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ORIGINAL PAPER

Elected Officials, Empowered Voters: The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Voter Turnout

Matthew Hayes[1] · **Cara Wong**[2] · **Andrew Bloeser**[3] · **Mark Fredrickson**[4] · **Chera LaForge**[5]

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Abstract

How does descriptive representation affect the voter turnout of African Americans? Though theories state that electing officials who belong to a minority group should lead to greater participation among that group's members via empowerment, the empirical evidence has been mixed. With three decades of voter turnout data, Census data, and data on Black elected officials in South Carolina, we address a number of questions about descriptive representation. Using the number of officials, their level of office, and when they were elected, we investigate how Black representatives affect turnout for Black voters. We find evidence of an empowering effect for African Americans, but find it depends on numbers and jurisdiction, with local representation associated with greater boosts to turnout than federal representation. These results help us reconcile the literature on empowerment by demonstrating the nuanced effects of descriptive representation across level and magnitude of representation.

Keywords Race · Representation · Turnout

Introduction

In 1970, African Americans made up a quarter of the population in York County, South Carolina, but held no elected office. Turnout was also quite low: only 44% of African Americans voted in the 1972 presidential election compared to 62% of whites. Local public services for African Americans were practically nonexistent, and as one local activist explained,

✉ Matthew Hayes
matthew.hayes@wustl.edu

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

> ...the reason is simple. Black folks have no voice in government. No elected representatives on any decision-making body in the city, county and a pitiful few in the state (Blacks, 1973).

This political powerlessness changed, however, after two African Americans were elected to the York City Council in 1973. Black turnout in the county increased to 64% in the subsequent presidential election, and remained at or above this level for the next twenty years.[1]

York County is a success story of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), which aimed to enfranchise and empower African Americans. By removing barriers to registering and voting, the VRA provided African Americans with the first real chance to elect candidates of their choice in the South since Reconstruction. And due to marginalized groups' general preferences for coethnic representation (Harden, 2015; Casellas & Wallace, 2015; Ansolabehere & Fraga, 2016; Lerman et al., 2015), it is no surprise that the enfranchisement of African Americans led to an immediate growth in the numbers of Black elected officials (BEOs) in South Carolina and across the Deep South. Theories of representation state that the presence of African American leaders will, in turn, inspire Black constituents to believe that there are tangible benefits from engaging in politics (Hamilton, 1986); after so many years of being excluded, the political system is no longer closed to their voices. African Americans should perceive real incentives for registering and voting, both in terms of getting favorable legislation passed and having a champion in City Hall or Congress who could give voice to their concerns (Stout, 2018). We thus expect to see a relationship between the emergence of BEOs and heightened Black political engagement.

Scholars have tested these theories linking the candidacy and election of Black officials to greater voter turnout at the mayoral, state, congressional, and presidential level (Browning et al., 1984; Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Keele et al., 2017; Clark, 2019; Gay, 2001; Fraga, 2018; Philpot et al., 2009; McKee et al., 2012). Yet empirical support for whether descriptive representation leads to a boost in minority turnout is mixed (Gay, 2001; Spence & McClerking, 2010; Fraga, 2016, 2015).[2]

We extend these studies with a more detailed measure of descriptive representation than has been used to date. Using data from South Carolina elections between 1970 and 2002, we produce a measure of Black descriptive representation that captures not only the total number of BEOs in a county, but also their presence across different jurisdictions and levels of office. Measuring the total number of BEOs in a community gives us a more complete portrait of how well incorporated African Americans are into the political system compared to past studies that are limited to

[1] We see a similar boost to turnout in midterm elections. This 20% increase occurred at the same time that turnout rates were declining at the national level.

[2] At the same time, much of this work consistently demonstrates that the election of minorities can negatively affect white turnout as well as whites' political knowledge (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Gay, 2001; Barreto et al., 2004), although there may be strategies BEOs can take to mitigate this effect (Petrow, 2010; Stout, 2015). We do not explore the effects of minority representation on white turnout in the main text of this paper, but results presented in Section A2 in the Supporting Information do not find evidence that white turnout is depressed by minority representation.

the presence or absence of a single prominent Black elected official. Looking across different levels of political office also allows us to establish whether some offices have a greater influence on participation than others.

Using this richer measure of Black descriptive representation, we find strong and consistent evidence that Black descriptive representation is closely linked to an increase in African American turnout. This effect is strongest when African Americans are present in local offices and in greater numbers. Our findings help explain the disparate results of past studies; looking only at one electoral office may miss the actual level and degree of African Americans' political incorporation in a community, and scholars might thus miss the empowering effect of descriptive representation. In other words, while a single Black representative may have an empowering effect on voters, increased representation in more proximate positions can be highly consequential for Black empowerment.

How Does Representation Affect Political Attitudes and Actions?

Theories of descriptive representation and empowerment posit that the presence of minority political leaders will lead marginalized constituents to feel a greater sense of efficacy, group pride, and trust in government (Preston, 1978; Browning et al., 1984; Gurin et al., 1989; Tate, 1994; Clark, 2019). Having a representative "like them" makes minority constituents more likely to recall the name of their representative, more likely to contact them, and more likely to approve of their performance (Banducci et al., 2004; Karp & Banducci, 2008; Stout, 2018; Tate, 2003). According to the political reality model, minority descriptive representation will also lead to public resources being redirected to minority communities, such that the more symbolic benefits of representation come hand-in-hand with more tangible changes (Marschall & Ruhil, 2007). Descriptive representation should also make minorities more likely to perceive an instrumental value of voting, since the ability to elect a candidate of their choice is a signal of greater openness in the political system (Burns et al., 2001). Therefore, the theoretical expectation is that after an ingroup representative takes office, more ingroup members will turn out to vote in the subsequent election.

