonald, 1982). As noted, however, the recent movement to force the abandonment of at-large elections in favor of districted arrangements has not been without success. Heilig and Mundt (1983; p. 394), for example, discovered that among the southern cities in their sample which were electing council members at large in 1970, one third had switched to either a mixed or districted system by 1980. This has created an opportunity to approach the differential impact question using longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data, that is, examining the level of black representation within a city both *before* and *after* the adoption of a different electoral arrangement.

Two studies have brought longitudinal data to bear on this question. The first to be reported was that by Chandler Davidson and George Korbel (1981). They report scores for both the representational ratio and the representational deficit for blacks and Mexican-Americans (combined) for all 21 municipalities in Texas which switched from elections at large to either a mixed or districted arrangement between 1970 and 1979. The differences between the before and after scores in these cities were dramatic—the average ratio was .28 prior to the systemic alteration and .86 after, while the average deficit was −18.7 before the change and only −3.3 after. While this is impressive evidence of the impact of these structural revisions, the absence of any "control" group of cities in this analysis (cities in which electoral arrangements were not altered) does leave open the possibility that these increases in minority representation are a result of some other factor or factors. Without a control group,

> [I]t is difficult to be sure that increased equity in minority representation is occurring *because* of change of election system—especially in a period where some minority groups (in particular, Blacks in the South) have been making extensive electoral gains based on increased voter registration and the easing of traditional barriers such as intimidation (Grofman 1982b, pp. 5-6).

TABLE 13.3. Representation Ratios for Southern Cities, 1970s and 1980

	Representation Ratio		
	1970s	1980	Difference
At-large ($N=122$)	.31	.37	+.06
Mixed ($N=10$)	.44	.57	+.13
Districts ($N=13$)	.45	.74	+.29
Changed from At-large to Mixed ($N=19$)	.16	.70	+.54
Changed from At-large to Districts ($N=25$)	.15	.87	+.72

Source. Heilig and Mundt (1983, p. 396).

This problem is at least partially overcome in the second analysis employing longitudinal data. Heilig and Mundt (1983) have examined the representation ratios over time for blacks in 209 southern cities (i.e., cities located in the former Confederacy) in which there are more than 10,000 residents, at least 15% of which are black. Heilig and Mundt employ a "natural" experimental design (see, e.g., Shively, 1980, pp. 92–93)—differences in representational ratios over time are compared across groups of cities, some of which have altered their electoral arrangements and some of which have not. In their analysis, those cities which used only at-large, mixed, or districted systems during the period 1970–1980 serve as "control" groups, while those in which a systemic change from an at-large to a mixed or districted arrangement occurred sometime during the 1970s serve as "treatment" groups. The average representation ratio for these groups in 1980 is compared to the average ratio throughout the 1970s for the control groups, and the average ratio in the 1970s prior to the systemic adjustments for the treatment groups.

The results of the Heilig and Mundt analysis, which are presented in Table 13.3, strongly support the differential impact thesis. Changes in the representational ratios were much greater in the treatment groups than in the control groups. The average ratio in 1980 for the 25 cities switching to districts exclusively was .72 higher than the average ratio for those cities prior to the adoption of districts. For the 19 cities adopting a mixed plan, the average ratio increased .54. Among the

control groups, the average ratio increased substantially within only one group, that in which districts had been employed over the entire period. This increase (.29), however, was still well below that for either of the groups of cities in which there had been a change. In the other two groups the ratio changed only minimally, + .06 for cities employing only at-large elections over the entire period and + .13 for those using a mixed arrangement.

Although this analysis does employ "control" groups against which before and after scores can be compared, it does not solve completely the inferential problem just noted. Alternative explanations for the increased minority representation in the treatment groups, beside that of the alteration in the electoral systems, are still possible because cities, although "matched" by region (i.e., all are located in the South), have not been placed into the treatment and control groups randomly (a situation which is characteristic of the "natural experiment"). This leaves open the possibility that another factor or factors may be responsible for both the change in the electoral system and the increase in the number of blacks elected to the councils. One such factor, for example, might be a high degree of political mobilization or organization within the black community. As Grofman has noted,

> [C]ities which change from at-large to ward elections are *ipso facto* more likely to be characterized by a minority political organization of some strength which will be likely to generate greater minority representation under *any* electoral system . . . (Grofman, 1982b, p. 6).

