

Voter Turnout in Majority-Minority Districts

Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, the number of Latino and African-American elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels has increased dramatically. California is now home to one of the nation's most diverse congressional delegations. Benefiting in part from VRA provisions that create so-called majority-minority districts—those in which minority groups constitute a majority of the voting population—Latino and black U.S. House members have emerged as visible political actors in an institution traditionally dominated by whites.

Some observers maintain that this diversity has not translated into tangible benefits for California's minority constituents. Yet redistricting advocates claim that, regardless of legislative outcomes, majority-minority districts are beneficial because they encourage more Latinos and African Americans to participate in the political process. By creating a climate of inclusion, race-conscious redistricting is thought to make voters out of previously unengaged Californians. This claim has met with considerable skepticism, but so far neither the advocates nor the skeptics have offered firm evidence for or against the link between majority-minority redistricting and increased political participation.

To provide this evidence, Claudine Gay's *The Effect of Minority Districts and Minority Representation on Political Participation in California* examines the relationship between majority-minority districts, minority representation, and voting participation among Latinos, African Americans, and Anglos in California. Specifically, the report addresses two key questions:

- Do Latino, African-American, and white turnout rates vary with the racial and ethnic balance of a district?
- Does the race or ethnicity of the congressional representative in a majority-minority district affect these turnout rates?

Drawing on Census information and voting statistics provided by the Statewide Database for the November 1994 elections, the report compares turnout rates in California's 13 majority-minority congressional districts with those in

majority-Anglo districts. Because these rates vary for reasons other than race or ethnicity, the author uses statistical techniques to adjust for the potentially confounding effects of age, educational attainment, household income, electoral competitiveness, and other factors. The findings therefore isolate the independent effects of majority-minority districts and minority representation on voter turnout.

How Race and Ethnicity Matter

The research results generally support the claim that minority representation and majority-minority districts are associated with greater involvement in electoral politics among Latinos and African Americans. In particular, the report contains four major findings on political participation.

In the state's six majority-Latino congressional districts, Latino registered voter turnout was 33 percentage points higher than Latino turnout in majority-Anglo districts after adjustment for demographic and political factors. Where Latinos and African Americans were more equally matched, Latino registered voter turnout was 30 percentage points above rates in majority-Anglo districts. In multi-ethnic districts where Latinos play a more limited role, their registered voter turnout rate was 7 percentage points higher than it was in majority-Anglo districts.

Turnout among Latinos was particularly high in districts with Latino representatives as well as Latino majorities. In the four districts of that type, Latino registered voter turnout was 36 percentage points higher than the Latino turnout in majority-Anglo districts. In the two majority-Latino districts represented by white legislators, Latino registered voter turnout was almost 27 percentage points higher than Latino turnout in majority-Anglo districts.

African-American voting-age turnout was highest in districts where they and Latinos were equally matched and together formed the majority of the voting-age population. On average, African-American voting-age turnout in such districts was almost 7 percentage points higher than the

African-American turnout in majority-Anglo districts. In districts where African Americans were one part of a more diverse multi-ethnic mix, turnout rates among the black voting-age population were almost 4 percentage points higher than the corresponding rate in majority-Anglo districts. African-American turnout was lowest wherever a single non-black community of any race or ethnicity dominated the congressional election; participation was marginally lower when this dominant community was Latino rather than white. There was no discernible independent relationship between African-American turnout and black representation.

White turnout did not suffer in districts where whites were a minority. In fact, white voting-age turnout was slightly higher in majority-Latino districts than in majority-Anglo districts. Similarly, white voting-age turnout did not decline in districts with nonwhite representatives.

Implications for Redistricting

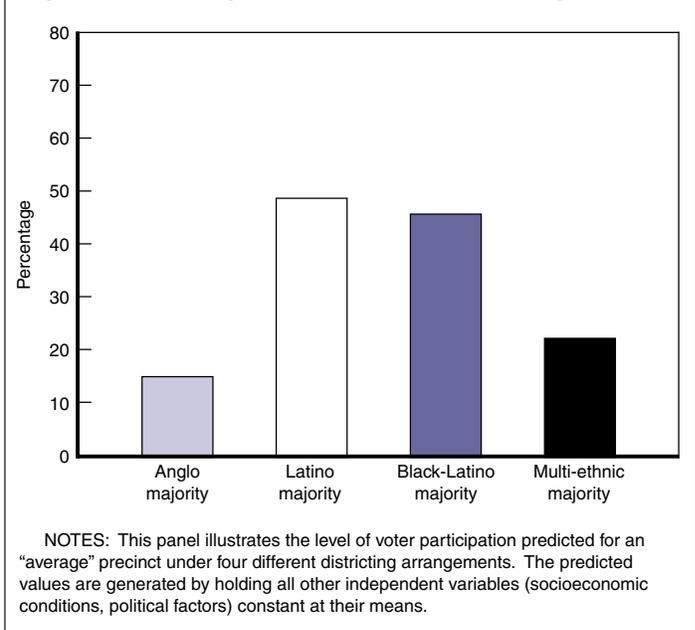
These four findings have important implications for redistricting in 2001. If majority-minority congressional districts promote political participation among Latinos and African Americans, creating such districts may compensate for other socioeconomic barriers, such as low income and educational levels, which are associated with low voter participation. For example, including a precinct in a majority-black and -Hispanic district rather than in a majority-Anglo district may have a greater effect on voter participation than increasing the number of college-educated residents by 10 percentage points. As a result of connecting new voters to the political world, race-conscious redistricting may create an active electorate that more accurately reflects the state's racial and ethnic make-up.

In creating majority-minority districts, mapmakers should be mindful that turnout among minority voters was highest wherever they were able to play a meaningful role in political life. Turnout among Latinos was highest in districts where they enjoyed overwhelming majority status (see the figure), but it was also high in districts where they were on roughly equal footing with African Americans. Even in more heterogeneous areas, Latinos participated at higher rates than Latinos in majority-Anglo districts. Turnout among African

Americans was highest where they were not relegated to the political margins by a single nonblack group, whereas white turnout was relatively impervious to both minority status within a district and nonwhite congressional representation.

This evidence suggests that there may be some advantage to creating more Hispanic-black and multi-ethnic districts in the next redistricting round. These districts would allow for multiple racial and ethnic communities to exercise political leverage—precisely the kind of political environment that encourages participation. Furthermore, increased participation among Latinos and African Americans would not come at the expense of lower white participation in majority-minority districts. Given both the democratic value of an engaged citizenry and the historical role of political participation in the advancement of racial and ethnic groups in the United States, increased voter participation in California's minority communities is an important if not a paramount policy goal.

Figure 1—Latino Registered Voter Turnout in “Average” Precinct



Although predicted turnout among Latinos was highest where they made up a majority of registered voters, it was also high in districts where they were on roughly equal footing with African Americans.

This research brief summarizes a report by Claudine Gay, The Effect of Minority Districts and Minority Representation on Political Participation in California (2001, 114 pp., \$7.00, ISBN 1-58213-030-2). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.