The empirical support for these theories is decidedly mixed. While minority representation increases recall and approval, there is minimal evidence that it leads to greater trust and efficacy or less alienation among minority group members (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Pantoja & Segura, 2003; Overby et al., 2005). Furthermore, Black congressional representation does not lead to warmer feelings about the Black incumbent or toward Congress as an institution (Gay, 2001), nor does it increase African Americans' interest in political campaigns or approval of Congress (Tate, 1994). The evidence is equally mixed for behavioral outcomes as well: some scholars find that descriptive representation leads to greater political participation for both African Americans and Latinos (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Barreto et al., 2004; Clark, 2019), while others find no effect of Black representation on Black turnout (Gay, 2001; Banducci et al., 2004).

There are many reasons why these findings have been mixed. One possibility is that the empowering effect of descriptive representation changes over time. Research indicates that the longer a community has experienced Black decision-making power, the less effective descriptive representation is at spurring empowerment and participation (Gilliam & Kaufmann, 1998; Spence & McClerking, 2010).[3] So even if there *is* an immediate short term effect of descriptive representation, studies might miss this effect by examining areas with differing histories of empowerment.

A second recent explanation is that traditional studies of descriptive representation are unable to separate the effects of representation from the effects of districts. As Fraga (2015) argues, ethnoracial context can affect the turnout of African Americans and Latinos, with African Americans more likely to turn out to vote when they reside in a majority-minority district. Since the lion's share of minority candidates and elected officials are in majority-minority districts, the effect of descriptive representation may actually be attributable to context (Fraga, 2016; Barreto et al., 2004).

Finally, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of empowerment from mobilization. Several studies have found that the presence of coethnic candidates on the ballot can increase minority turnout, with coethnic voters more likely to vote for such candidates (Barreto, 2007, 2010; McConnaughy et al., 2010; Sanchez, 2006). A mobilizing effect could arise through psychological means, such as a decrease in the perceived hostility of the political environment to minorities (e.g., Schildkraut, 2005), or through active campaigning and targeting by coethnic candidates and local organizations (e.g., Hersh & Schaffner, 2013). If the presence or behaviors of these coethnic candidates and GOTV efforts boost turnout, then it would make it particularly hard to separate the effects of empowerment from the effects of mobilization, since having minority officeholders necessitates having minority candidates. As we discuss below, scholars can leverage the nature and timing of elections at different levels to separate mobilization from empowerment. If the presence of minority officeholders confers a sense of political empowerment, their constituents should be more likely to turn out to vote even in elections where they are not voting to express their support for coethnic candidates.

In addition to over time changes in empowerment effects and the confounds of districts and mobilization, we believe that another explanation for the inconsistent findings is the difficulty in developing a measure of descriptive representation that is well grounded in theories of empowerment. Scholars have acknowledged that the effect of empowerment might diminish over time, as the excitement arising from the promise of political representation fades into the normalcy of everyday politics (Gilliam & Kaufmann, 1998). Yet many studies of descriptive representation examine cross-sections of time or only a handful of elections, often well after empowerment should have occurred. Likewise, the empowering effect of descriptive representation should occur only when minority groups are able to avoid tokenism and accumulate power, and thereby build influence on policymaking by electing many officials from their group. For this reason, previous studies whose data were limited

[3] In our Supporting Information, we demonstrate that this appears to be the case in our data as well—the effect of gaining a Black elected official is strongest in the 1970s and decreases over time.

to a single office may significantly underestimate the impact of empowerment (e.g., Gay, 2001; Tate, 2003; Whitby, 2007; Gleason & Stout, 2014). A complete test of empowerment should capture a robust measure of descriptive representation at the local, state, and federal levels. To observe whether descriptive representation indeed can affect empowerment and political participation, we must examine this relationship over a broader time horizon and in response to both the numbers and types of minority elected officials.

Level of Representation

Much of the research on the effect of descriptive representation on voter turnout has focused on prominent political offices. The VRA focuses on the creation of majority-minority congressional districts, which has directed much attention—academic, media, legal, and partisan—to congressional redistricting and representation. The election of Black mayors like Harold Washington in Chicago and Tom Bradley in Los Angeles also garnered national attention; these mayoral elections led scholars to examine how these pioneers affected intergroup cooperation and conflict in their municipalities, as well as the political engagement of the various racial and ethnic groups involved. What is largely ignored are the lower levels of representation that rarely grab the spotlight of national news: city councils, school superintendents, local judges, and state legislators.

We hypothesize that lower level offices can also lead minorities to feel they have a stake and voice in their own governance just as is posited for higher offices. After all, the vast majority of Black elected officials in the United States are *not* mayors or members of Congress. The election of an area's first Black school superintendent or city council member may not garner national news coverage, but it could be a salient event at the local level. A minority voter could think that finally someone like her would have a say in how her children were taught or in how local funding was allocated. For example, Marschall and her colleagues have shown that city council and school board members can affect civic engagement (Marschall & Ruhil, 2007; Marschall et al., 2010). However, it is also possible that descriptive representation at lower levels of government has no effect on the turnout of minority voters, especially if constituents do not know the race of these representatives (Bullock et al., 2001). This is an empirical question we seek to answer.

Number of Representatives

Since Black officials can represent Black voters at many different levels of government, and empowerment could result from officials holding a variety of different offices, we need to consider the potential cumulative effect of descriptive representation. For example, if one Black mayor can lead more African Americans to go to the voting booths on Election Day, will a Black mayor and a few city council members lead to even greater turnout? This is an especially important point if we truly want to measure empowerment, or "the extent to which a group has achieved significant representation and influence in political decision making" (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990, p.