The fact that the representation ratios for the treatment groups in this analysis during the period in which at-large elections were employed were substantially below those for the at-large control group during the 1970s (.15 and .16 vs. .31) and that the ratios for 1980 were substantially above those for the respective control groups in 1980 (.57 vs. .70 for those with mixed systems, and .74 vs. .87 for those with districts only) suggests that another factor or factors may also be at work. While alternative explanations for these "experimental" results therefore cannot be precluded, the Heilig and Mundt analysis does provide impressive empirical support for the differential impact thesis.

The longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses just described provide, we believe, a solid basis from which to generalize about the racial consequences of alternative electoral structures. As just noted, however, there has not been unanimity among researchers on this

electoral frameworks have only minimal, if any, impact on the election of blacks to municipal councils.

The most extensive analysis in which electoral structures have been reported to be relatively unimportant was conducted by MacManus (1978). Utilizing data gathered in 1975 on 243 central cities of SMSAs, MacManus discovered that differences in the local electoral structures across those cities had virtually no impact on how proportionately blacks were represented within them. Various demographic characteristics of these cities, however, such as population size and growth, median family income, median school years completed, and the proportion of workers employed in white-collar occupations, were related to the representation levels. This leads MacManus to suggest that these environmental factors were the more important determinants of the rate at which blacks were elected, while the councilmanic election system was "only an intervening variable" (MacManus, 1978, p. 159) which itself had very little effect on whether or not blacks were elected.

The analysis conducted by MacManus, however, does not provide an adequate basis for abandoning the differential impact notion. The basic problem with the study concerns the use of the representational deficit (the percentage of council members who are black *minus* the black percentage of the city's population) as the measure of descriptive representation without also requiring that the cities included in the study contain at least some minimal number or percentage of black residents (a threshold commonly set at 10% or 15%). In cities in which there are proportionately very few black residents, no more than a minimal level of underrepresentation can be recorded on this measure, even if the municipal council is composed exclusively of white members. One can hardly expect any electoral system to have a racially discriminatory impact in these virtually all-white cities.

Sixty of the cities in the MacManus analysis in which no black was serving on the council also had black population proportions of *less than* 5%. In over half of these cities, councilmanic elections were conducted *at large*.[7] It should not be surprising, then, to discover that the electoral system variable has little impact on the scores recorded by the deficit measure—blacks can hardly be seriously disadvantaged by the use of at-large elections in places such as Fargo, North Dakota; Provo, Utah; Dubuque, Iowa; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota! Nor should it be surprising, given the absence of any minimal black population threshold, that MacManus ultimately concluded that blacks are most likely to be equitably represented in "small [central] cities, char-

lations . . . regardless of the plan of electing council members" (MacManus, 1978, p. 160). These are precisely the types of cities most likely to have minimal percentages of blacks in their populations and therefore cities in which blacks cannot be seriously underrepresented, by definition (given the deficit measure). There is a strong negative relationship between the percentage of blacks in the populations of cities and the representation scores recorded on the deficit measure, and when statistical controls are imposed for these black population percentages, the relationships between the environmental variables MacManus focused upon and black representation levels virtually disappear (see Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, pp. 350-351). The MacManus analysis, therefore, does not provide a very solid foundation upon which to challenge the differential impact thesis.

A second study which also questions the differential impact notion is a much more limited analysis by Cole (1974). Examining the 16 cities in New Jersey with a population of 25,000 or more, at least 15% of which were black, Cole discovered that it was not possible to distinguish, on the basis of their electoral systems, between those cities in which blacks were close to being proportionally represented (in 1972, based on the deficit measure) and those in which they were not. Cole (1974, pp. 23-28) concluded, therefore, that the differential impact thesis had been exaggerated and, like MacManus, suggested that the socioeconomic characteristics of a city's residents were much more important determinants of black electoral success. Blacks were more likely to be equitably represented, he reported, in those cities in which the municipal population had the highest levels of formal education, largest proportions of residents employed in relatively prestigious occupations, and the highest median annual incomes.

Although the analysis performed by Cole does not suffer from the methodological problems present in the analysis by MacManus, the data base is clearly too limited to provide a basis for generalization (see, e.g., Karnig, 1976, p. 224). Given that other, more extensive cross-sectional studies have controlled for these and similar environmental variables without equivalent results (e.g., Engstrom and McDonald, 1981; Karnig and Welch, 1982; Robinson and Dye, 1978; and Latimer, 1979), it hardly seems appropriate to abandon the differential impact thesis on the basis of Cole's limited analysis.

