Black mayoral candidates win close elections in the South, pointing to importance of voter mobilization

December 16 2013

It wasn't until 1967 – the peak of the Civil Rights Movement – that an African-American was elected mayor of a large U.S. city. The interracial mayoral races that followed were often heated, involving high voter turnout and close margins.

Now, a study by Princeton University takes an unprecedented look into the history of such mayoral elections, arguing that, while voter mobilization efforts took place across the country, they had a stronger effect in the South, where there was a large number of unregistered, unincorporated African-American voters.

The study shows that in the South – but not the North – close black mayoral victories have been more likely than close black mayoral losses and have had higher voter turnout than black mayoral losses. It's likely that when an election became 'close enough,' black campaigns could "out-mobilize their opponents and win" by invigorating the African-American electorate. Additionally, those black victories were then followed by subsequent wins by black candidates.

"It's extremely surprising that a group of candidates unconnected to traditional sources of power and money held an advantage in close elections," said study author Tom Vogl, assistant professor of economics and international affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School. "Because the South had a huge pool of African-Americans who had previously been

excluded from the political system, getting those people out to vote – by way of church drives, get-out-the-vote campaigns and car polls to the polls – was cheaper for black campaigns."

The findings were actually realized when Vogl set out to examine a different effect of black mayors: their influence on cities. He'd designed a model relying on the assumption that candidates could not swing close elections. That was soon turned on its head when Vogl found that, in Southern cities, black candidates were winning a disproportionate share of close elections.

And so, he spent the next several months compiling data from government surveys, newspaper archives, online elections portals and rosters of black-elected officials. He captured data on the name, race, party affiliation and voter return of each of the top-two candidates in urban mayoral elections between 1965 and 2010. This included elections in cities with a population of at least 50,000, 4 percent of whom were black. And, because municipal surveys had some non-respondents, Vogl turned to other sources of information like the National Roster of Black Elected Officials, produced by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C.

Of the 1,226 elections he collected, 299 were documented as interracial. Vogl performed a number of calculations between the North and South regions. These zones are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau's definition, which spans the territory from Maryland and Delaware in the northeastern corner to Texas in the southwestern corner. He found that alternative regional definitions did not change the results.

"The two decades following 1950 saw a revolution in voting rights," said Vogl. "Based on the regional differences between the North and South, the data demonstrates how differences in the capacity to mobilize voters to the polls can influence the outcome of an election."

More information: Vogl, Tom S., Race and the Politics of Close Elections, *Journal of Public Economics* (2013), DOI: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2013.11.004 . www.sciencedirect.com/science/ … ii/S0047272713002144

Provided by Princeton University