378). In majoritarian democratic systems, meaningful political power rarely comes from having a single representative who shares your identity. Yet, many previous studies examining the effects of descriptive representation have focused on a sole political office, such as the House of Representatives (Whitby, 2000; Tate, 2003; Wolak & Juenke, 2019), or even on individual elected officials (West, 2017; Simien & Hampson, 2020).

Our work attempts to bridge the gap between the theoretical concept of empowerment and its empirical measurement. Like Barreto et al. (2004), we look at multiple jurisdictions in our measure of empowerment. We expand on this research by measuring more of the underlying variance in the magnitude of descriptive representation. We do this by looking across more levels of public office and focusing explicitly on elected officials, rather than the diversity of districts in which constituents reside. In doing so, we believe we present a more nuanced measure of empowerment that is true to its theoretical definition as involving significant decision-making power.

The Case of South Carolina

Our research design depends on finding a geographic locale that meets two criteria: (1) The area must have some variation in Black elected officials over time, and (2) we must be able to access turnout rates by race for each election from the local Registrar of Voters. We rely on actual vote returns to avoid both self (mis-)reports of turnout and having to impute the voting behavior of entire racial groups (Silver et al., 1986; Abramson & Claggett, 1984).[4]

We choose to test our hypotheses using the state of South Carolina. This is a useful test case for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the only states in the nation that has recorded and reported white and non-white turnout from 1970 to the present.[5] Second, South Carolina is in the South, where 57% of African Americans were living as of the 2010 Census (Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2011). Third, South Carolina's racial history makes it an important case for studying Black empowerment: it was the first state to secede from the Union; there were about 300 Black officeholders during Reconstruction; and after Reconstruction, African Americans were largely disenfranchised and descriptive representation ended (Foner, 1996). (Key, 1949, p. 130) describes South Carolina in the 1940's in *Southern Politics* as follows:

> While others shared their views, the politicians of South Carolina—and Mississippi—have put the white-supremacy case most bitterly, most uncompromisingly, most vindictively...The harshness and ceaselessness of race discus-

[4] We still have to deal with an ecological inference problem because county-election is our unit of analysis; however, we are sensitive in our interpretations not to generalize differences in voter turnout at the aggregate level to the behavior of individual voters (Achen & Shively, 1995).

[5] Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida also make these data easily accessible, but only for a shorter period of time. As it will become clear in our analyses, having data in the 1970s is crucial: in South Carolina, 87% of the counties had their first Black elected official by 1980.

> sion in South Carolina are not matters of coincidence. It is but a short time ago, as time must be measured, since the state had three Negroes for every two white persons.

Key goes on to explain the link between the state's racial context and its politics:

> South Carolina's preoccupation with the Negro stifles political conflict. Over offices there is conflict aplenty, but the race question muffles conflict over issues latent in the economy of South Carolina. Mill worker and plantation owner alike want to keep the Negro in his place. In part, issues are deliberately repressed, for, at least in the long run, concern with genuine issues would bring an end to the consensus by which the Negro is kept out of politics (Key, 1949, 131).

The Civil Rights Movement, along with legislation passed by Congress, had a huge effect on South Carolina. Today, there are again hundreds of Black elected officials, even more than at the height of Reconstruction. Nevertheless, South Carolina is still plagued by racial tension, as attested to by the recent heated debate over the removal of the Confederate Flag flying on the capitol grounds in Columbia as well as ongoing Black Lives Matter protests throughout the state (Hutchings et al., 2010; Strother et al., 2017; Sinclair-Chapman, 2018; Williamson et al., 2018).

Census data for South Carolina also show it to be an excellent test case for looking at the effects of Black representation on the political engagement of Black and white residents. There is substantial variance in the size of the Black population across counties, and this heterogeneity has persisted over time.[6] As of the 2000 Census, the average percent Black in a county was 37.7%, with counties ranging from around 9.5% Black to almost 62% Black. However, there has been relatively little racial demographic change from decade to decade within counties and across the state. The largest change in racial demographics between 1970 and 2000 occurred in Richland county which went from 68% white to 50% white. This large of a demographic shift was uncommon; the average change in the percent white in a county was − 2%, and only 4 (out of 46) counties saw double digit changes in the percent white over this 30-year period. Because of this, we cannot explain a rise in BEOs over time as a result of more African Americans migrating into certain counties or the state overall. The state's demographics also cannot explain a rise or fluctuation in Black or white turnout over time; racial solidarity or power threat theories require large or increasing proportions of African Americans in local areas (Key, 1949; Matthews & Prothro, 1966; Green et al., 1998; Ananat & Washington, 2009).

Data and Measures

To explore the potential empowering effect of descriptive representation, our empirical analysis will examine the relationship between the number of Black elected

[6] See Table A1 of the Supporting Information for full description of the demographic statistics of South Carolina.

officials in a county and African American voter turnout.[7] For voter turnout data, we use the South Carolina Registrar of Voters' records for white and nonwhite turnout by county for even-year November general elections between 1970 and 2002.[8] These turnout numbers report the total number of ballots cast in the election, not whether the voter made a selection in any particular race. This means that we are capturing the actual number of voters who turned out to the polls, regardless of the amount of electoral roll-off on down-ballot races. Moreover, it is important to note that we are not necessarily measuring the turnout in an election corresponding to a Black elected official. Many of our BEOs—local, judicial, and many education officials—are elected in off-cycle elections. This should have two effects on our analyses. First, by including officials who were not on the ballot in our measure of empowerment, we are likely underestimating the true effect of descriptive representation. If, as other scholars have found, having a Black mayor produces greater satisfaction with government services (Marschall et al., 2010), then we would expect the greatest empowerment-linked turnout boost to occur in mayoral elections rather than in federal and state elections. Second, the inclusion of elected officials not on the ballot should help to eliminate the potential confound of coethnic mobilization by Black candidates. We would expect the greatest get-out-the-vote efforts by BEOs to occur when they are actually up for (re-)election. Taken together, our main dependent variable should allow us to make a conservative estimate of the effect of descriptive representation on turnout.