There is substantial evidence for the first proposition upon which the campaign against at-large elections is premised—that the black minority will be better able to convert its voting strength into the selection of black representatives if councilmanic elections are held

within districts rather than citywide. This appears to be especially true for cities within the South, the region in which this campaign is most intense. Southern cities tend to have the most racially segregated residential patterns, and therefore the blacks in these cities are likely to benefit the most from the adoption of geographic districting (see, e.g., Van Valey et al., 1977; Vedlitz and Johnson, 1982; and O'Loughlin and Taylor, 1982).

The impact of this campaign on the racial composition of municipal councils in that region has already been impressive. The data reported by Heilig and Mundt (1983, p. 396) demonstrate that the dramatic increase over the past decade in the number of black people serving on city councils in the South can be attributed almost entirely to the adoption of district elections. The regional differences (South vs. non-South) in how proportionately blacks are represented were, by 1980, only slight in those cities employing districted or mixed electoral arrangements, yet still substantial in those employing only at-large elections. Heilig and Mundt have concluded, therefore, that the continued adoption of district elections "is the key to increasing black representation in the South" (Heilig and Mundt, 1983, p. 396). Indeed, it has been estimated that if the distribution of electoral systems across southern cities were the same as that across cities outside the South, not only would the relative underrepresentation of southern black people disappear, but blacks within that region will be likely to be more proportionately represented on city councils than black people outside the South (Engstrom and McDonald, 1982).

Black Representation and Responsiveness

While electing black people to city councils is a major goal of the new reform movement, that in itself is of course "only half the battle [and] perhaps the lesser half at that" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 150). Black demands to employ district-based elections are premised on the expectation that the election of black council members will result in a difference in the way in which a municipal government responds to the needs and interests of its minority citizens. As expressed by Eisinger,

> A central assumption in the practice of ethnic [or racial] politics is that a particular group will be in a more powerful position to have its demands met if it has a coethnic in a position of authority than if it must supplicate an officialdom controlled by other groups (Eisinger, 1982, p. 388; see also Bullock, 1975, p. 727; and Keech, 1968, pp. 57-58).

The presence of blacks on city councils, therefore, is expected to result in more than "symbolic representation"; it is expected to translate into "substantive representation" as well (see, e.g., Preston, 1978).

The second proposition upon which this more recent reform movement is based, however—that councilmanic decisions (and municipal policies generally) will become more responsive to the needs and interests of the black community as the percentage of council members who are black increases—has not been documented anywhere near as impressively as the initial proposition linking different electoral systems to black electoral success. While there is impressionistic evidence suggesting that black elected officials do make the expected difference (see esp. Cole, 1976, pp. 221–223), only a few efforts at systematic empirical verification of this second proposition have as yet been attempted. Although these initial attempts at verification have been limited (and must be considered far from conclusive), they do suggest that it would be wise, at least at this time, to heed Marguerite Barnett's warning against any naive acceptance of "the *careless equation* of black political presence with black political power" (Barnett, 1982, p. 28; emphasis added; see also Walton, 1972, pp. 196–202).

Measuring the influence of black elected officials in the policy-making process, especially across a large number of municipalities, is admittedly an investigative task "fraught with methodological and conceptual difficulties" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 115). One of the initial, and most serious, conceptual problems researchers working in this area must confront is the specification of the types of impact that black council members can be expected to have on municipal policies and programs. Mack Jones has provided a useful approach to this problem by identifying three conceptually distinct areas in which the impact of black elected officials may be evaluated. According to Jones,

> [T]he political power of black officeholders may be assessed in terms of: (1) their success in *reordering the priorities* of their boards and commissions and persuading them to seek novel solutions to outstanding problems, particularly those especially salient in black communities; (2) garnering for the black community a *more equitable distribution of existing benefits and services* provided by government; (3) *thwarting the passage of measures inimical* to the welfare of their constituents (1978, pp. 98–99, emphasis added).

