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A Seat at the Table: Minority Representation and County Governing Boards

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This study focuses on minority representation on county governing boards to determine the extent of minority representation, and then to provide explanation for the exiting patterns in its representation. The dependent variable used in this paper is a count variable employing a Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial model. The results indicate that minority populations, counties located in the South, partisan elections, the size of county governing boards and urban counties have positive effects on increased minority representation, while at-large voting districts have a negative effect. Furthermore, it advances the need for greater research on county governing boards, county governments in general and a new agenda for the future study of minority representation on local governing bodies.

The year 2020 provides evidence of fundamental issues of governing and social equity with regards to public health issues. In particular, 2020 is characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as law enforcement and criminal justice reform with county governments playing a key role in the governance of these major societal issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, county government have proven to be the primary source of information, delivery, and an essential functioning government. For example, “counties support over 900 hospitals and operate over 1,900 public health departments, which are the ground troops in the fight against the coronavirus outbreak” (National Association of Counties [NACo], n.d.). While county governments are often categorized as “forgotten or hidden governments,” or mere extensions of the state (Menzel et al., 1992, p. 176), they play a vital role in governing society.

In fact, county governments in rural areas of the United States may be the primary if not only form of local government. Specifically, Benton et al., (2007) demonstrated the importance and unique nature of counties versus municipalities by highlighting that 1) counties accounted for nearly half of all county/municipal revenues and expenditures, 2) counties employed nearly the same number of people as did municipalities, and 3) counties provided services for about 30% more individuals than municipalities (pp. 112-114). They have also become prominent regional service providers (Benton, 2003). Pink-Harper (2018) further identified counties as “the fastest growing general-purpose level of government,” (p. 246). Yet, county governments have not been well studied.

Given the importance of county governments as highlighted by recent events, the existing body of literature on the subject of counties leaves significant room for further development and research, especially with regard to the electoral process (Menzel et al., 1992; Benton et al., 2007). As the role of county governments continues to expand, it is important to understand the determinants of who governs county governments. Representation on county governing boards is one of the key characteristics in exploring and understanding this once forgotten government. Sadhwani and Junn (2018) claim, “we should be skeptical when democratic institutions fall short of being descriptively and substantively representative of marginalized groups,” (p. 318). And yet, county governments and specifically county elected representation has only been sparsely studied as compared to both municipal and state representation. This article will begin to bridge these gaps in the literature by looking at minority representation — defined here as representation identified as non-White, i.e.: Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaskan, etc. Our research seeks to answer the question: “To what extent do minorities serve on county governing board?” Moreover, the study looks to provide an explanation of the existing patterns of representation. As such we review literatures covering social equity, representation, and barriers to representation.

Social Equity

Representation and social equity have never been at the forefront of leadership; therefore, it only heightens the importance of academic scholars highlighting the inequities and structural injustices that exist in government (Rutledge, 2002, p. 391). Social equity as a concept goes as far back as the works of Aristotle and Plato (Rutledge, 2002; Frederickson, 2010). However, as it relates to government and public administration, social equity did not come into prominence until the late 1960s (Blessett et al., 2019, p. 283). The modern take on “social equity” was developed by H. George Frederickson and is an outgrowth of the Minnowbrook conferences held at Syracuse University every 20 years since 1968 (Frederickson, 1990). The National Association of Public Administration defines social equity as:

The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract, and the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy. (Woolridge & Bilharz, 2017, p. 3)

Early scholars in equity looked at discrimination in the administration of government programs and the distribution patterns of service in relation to equity (Chitwood, 1974; Williams, 1947). More recently scholars have studied a number of marginalized groups such as Black/African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics/Latinos, women, members of the

LGBTQ community, and persons with disabilities through the lens of many institutions and policy domains: education, criminal justice and policing, transit, environmental justice and land use planning, women's representation, health and health care, etc. (Gooden, 2015; Guy & McCandless, 2020; Johnson & Svara, 2011; Kellogg et al., 2019; Norman-Major & Gooden, 2012).

Gooden (2014) conceptualizes racial equity as a component within social equity and argues that racial and social equity are a nervous area of government. These varying degrees of nervousness are problematic in reference to government's distribution of goods and services. There are four areas within Gooden's conceptual model of the nervous area of government: the external environment, senior public administrators, public servants, and organizational values. It is in the external environment of the map that we find political candidates and elected officials who provide racial-equity motivation for the examination of and advancement of racial and social equity concerns (pp. 4-6), which echo the importance of minority representation identified by Tate (2001). Furthermore, Gooden (2015) has stated, "there is a need to understand the experiences of these groups [such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and American Indians] in more depth, including more nuanced understanding of their experiences," (p. 378). As such, we find a compelling need to understand representation of minorities at the county level.