For the data on descriptive representation, we use national rosters of BEOs compiled by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies from 1969 to 2002.[9] The Joint Center reports data on officials at the federal, state, county, and municipal levels, as well as judicial and education elected officials.[10] Because our measure of voter turnout is aggregated to the county level, we want to be able to locate the BEOs in the counties that they represent. For all of the offices at the county level and below, we match BEOs with the counties in which they reside. For BEOs above the county level, we match the BEOs with all counties that fall within his or her district. For state level officials, this is generally a single county, but could be as many as three counties. The lone member of Congress in our data represented a district containing majorities of eight counties with portions of an additional eight counties.[11] We are assuming that if a South Carolinian lives in a county that has a Black mayor, for example, she has the potential for being empowered by that mayor, even if she does not live in the mayor's city. This should result in a fairly conservative estimate of the effect of descriptive

[7] Data and replication code are publicly available in the Political Behavior Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BFOY4A

[8] We use non-white turnout as a proxy for Black turnout because South Carolina reports voting data only for whites and non-whites. According to the Census, however, the vast majority of non-whites in South Carolina are Black. Over 99% of all non-whites in 1970 were Black, as were 93.4% in 2000.

[9] The Joint Center is missing data for 1984 and so we omit this year from our analyses.

[10] The list of elected offices in our data can be found in Table A2 in the Supporting Information.

[11] Our results are robust to including only those counties with a majority of voters in the district or all counties with any population in the district.

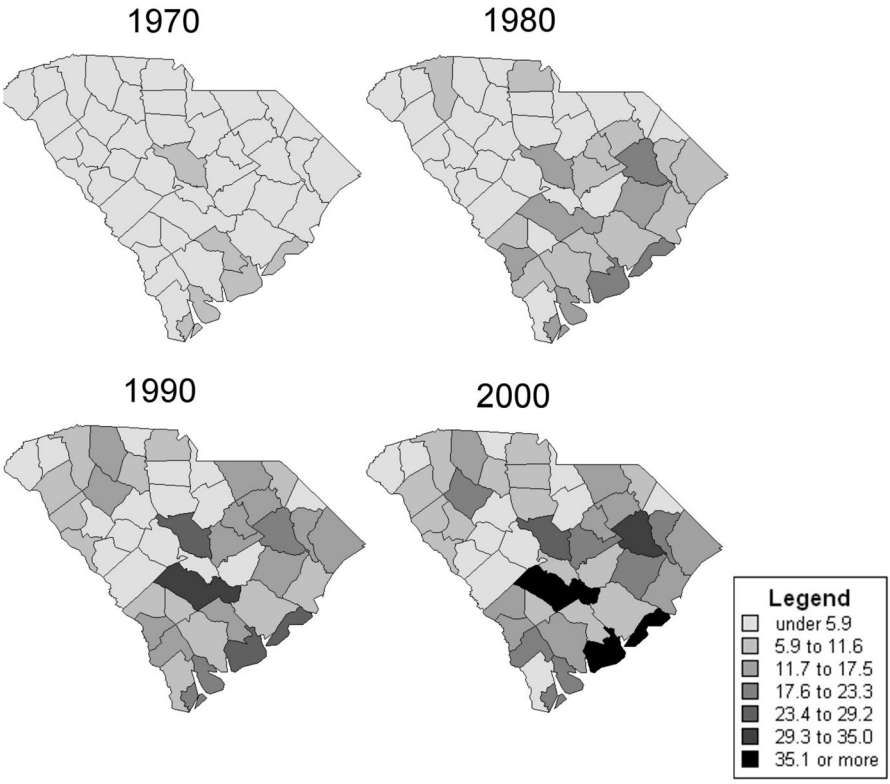

Fig. 1 Number of Black Elected Officials in South Carolina Counties in 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. *Source* Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

representation; we are including many voters who may be unaffected by a BEO in their counties, which should only dilute the effects we observe. In other words, we have created a harder test for ourselves to find effects of descriptive representation on turnout.

In January 1969, there were only 26 South Carolinians on the list of Black officials compiled by the Joint Center's Voter Education Project (Voter, 1969). By 2002, there were more than 500 BEOs in the state. Although there is a positive correlation between percent Black in a county and the total number of BEOs, this relationship is modest ($r = 0.25$). As Fig. 1 shows, we actually observe an increase in Black officials in nearly all counties statewide. As of 1970, only 7 counties had African Americans holding elected office. By 2000, 45 out of 46 counties had African Americans serving in office, underscoring the rapid change in Black descriptive representation over the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