The efforts to verify the increased responsiveness thesis have to date examined the first and second of Jones's dimensions; the third has yet to be the subject of systematic, comparative inquiry.

the reordering of public priorities. This was the focus of the first broadly based comparative study to attempt to link different levels of black councilmanic representation to changes in municipal policies. Albert Karnig and Susan Welch (1980) attempted to determine whether the changes in the amount of money spent for different categories of municipal functions (both per capita and as a proportion of the total budget) could be attributable to the level of black representation on municipal councils. They had hypothesized that as the black percentage on a council increased, there would be *greater increases* in spending on social welfare functions (health, housing, welfare, and education) and *smaller increases* in spending for protective services (fire and police), physical facilities (streets, sanitation, sewage, and hospitals), and amenities (parks and libraries). When they related the percentage of council members who were black (the average percentage for 1970 and 1972) in 139 cities (each greater than 50,000 in population) to the changes in the municipal expenditures in these categories between 1968 and 1969 and 1974 and 1975, however, they discovered that the level of black representation had minimal, if any, impact on any of the policy areas, including the social services category (Karnig and Welch, 1980, pp. 124–141).[8]

Karnig's and Welch's results surely will not bring comfort to those who assume (or hope) that a linkage exists between the presence of blacks on municipal councils and the policies and programs of municipalities. But these results must be considered, at best, as only suggestive. It would be premature to dismiss the increased responsiveness thesis on the basis of this analysis alone. While the findings certainly are not supportive of that thesis, neither are they, by themselves, a sufficient basis for rejecting it.

Karnig and Welch have relied upon changes in the amount of money spent in various functional areas as an indicator of changes in "responsiveness." The relationship between these budgetary categories and the actual needs and/or demands of minority residents, however, is far from clear, and, as Karnig and Welch (1980, p. 117) acknowledge, may vary from municipality to municipality. Eisinger has argued that "assigning special racial interests to broad functional expenditure categories is an exercise fraught with ambiguity," one which requires the researcher to make "questionable assumptions" (Eisinger, 1982, p. 382)—such as assuming that blacks will place a relatively low priority on spending for protective services, despite the fact that they are disproportionately the victims of both crimes and fires. Even if such racial assignments could be made, the problem of assuming a

Schumaker and Getter have commented in this regard that "[T]here is no single, a priori distribution of policy which can be considered responsive" (Schumaker and Getter, 1977, p. 249; see also Getter and Schumaker, 1978). Ideally, a study assessing changes in responsiveness should have an independent measure or measures of minority needs and/or demands so that responsiveness could be inferred from a relationship between variables, rather than defined through the researcher's own selection of a dependent variable or variables.

Another problem with the use of aggregate expenditure levels as a medium for assessing the impact of black council members is that the level at which budgetary categories are funded is something over which council members may have minimal control, especially in the short run. As expressed by Thomas Dye and James Renick, "Much of a city's budget is composed of 'uncontrollables'–items over which neither black nor white . . . council members have much authority" (Dye and Renick, 1981, p. 475). To expect dramatic changes in the levels at which existing programs and services are funded is to impose, therefore, a very stringent test on the increased responsiveness thesis. A more important problem with the use of aggregate expenditure figures, however, is that the level at which programs and services are funded may not be a good indicator of who is actually benefiting from the expenditures. Money spent in functional areas assumed to be important to blacks may or may not be spent in a fashion directly benefiting the black community. This relates, of course, to the second dimension of possible impact identified by Jones–"garnering for the black community a more equitable distribution of existing benefits and services" (Jones, 1978, p. 98). This, in fact, may be the area in which black council members can be expected to have the greatest influence. As Karnig and Welch suggest:

> It is quite possible, owing to financial straits as well as the difficulty of changing policy in other than an incremental fashion, that the emphasis of black officials may be on shifting program benefits from white to black neighborhoods. For example, the stress may be on more police protection in black neighborhoods, more spending on black schools, improved paving and repair of streets in black areas, and so forth (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 153).

This type of change in policy, as Karnig and Welch recognize, "may occur without changing the distribution of expenditures in the overall policy categories" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 153).

Support for the expectation that black councilmanic representation

will result in blacks being treated more equitably has been found in a study of municipal employment patterns. Unlike broad categories of expenditures, "the distribution of public-sector jobs is clearly divisible by race" (Eisinger, 1982, p. 382) and can be used, therefore, to measure differences in how equitably blacks are treated, both across communities and over time within specific municipalities. Dye and Renick have suggested that this is one area in which black council members are most likely to have an impact.