Representation

Representativeness has been labeled in a number of ways by different scholars. Kingsley (1944) introduced the term representative bureaucracy where he argued that "bureaucracies, to be democratic, must be representative of the groups they serve," (p. 305). Mosher (1968) expanded upon Kingsley's work and theorized that representativeness has two meanings: active and passive. Active or responsible representativeness is the notion that a representative will pursue the interests and desires of those that they represent (pp. 11-12). Passive or sociological representativeness on the other hand, deals with the origin of the persons involved and their ability to reflect or mirror the overall society. Examples of passive representativeness include rural versus urban, parent's occupations, education, religion, and race (p. 12). Krislov (1974) made similar arguments as Mosher and suggested the term representational participation, which again has two aspects: symbolic/legitimizing and functional. Symbolic participation is the simple affirmation that all groups have a right, an access, to position and influence," (p. 129). Active or functional participation, on the other hand is "robust participation of groups in concrete decisions," (p. 129).

Moving from bureaucracies to legislative bodies, Griffiths and Wollheim (1960) were the first to coin the phrase "descriptive representation," (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999) as a concept of representation in which someone represents another by being like him:

I am a descriptive representative of my generation – a sample specimen, or analogue – when I am sufficiently like my fellows for someone to be reasonably safe in drawing conclusions about the other members of my generation from what they know about me. (Griffiths & Wollheim, 1960, p. 188)

This concept is distinguished from other forms of representation, such as symbolic representation, in which constituents have ascribed a thematic set of attitudes to an individual or accredited representation, in which a representative negotiates something (e.g., a law) on behalf of constituents. The theory assumes that voters, particularly in low-information

elections, use race and gender as cues to attribute ideology and issue positions to candidates (McDermott, 1998; Sass, 2000).

In her seminal book on representation, Pitkin (1967) contrasted descriptive representation and presented the idea of substantive representation, in which legislators vote or make policy decisions on behalf of the groups they purport to represent. She was critical of descriptive representation because she argued it does not require representatives to do anything. Rather, she said it depends on an elected official “being” something (p. 61). Mansbridge (1999) expanded upon the scholarly definition of descriptive representation, providing a solution to Pitkin’s qualm. Prior to Mansbridge’s writings, few commentators noted that physical descriptors, such as race or gender, are often tied to shared experiences among those with similar characteristics. A shared experience involves similar backgrounds, upbringings, socialization or education and provides a similar lens with which members of these groups use to interpret events around them (Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2000). It is this shared experience, Mansbridge argued, that is fundamental to descriptive representation (p. 629) and provides the basis for legislative discussions that represent the group in question and that would not occur among solely non-descriptive members. But ultimately, critics of descriptive representation, she advocated, should judge the theory based on how well it explains substantive representation or the public policy decisions that protect the interests of under-represented groups.

Empirical research in this area varies. Some of the first studies examining Black or women members of Congress found that the descriptive representatives in these cases did not see themselves as representing Black or women interests (Mansbridge, 1999; Diamond, 1977; Swain, 1993). In her 2014 analysis of the 111th Congress, Wallace found that partisanship is the key to determining a member’s voting behavior, not race, ethnicity or constituent demographics and that Black and Democrats provided Latinos with considerable substantive representation on the issues of social security, immigration, labor, and education. However, other scholars have found considerable support, indicating that White lawmakers differ from minority legislators in ways that underscore the importance of descriptive representation (Juenke & Preuhs, 2012; Grose, 2005; Hicklin & Meier, 2008; Minta 2009; Tate, 2001; Menifield and Julian, 1998). While conceding that non-descriptive representatives positively respond to minority constituent preferences, Juenke & Preuhs (2012) advocated that minority legislators provide an additional level of substantive representation through votes on bills considered important to minorities. In their study of 50 state legislatures in 1999-2000, the two authors found that minority legislators expressed additional ideological variation unique to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. In another study that reviewed transcripts from the 107th Congress, researchers found that minority members of Congress were more likely than White legislators to participate in racial-oversight hearings (Minta, 2009). In 2001, Tate found that Black constituents expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their members of Congress if they were Black.