We include several additional control variables in our models. We control for a secular trend in voter turnout, since turnout has declined in South Carolina over time; we do not want to confuse lower turnout due to a statewide trend with lower turnout due to a BEO (Teixeira, 1987). To capture the over-time decrease

in turnout, we control for years since 1970. We add a dummy variable for whether the year is a presidential election year or a midterm election year, since turnout in the latter is drastically lower than in the former. Since the unit of analysis is the county-election, we also introduce control variables for several county-level factors that should be related to turnout. These include county population (in thousands), percent Black, median income (in thousands of dollars), the percentage of the population with a college degree, and percent urban in the county. These variables are only marginally correlated with one another, with the strongest relationship being between the county percent Black and household income ($r = -0.77$). These controls should help us avoid confusing the effect of context with the effect of representation. In addition, our models allow the intercept for turnout to vary randomly across counties, which should help mitigate the risk of county-level omitted variable bias.[12]

Results

Our central question is whether the presence of African Americans in elected office is associated with higher turnout for Black constituents. So, for example, if a county elects a Black official in 1974 to a city council, is there an increase in the percentage of African Americans in that county who turn out to vote in 1976 as a result?[13] To model the effect of the presence of Black elected officials, we run a series of multivariate analyses that examine descriptive representation across number of officials and jurisdiction. Since our data are clustered at the county level, we run multilevel models with elections nested within counties. We have observations from 16 election years (1970-2002, with 1984 omitted due to a lack of data on BEOs in that year) and 46 counties, yielding a total N of 736. We allow the intercepts of these models to vary randomly by county and include a simple counter for year. Doing so allows us to take into account unobserved differences in base turnout rates of Black voters in these counties.

We first want to examine the link between the number of BEOs in a county and turnout for African Americans. At the beginning of our data in 1970, most counties (35 out of 46) had no BEOs. However, the number of BEOs in South Carolina expanded throughout the 1970s. By 1980, only 10 counties had no BEOs, and some counties had as many as 19. We expect for this rapid increase in the number of BEOs to have an immediate impact on the political participation of Black voters, since they are receiving a signal that political doors that were once closed to them have now been opened.

To investigate this link, we look at the number of BEOs in any given county-election. There is good reason to presume that the number of officials has a nonlinear relationship with turnout: there are likely to be diminishing returns once African Americans are descriptively represented. The effect of the 44^{th} Black elected official is likely very different from the effect of the 5^{th}. We introduce a simple count of

[12] Another possible confound is the competitiveness of the election. In Section A4.3 of the Supporting Information we also run models accounting for the winning vote share and whether there was an open seat in that county's congressional race.

[13] See Section A3 of the Supplemental Information for analyses of specific temporal effects.

Table 1 Effect of total number of BEOs on black turnout

	Dependent variable: Black turnout percent
Number of BEOs	0.432***
	(0.134)
(Number of BEOs)^2	− 0.014***
	(0.004)
Population (thousands)	0.014
	(0.012)
Median income (thousands)	− 0.163
	(0.140)
Percent with college degree	0.407***
	(0.145)
Percent Black	− 0.035
	(0.048)
Percent Urban	− 0.094***
	(0.033)
Year	− 0.124***
	(0.046)
Presidential election	12.325***
	(0.486)
Constant	55.788***
	(5.178)
Observations	736
Log Likelihood	− 2,473.583
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,971.166
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	5,026.381

Coefficients are the result of a multilevel model that allows the intercept to vary by county. N = 736. BEO data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Turnout data from the South Carolina Registrar of Voters and represents the percentage of registered voters who cast ballots. Other variables from the U.S. Census Bureau. Years 1970-2002, coded such that the start year is 0 and the end year is 32.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

the number of BEOs serving in that county as of that election, as well as that count squared to capture nonlinear effects.[14] Table 1 presents our results for the effect of number of BEOs on Black turnout.

[14] It is possible that the nonlinear relationship between number of officials and turnout follows a non-quadratic form. To investigate this possibility, we also ran a model that included dummies for different numbers of elected officials (e.g., 1-5, 6-10, etc.). The main finding from that analysis is consistent with what we report here. Results from that analysis are available in Table A26a in the Supporting Information.

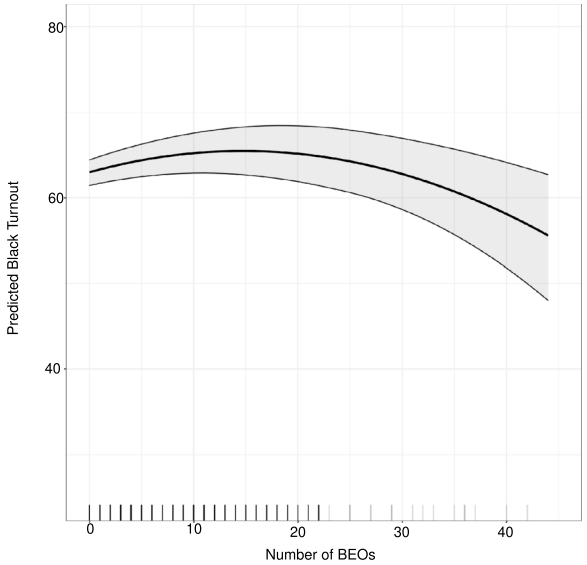

Fig. 2 Predicted Black turnout by number of BEOs

Our findings indicate a measurable positive relationship between the number of BEOs in the county and African American turnout. The intercept here represents the average turnout in a county with no BEOs, with all other variables set to their minimum.[15] The negative sign and significant effect of the squared term indicates that the positive effect of descriptive representation diminishes as the number of Black officials increases. This is consistent with there being diminishing returns for larger numbers of officials.