> If there are any policy consequences at all which stem from increased minority representation, certainly increased minority employment in government ought to be one of those consequences. Even if minority council members cannot solve all of the problems confronting the nation's cities, they can still act to obtain more and better city jobs for their minority constituents. (1981, p. 476)

When Dye and Renick compared the race of full-time municipal employees across various occupational categories for 42 cities in 1977 (all with populations of 25,000 or more, at least 10% of which were black) with the percentage of councilmanic seats filled by blacks in 1976, they discovered a very pronounced relationship. The greater the percentage of black council members in a city, the higher the percentage of blacks employed in administrative, professional, and protective (police, fire, corrections, etc.) positions, regardless of the relative size and the educational and income characteristics of the black population within a city. For each of these employment categories, the level of black representation was the variable most strongly related to the level of black employment, prompting Dye and Renick to conclude that "black representation on city councils is a *crucial link* in improving black employment opportunities" (1981, p. 485, emphasis added).

Eisinger (1982) has analyzed data very similar to that relied on by Dye and Renick, however, and reached a conclusion inconsistent with theirs. Examining employment data for 43 cities with populations exceeding 50,000 and which were also at least 10% black (only 14 of which were included in the Dye and Renick study), Eisinger discovered that the degree to which blacks were represented on a city council in 1977 had virtually no impact on the percentage of blacks in administrative or professional positions in 1978. (The presence of a black mayor, however, was related to black employment in these categories.) Eisinger's indicator of black representation, however, was the ratio measure frequently utilized in studies of "descriptive representation"; that is, the percentage of council members who were black

divided by the percentage of the population which was black, and the results of the analysis therefore cannot be considered a test of the increased responsiveness thesis. The causal variable specified by that thesis is *not* how proportionately black people are represented but the proportion of the council which is black. When the issue is the policy impact of black representatives, the latter is clearly the more appropriate variable. In this regard, we are in agreement with Karnig and Welch, who state:

> An equitable proportion on the city council is probably less important to meeting policy objectives than is the absolute representation that blacks possess on the council. That is, we would expect blacks to have greater influence where they hold 60% of the council seats, even if that is only 80% of the equitable rate, than where they hold one quarter of the seats and this reflects an equity ratio 1.5 times their share of the population (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 116; see also Meier and England, 1982, p. 13).

Much more research obviously needs to be completed before the increased responsiveness thesis, the second proposition upon which the new reform movement is based, can be considered empirically sound. The degree of congruence between a greater variety of measures of "policy" and indicators of the needs and/or demands of black residents needs to be investigated. In addition, some important analytic issues concerning the assumed linkage between black representation and policy outputs need to be resolved. One such issue is the degree to which increased responsiveness may be a function of the race of the representative, or the race of the represented. Earlier research has reported that municipal policies are more responsive to the interests and needs of blacks in those cities in which council members are elected by district, rather than at large (see, e.g., Liebert, 1974, pp. 781–782; Karnig, 1975, pp. 99–100; Lyons, 1978, pp. 126–129; and Schumaker and Getter, 1977, pp. 265, 273–275; 1983, p. 25). The race of councilmanic representatives was not included in these analyses. Because districted systems presumably create situations in which black voters have more electoral influence, these studies suggest that the important variable may be the ability of blacks to hold representatives electorally accountable, regardless of the race of those representatives. In other words, responsiveness may result from a fear of electoral retribution by black voters, a fear that is presumably shared by black and white officeholders alike (and is felt more immediately by a greater percentage of council members in districted cities). The efforts

system variable or the black representation variable, but never both. Each needs to be included in future research designs so that the relative impact of each can be better clarified. Another related issue concerns a more complete elaboration of the manner in which the presence of blacks on a city council affects responsiveness. Is the percentage of blacks on a council best understood as an intervening variable in a causal sequence (as suggested by Dye and Renick, 1981, p. 485) and therefore viewed as having a direct affect on the adoption of policies that are congruent with the needs or demands of blacks, or is it best understood as a specifying variable which establishes conditions under which the relationship between black needs or demands and policies will vary? In statistical terms, should it be viewed as having an additive or a multiplicative impact? These, and undoubtedly other issues, will have to be addressed in future research efforts before we have an adequate empirical basis upon which to accept the increased responsiveness thesis.