In 2008, Hicklin and Meier argued the body of research confirming the importance of descriptive representation is substantial enough to explore descriptive representativeness at every level of government. From 1975 to the early 2000s, Meier conducted a number of empirical studies to link the impact of the descriptive representation of racial minorities to substantive benefits (Meier, 1975; Meier & England, 1984; Stewart, England & Meier, 1989; Meier & Stewart, 1992; Meier, Juenke & Wrinkle, 2005). Furthermore, scholars have created an impressive litany of research to support the extent to which local elected officials mirror their communities in terms of gender and ethnicity matters in state legislatures, local city councils and school boards (Hicklin & Meier, 2008; Riccucci & Meyers, 2004; Meier,

Wrinkle & Polinard, 1999; Stewart, England & Meier, 1989).

The commonality between representatives and constituents can also produce other outcomes beneficial to the maintenance of a productive democratic government, including increased communication, empathy and trust among groups, increased legitimacy of under-represented populations, an appearance of a successful and inclusive democracy, and prominence of traditionally under-represented interests and perspectives in deliberative discussions (Mansbridge, 1999; Sass, 2000; Young, 2000; Sowa & Seldon, 2003; Lim, 2006).

But most importantly, there is little argument that minorities and women are less likely to be represented in even the most contemporary and progressive democracies. Social and economic obstacles have excluded them from influential political discussions for generations. Combined with selection mechanisms that favor non-descriptive representatives, these inequalities have hindered their ascent into the governing ranks (Young, 2000). The marginalization of these groups undermines Democracy's iconic promise of equal opportunities, and Young (2000) argued that increased inclusion of disenfranchised groups could help society confront and ameliorate longstanding structural and social inequalities. As Mill emphasized (1867), without the minority's participation in government, the majority's authority is illegitimately exercised, which speaks to the importance of social equity.

Barriers to Representation

The issue of race in the electoral process has received ample attention in the academic literature. Recent work has focused on the impact of race and gender along with the role that community organizations and structures play in determining election results (Clawson & Clark, 2003; Bullock & Hood, 2006; Kulich, Ryan & Haslam, 2014). Social movements and major political influences in minority communities over the past few decades have provided some insight into the impact of minority representation on elections across the country (Clawson & Clark, 2003). Researchers have also found regional locations to have significant influence on minority representation, depending on whether the county is located within or outside of the South. However, additional research is needed to determine its impact on county level government elections and officials (Grofman & Handley, 1989; Bullock & Hood, 2006).

The literature on state governments identifies key characteristics that contribute to the representation of minorities to elected office. For the Black electorate in southern Florida, scholars Button, Richards and Bethune (1998) identify three explanatory factors that contribute to the presence of minority representation. The first is described as Contextual Characteristics and includes measures of population size, percentage of minority population, median income levels and election formats. The second is Political Factors, which measures the impact of support, job performance, and whether the city has a Black mayor. The final factor is Personal Characteristics, which looked at years in office, level of education and ideology (Button, Richards & Bethune, 1998).

In local government elections, one of the dominant areas of research over the past 30 years has surrounded the issue of at-large versus district elections. Historically, at-large elections have favored non-minority constituencies because of their higher voter turnout (Karnig, 1976; Davidson & Korbel, 1981; Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Karnig & Welch, 1982; Robinson & Dye, 1978). Although some contradictory literature exists on the topic of electoral arrangements and their impact on minority representation (Cole, 1974; MacManus, 1978), the majority of the literature indicates that at-large elections result in the underrepresentation of minorities in local government elections (Karnig, 1976; Davidson & Korbel, 1981; Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Karnig & Welch, 1982; Robinson & Dye,

1978).

Throughout the literature on local government elections, the role of partisan elections has been linked to minority representation (Welch & Bledsoe, 1986; Stein & Fleischmann, 1987). In determining the level of minority representation, there are several primary factors, including research both in terms of partisan elections and its impact on voter turnout, overrepresented electorate from higher income groups, minority participation, and general elections (Welch, 1978). The literature also indicates that these factors may even be more prevalent among the Black electorate than other racialized groups overall (Lubin, 1997; Cannon, 1999). To reiterate, this article attempts to determine the extent to which minorities serve on county governing boards.

Methodology

This study looks at the extent of minority board members serving on county governing boards at one point in time in 2014. The data and research construction of this study is provided in the sections below.