To illustrate this effect, Fig. 2 shows the estimated effect on turnout of the number of BEOs. The solid line indicates the predicted turnout for African Americans, with the shaded area displaying a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval. Our results suggest there is a positive effect of electing the first few African Americans to office in South Carolina on turnout, but that effect peaks at about 15 officials. Once there are very large numbers of elected officials, the effect is actually negative. However, this should be interpreted with caution; 90% of cases had 16 or fewer Black elected officials, so the paucity of cases limits our ability to detect effects. Nevertheless, descriptive representation does not appear to be a simple function that switches a boost in turnout on or off. Instead, the effect of having African Americans in office grows with their numbers to a point.

[15] Since this is a random intercept model, the value for this intercept is allowed to vary across counties. This accounts for any residual differences in turnout across counties not captured by other variables in our model. Discussion of these random effects and the amount of variation explained within and across counties appears in Table A21 in the Supporting Information.

Effects Across Level of Office

One of the reasons that we can look at multiple Black elected officials is because our measurement of descriptive representation encompasses representation across multiple jurisdictions. After all, if one focused only on Black House members and senators, for example, it would be rare for someone to be represented by more than a single Black elected official. Separating the types of BEOs helps us determine whether some offices may have positive effects while others may have no effect on turnout for African Americans. Some offices, for example, may be better at providing material or expressive benefits to in-group members than others. By looking at the different levels of office, we can avoid pooling across types of treatment, as Keele and White (2011) warn of inconsistent estimates from treatment heterogeneity. Table 2 shows the effects of BEOs separated by type of office.

These models show the effects of having a Black elected official differ greatly by level of office. For African American voters, having a city, county, or state level official seems to confer the greatest boost to turnout. Having a city-level BEO is associated with an approximately 3% higher turnout rate; having at least one county-level BEO is associated with a 1–2% higher turnout rate; and having a state-level BEO is associated with an almost 3% higher turnout rate. Both education and judicial BEOs are positively signed, but not measurably different from zero for African Americans. Finally, having a BEO at the federal level was associated with a decrease in turnout.

Our results for the federal level may appear initially puzzling. Why would the election of James Clyburn, the first Black official elected at the federal level for South Carolina since Reconstruction (and the only federal-level BEO in our data), *decrease* political participation? While Clyburn's election represented a significant and symbolic victory for African Americans, we believe this finding is actually consistent with theoretical expectations about voter empowerment on two dimensions. First, Clyburn's election likely faced a ceiling effect for local levels of Black empowerment. All counties in Clyburn's district already scored very highly on descriptive representation by 1992, the year in which he was elected. These are counties with many other BEOs in lower offices, such that there may be no "room" for an additional boost to turnout from empowerment. This ceiling effect may also explain why, when African Americans achieve other higher (and rarer) offices—like judicial and state offices—there is no boost in turnout.

Second, if empowerment requires "significant representation and influence in political decision making" (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990, p. 378), Clyburn's election may not immediately signal to Black voters that they had achieved political influence at the federal level. When Clyburn was first seated for the 103rd Congress, he was one of only 39 Black members of Congress, constituting less than 9% of the total chamber. At such low numbers—well below African Americans' share of the population—it is reasonable to expect that even a historic "first" like James Clyburn would be insufficient to make his Black constituents feels as though they had significant power in federal lawmaking. Indeed, previous research has found that descriptive representation at low numbers in legislative contexts can be insufficient for generating positive symbolic responses among constituents (Hayes & Hibbing, 2017; Clayton et al., 2019).

Table 2 Effects by BEO Type on Black turnout

	Dependent variable: Black turnout percent
City BEO	3.028***
	(0.706)
County BEO	1.571**
	(0.720)
State BEO	2.951***
	(0.836)
Federal BEO	− 4.061***
	(0.958)
Judicial BEO	0.614
	(0.859)
Education BEO	0.491
	(0.739)
Population (thousands)	− 0.001
	(0.012)
Median income (thousands)	− 0.104
	(0.137)
Percent with college degree	0.450***
	(0.141)
Percent Black	− 0.052
	(0.048)
Percent Urban	− 0.095***
	(0.032)
Year	− 0.147***
	(0.045)
Presidential election	12.194***
	(0.470)
Constant	53.674***
	(5.148)
Observations	736
Log Likelihood	− 2,437.853
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,907.705
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	4,981.325

Coefficients are the result of a multilevel model that allows the intercept to vary by county. N = 736. BEO data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Turnout data from the South Carolina Registrar of Voters and represents the percentage of registered voters who cast ballots. Other variables from the U.S. Census Bureau. Years 1970-2002, coded such that the start year is 0 and the end year is 32.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Moreover, the 1992 election resulted in a South Carolina congressional delegation that had fewer Democrats (3 out of 6) compared to the previous delegation (4 out of 6), consistent with a longstanding concern that creating majority-minority districts might undermine Democratic seats and thus Black substantive representation (Canon & Posner, 1999; Lublin, 1999). As a result, Black voters in South Carolina who are overwhelmingly Democratic might have received decidedly mixed messages about the extent to which Clyburn's election increased their decision-making influence in Congress.

Robustness Checks

We have thus far presented evidence that the number of Black elected officials in a county is predictive of Black turnout, a finding consistent with an empowerment effect from descriptive representation. In this section, we present two robustness checks. The first examines Black descriptive representation as a proportion of all elected officials (rather than the raw total numbers of Black officials). The second aims to disentangle empowerment effects from mobilization by examining the effect of BEOs who were not on the ballot for re-election in our even-year federal elections.