Conclusions

At-large councilmanic elections have been a central plank in the platform of municipal reformers for many years. These elections, it was assumed, would result in the selection of "responsible" council members from the middle and upper classes, who would make decisions on the basis of a citywide, "public-regarding" viewpoint (see Banfield and Wilson, 1963, pp. 87–96, and Lineberry and Fowler, 1967). Many American municipalities have adopted and are today using this "reformed" electoral structure as the means for selecting council members. This electoral system has drawn an adverse reaction from America's black minority, however, which has argued that at-large elections are often racially discriminatory. District-based electoral systems, they maintain, would provide black people with a much more equitable opportunity to elect fellow blacks to city councils, a situation which in turn is expected to result in municipal governments being more responsive to minority needs and interests. This has stimulated another "reform movement," focused largely on municipalities within the southern portion of the United States, which seeks to substitute single-member districts for the at-large arrangement.

The empirical evidence for the two propositions upon which this new black reform movement is based has been reviewed in the preceding pages. The first proposition, that blacks will be represented

elections are employed, has been impressively documented. Indeed, this proposition is among the best verified empirical generalizations in political science. The second proposition, however, that governmental responsiveness will increase as the level of black representation increases, does not rest upon nearly as solid an empirical foundation as the first. Systematic efforts to verify this second proposition have begun only recently and have reached inconsistent conclusions. It would seem prudent, therefore, to exercise considerable caution before generalizing about the policy consequences associated with different levels of black councilmanic representation. It is not possible, as yet, to state with any confidence whether these inconsistent findings are related to the type of policy dimensions analyzed (priorities or equitability of distributions), the measurement of black strength on the council (black proportionality or black percentage), and/or the failure to account for other factors that might make a difference (such as variation in black needs or demands or the likelihood of greater electoral accountability generally in districted as opposed to at-large systems).

Even if the impact that black elected officials have on municipal policies and programs should prove to be of less magnitude than many black reformers would like, this should not suggest that the current electoral reform movement is therefore unimportant. District-based election systems do generally facilitate the election of blacks to city councils, and the presence of blacks on councils may serve other important functions beside that of altering policies. The presence of blacks on a council may very well result in increased constituency service for black citizens (see, e.g., Jewell, 1982, pp. 145–146). And feelings of political competence and affect among blacks may increase as a result of blacks being in decision-making positions. As expressed by Michael Preston:

> [S]ymbolic representation is not only desirable but necessary for black Americans. Because of past historical conditions, blacks need role models in government; they need representatives that they believe will represent their interests; they need to know that good leadership (or bad) is not dominated by one race or group. Most important, blacks must become more self-reliant. Self-reliance is a basic ingredient of political influence. To be self-reliant is to believe in oneself, and to seek out others who can be influenced to act in one's behalf (Preston, 1978, p. 198; see also Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 109).

Regardless of the type of impact that black council members may (or may not) ultimately have, the better electoral prospects for black candidates in districted as opposed to at-large systems will continue to compel the racial minority to view districted systems as the more fair alternative, in the sense that "the fairness of the electoral method depends on whether substantial numbers of voters who wish to elect one of their own members . . . can, in fact, do so" (Lijphart, 1982, p. 144). On this dimension, the black reformers are unquestionably correct.

Notes

1. This data was collected through a telephone survey of city clerks' offices during the spring of 1982. The authors wish to thank Albert Ringelstein for assisting with this survey.
2. The South was second to the West in the proportion of cities utilizing at-large elections in the earlier study of cities with populations exceeding 10,000. For the regional percentages in the earlier survey, as well as the definition of the West employed in both, see Svara (1977, p. 171).
3. The litigation has been premised on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution and on section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. For an excellent discussion of the history of this litigation, and commentary on the standards applied, see O'Rourke (1982).
4. Efforts to switch to at-large elections in those southern states covered by section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which requires federal "preclearance" of any changes in laws affecting elections, are generally prevented by the Department of Justice, or the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, on the grounds that they may have a racially discriminatory effect (see Motomura, 1983, pp. 210–214).
5. Four central cities in which blacks constituted a *majority* of the population were excluded from this analysis.
6. The correlation between these two measures is exceptionally high when they are applied to cities having populations which are at least 10% black but is reduced dramatically if a lower black population threshold is applied (see Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 346).
7. These figures are based on the data collected in 1976 by Robinson, not the data collected by MacManus. For analyses of the data collected by Robinson, see Robinson and Dye (1798) and Engstrom and McDonald (1981, 1982).
8. Karnig and Welch (1980, p. 120) attempted to minimize the impact that the differences in the functional responsibilities of cities might have on these results by examining changes over time within each city's budget and by eliminating from the analysis of each category of expenditures any cities that did not have expenditures in that category in either of the two observed fiscal years. On the importance of taking these differences into account, see Liebert (1974).