Proportion of Black Elected Officials

Our findings presented above show a clear relationship between the number of Black elected officials serving in a county and the voter turnout of African Americans. But it could be the case that the effect of the raw number of Black elected officials would differ from one county to the next. We might be concerned, for example, that the effect of three city council members in Charleston is fundamentally different from the effect of three city council members in York, since the former has a council of twelve and the latter a council of five. Moreover, empowerment theory suggests that the empowering effect of political incorporation is due, in part, to an increase in political power and policy responsiveness (Browning et al., 1984). Electing a sole Black representative to a city council would likely have only minimal effects on the responsiveness of that council to Black constituents' needs. Instead, we should see policy responsiveness improve when African Americans begin to constitute a meaningful proportion of all elected decision-makers.

To address these concerns, we conducted a robustness check using an additional source of data. Until 1992, the Census Bureau conducted a census of popularly elected officials that includes information on the total number of elected officials in various geographies.[16] We use these reports to determine a denominator for the number of elected representatives in each county in South Carolina. This allows us to investigate if the effect of Black elected officials comes from their raw numbers

[16] These censuses were conducted in 1957, 1967, 1977, 1987, and 1992. We use data from 1977, 1987, and 1992.

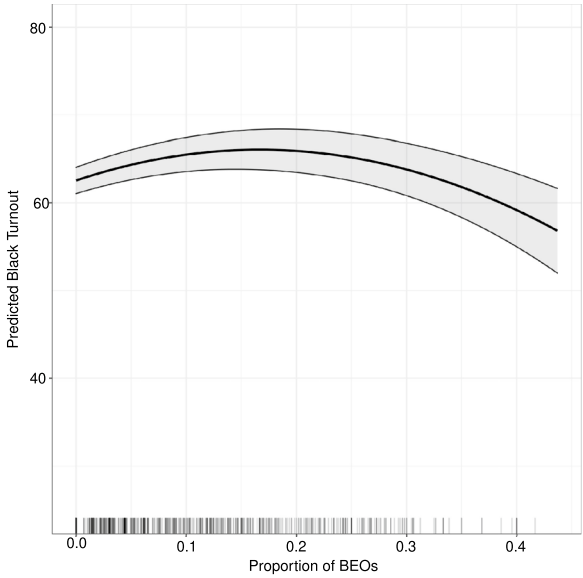

Fig. 3 Predicted Black turnout by proportion of BEOs

or from their proportion of all elected officials. Since these reports were not updated yearly, we cannot account for changes in the number of officials between reports. For each county-election, we use data from the most proximate census of popularly elected officials.

If we substitute the proportion of all elected officials instead of the raw number of Black elected officials, our findings are remarkably consistent. Figure 3 displays the effect of an increase in the proportion of BEOs on African American turnout (full results are available in the Supporting Information). We see a very similar pattern of a boost in turnout followed by diminishing returns. The highest boost in Black turnout appears to occur when African Americans make up about 20% of elected officials. This suggests that our results are robust to measuring descriptive representation as a proportion rather than a count.

Officials Not on the Ballot

A potential alternative mechanism explaining our results is that coethnic candidates mobilize voters, rather than voters feeling empowered by the presence of descriptive representatives. This is supported by previous literature that finds a boost to the mobilization of African American and Hispanic voters by coethnic candidates (Barreto, 2007; Fraga, 2018). Ideally, we would be able to compare the effects of Black elected officials themselves versus the effects of having Black candidates on the ballot. Unfortunately, no historical data on Black candidates on the ballot exist, so we cannot fully account for how many Black candidates might have been running in a given county-election.

Table 3 Effect of number of local BEOs not on ballot on Black turnout

	Dependent variable
	Black turnout percent
Number of off-ballot BEOs	0.715***
	(0.244)
(Number of off-ballot BEOs)^2	− 0.054***
	(0.015)
Population (thousands)	0.014
	(0.012)
Median income (thousands)	− 0.200
	(0.140)
Percent with college degree	0.390***
	(0.145)
Percent Black	− 0.028
	(0.047)
Percent Urban	− 0.087***
	(0.033)
Year	− 0.088**
	(0.042)
Presidential election	12.349***
	(0.486)
Constant	56.611***
	(5.192)
Observations	736
Log Likelihood	− 2,476.700
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,977.401
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	5,032.616

Coefficients are the result of a multilevel model that allows the intercept to vary by county. N = 736. BEO data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Turnout data from the South Carolina Registrar of Voters and represents the percentage of registered voters who cast ballots. Other variables from the U.S. Census Bureau. Years 1970-2002, coded such that the start year is 0 and the end year is 32.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

We can, however, determine when Black incumbents are running for re-election. The vast majority of local and judicial elections in South Carolina occur off-cycle, either in odd years or in the Spring.[17] Thus, most local-level officials, which we find have the strongest connection to Black turnout in Table 2, will not be on the ballot

[17] As of this writing, no municipality in South Carolina with a population of 50,000 or more had local elections concurrent with federal and state elections. We cannot say definitively that no municipalities from 1970-2002 ever held local elections concurrent with state and federal elections, but none were listed in the South Carolina Election Commission's annual reports for the time period of our study, which can be found at http://dc.statelibrary.sc.gov/handle/10827/11983/browse. Table A14 in the Supporting Information lists which offices are on- and off-cycle.

in the elections from which we are measuring Black turnout. Both because they lack any direct re-election motive, and because off-cycle elections tend to feature quite lower voter turnout than on-cycle ones (Marschall & Lappie, 2018; Holbrook & Weinschenk, 2014), there is not a clear theoretical basis for why these incumbents would participate in mobilization for elections in which they are not running. By accounting for this structure, we can bolster confidence that we are detecting an empowering, rather than mobilizing, effect among African American voters.

In Table 3, we replicate our analyses above predicting African American turnout, but only using local-level BEOs who were not running for re-election. We still find a positive and significant effect for the number of BEOs on Black turnout (coefficient = 0.715, std. error = 0.244). This suggests that the effects we observe result not solely from mobilization by coethnic candidates, but rather from the nature of living in a county with high Black empowerment. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of an effect of mobilization on turnout; obviously, local organizations were working steadily to encourage voting, regardless of which candidates were running or what power representatives were wielding.

Discussion and Conclusion

The 1965 Voting Rights Act had, at its heart, the goal of empowering African Americans and incorporating them into the political system after nearly a century of disenfranchisement, segregation, and Jim Crow following Reconstruction. Central to this goal of empowerment was the notion that marginalized communities ought to be able to elect candidates of their choice to represent them, both in Congress and at the state and local level. Our research suggests that such efforts saw a high degree of success. By examining the numbers and proportions of Black elected officials across a wide array of offices in South Carolina from 1970–2002, we are able to chart the growth of Black descriptive representation. And, leveraging the VRA-required tracking of voting by race in South Carolina allows us to determine if these gains in descriptive representation were consequential for African American turnout.

Our results point to a marked growth in the presence of Black officials across the state of South Carolina in the decades following the VRA. Moreover, we find clear empirical evidence that access to political power had an empowering effect on African American voters. Our empirical models predict African American turnout increases by approximately 3% when a city-level BEO is present and a similar increase when a state-level BEO is present. Further, turnout is predicted to be 5% higher in a county with 15 BEOs than in a county with none. These results hold when examining turnout in subsequent elections where these officials were not on the ballot, suggesting we are detecting an effect that goes beyond simple mobilization by candidates seeking re-election.

We find the strongest empowering effect when African Americans are elected to city, state, and county offices. We also find that there are diminishing returns on voter empowerment for Black representation: the empowering effect of descriptive representation peaks when a county has around 15 BEOs, and decreases thereafter. These diminishing returns suggest that once there is a norm of Black representation,

additional gains may become less consequential for empowerment, though they may hold benefits for policy responsiveness and political influence.

Taken together, our findings suggest that our understanding of Black political empowerment would be incomplete if we focused solely on one level of office and ignored the full context of Black descriptive representation in a community. Previous research has highlighted how the existence of descriptive representation at the state and local level can increase civic engagement (Marschall & Ruhil, 2007; Marschall et al., 2010; Rocha et al., 2010). Our research builds on these findings by demonstrating that the empowerment effect of representation at sub-national levels of government can be especially profound.

This underscores the importance of fostering conditions that enable the emergence of viable African American candidates at the local level. Historically, this has been quite difficult, even in the aftermath of the VRA. As other research has noted, African Americans considering a run for local office tend to act strategically. They are less likely to enter races for local level offices as the co-racial proportion of the electorate becomes smaller or previous coethnic candidates have fared poorly (Keele et al., 2017; Juenke & Shah, 2016; Atsusaka, n.d.). Accordingly, many localities have no African American candidates, let alone African American officeholders. On the one hand, this dynamic suggests that the empowerment effects reported in our study will be confined largely to localities with significant Black populations, where Black political networks can mobilize voters to support Black candidates (White, 2020; Fraga, 2018). Unless Black candidates become more viable even when African Americans are a small minority of the electorate [a phenomenon Stout (2020) suggests may be increasingly possible with the racial liberalization of white Democrats], the empowerment effects we report will manifest primarily in localities that are near majority-minority status or have large, electorally decisive coalitions of African Americans and white Democrats. On the other hand, our findings suggest that where this challenge can be surmounted at the local level, the implications for African American voter turnout can be striking and can transcend the specific elections that lead to greater descriptive representation in particular offices.

Second, the findings we report have implications for the study of empowerment among other racial or ethnic groups in American politics. There is general recognition that the rates of voter turnout among groups such as Latinos, Asian Americans, and Muslim Americans will be increasingly important in shaping the direction of America's multi-cultural democracy. Our study signals the importance of studying descriptive representation across levels of office for each of these groups. In the past, such efforts have been hampered by limited data, but new efforts such as Fraga et al. (2020) and Sumner et al. (2020) offer a promising path forward for research on the effects of descriptive representation. Although some research has explored the effects of descriptive representation on Latinos, especially at the congressional level (Barreto et al., 2004; Fraga, 2016; Ocampo, 2018), this scholarship has not examined whether descriptive representation at the local level might have distinctively strong empowerment effects. Likewise, there has been very little scholarship on the effects of descriptive representation across level for Asian Americans and Muslim Americans, despite a growing body of scholarship exploring how these identities shape political behavior and turnout (Oskooii, 2016; Masuoka et al.,

2019; Lajevardi, 2020). To better understand when and how empowerment effects for these groups may emerge, turning attention to descriptive representation across multiple levels of office—and identifying data that makes this possible—is a practical necessity.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09823-0.

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Authors and Affiliations

Matthew Hayes[1] · Cara Wong[2] · Andrew Bloeser[3] · Mark Fredrickson[4] · Chera LaForge[5]

Cara Wong
carawong@illinois.edu

Andrew Bloeser
abloeser@allegheny.edu

Mark Fredrickson
mfredric@umich.edu

Chera LaForge
calaforg@iue.edu

[1] Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis, 1 Brookings Dr, Saint Louis, MO 63130, USA

[2] Department of Political Science, University of Illinois, 506 S. Wright St, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

[3] Department of Political Science, Allegheny College, 520 N Main St, Meadville, PA 16335, USA

[4] Department of Statistics, University of Michigan, 500 S State St, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

[5] Department of Criminal Justice and Political Science, Indiana University East, 2325 Chester Blvd, Richmond, IN 47374, USA