Data

The study created a *stratified random* sample of 400 counties from the more than 3,000 counties in the United States. Initially our random sample contained counties from 47 of the 50 states. Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments, and Maine did not have a county selected in the sample. While Alaska and Vermont do officially have county-like entities, they are non-functioning county governments and, therefore, were not included in the sample. As a result of eliminating those cases, the total number of cases in the sample was reduced from 400 to 395 for the study, which provides the study a margin of error +/- 4.5%.

Two strata were used for this study: one for counties with a population over 100,000 and a second one for counties with a population under 100,000. All of the counties in the study with populations over 100,000 were included in an urban category. The Urban versus Non-Urban classification is based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Continuum codes (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

For the purpose of this study, the researchers used the minority designation consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau as all populations not included in the White-Non-Hispanic category. Board members were classified as minority via a manual process using county websites and phone calls placed to members' offices.

Dependent Variable and Sample

Scholars have employed a variety of statistical measures to examine minority representation (Lim, 2006), including a representation index (which calculates the difference in the percentage of minority seats divided by the percentage of minority population the government body represents); the subtraction method (which calculates the differences between these percentages) and a proportional measure. The results of these methods are easily skewed based on the size of the minority population and outcomes have varied, particularly when scholars have introduced control variables, such as electoral structures (Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Stewart, England & Meier, 1989; Shah, 2014). Political scientist Ken Meier conducted a number of empirical studies focused on descriptive representation at the local level using an OLS regression formula tool that evaluates the level of representation (Meier, 1975; Stewart, England & Meier, 1989; Meier, Juenke & Wrinkle, 2005). In recent research, more scholars have shifted analysis of minority representation using count data and Poisson

modeling (Marschall, Ruhil & Shah, 2010).

From a data perspective, initially this research is not concerned with whether county governing boards are descriptively represented. Nearly three quarters of the counties in the sample had no minority board member. In fact, there is little likelihood that a county board could be descriptively representative. Across the counties under investigation, the average minority population was 21%. However, a third of our counties had only three board seats, which means that each seat would require a minority population significantly higher (33%) than our average minority population. Therefore, a seat-value of 33% for a county with minority population of less than 20% becomes of structural barrier in the electoral process for minority groups, reducing the opportunity/probability for representation.

With regard to decision-making and the political dynamics of a board, it matters little if individuals constitute only 14% or 20% of the total board. Rather, a more important concern is whether minorities have a presence on a board and a seat at the table to influence the policy process, bring attention to minority perspectives, and highlight social inequities and systematic injustices. Presumably having more than one minority member provides even greater opportunity and leverage for minority-favored issues to be placed on the agenda. Thus, the current research uses a count dependent variable of minority representation in terms of the number of minority representatives a county governing board had at the time of the research. A common and popular approach in research with count data is to use the Poisson Regression Model (PRM).

Initial examination of the 395 counties in the sample and the composition of the governing boards revealed 72.5% had no minority board members. A test of the mean against the variance of the dependent count variable determined that the variance of the distribution was significantly larger than the mean, creating an over-dispersion and indicating that a Negative Binomial Regression Model (NBRM) would be a better fit (Long & Freese, 2006). With 72.5% of the counties in the dataset having no minorities, the data produces significantly more zeros in the dependent variable than non-zeros. Zero-inflated models have been created to address the problem of an excessive number of zeros by adjusting the mean structure to allow the zeros to be generated simultaneously in two separate equations (Long & Freese, 2006). As a result, it was decided to use a Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial (ZINB) model for the purpose of this research.

Independent Variables and Hypotheses

Below, we provide the initial list of variables hypothesized to explain variation in minority representation on county governing boards. Specifically, we provide the six variables used in the analysis, the hypothesized directions, and the explanation of how the variables were coded.

H1: Counties located in ***Southern*** States are more likely to elect minority representatives (+ coefficient). Karnig (1976) found that ward structured cities and minority populations provided the fairest environment for minority representation. These are the 11 original southern states as identified in the Confederate States of America.

H2: Counties with greater levels of ***minority population*** are more likely to elect minority representatives (+ coefficient). Larger minority populations are more likely to elect minority representatives (Button, Richards, & Bethune, 1998; Trounstein & Valdin, 2008; Marschall, Ruhil, & Shah, 2010). Data were used from Five-Year Estimates of the

American Community Survey.

H3: Counties with *partisan elections* are more likely to elect minority representatives (+ coefficient). Minorities are more likely to be elected in partisan elections (McDermott, 1998). This is the number of counties with partisan elections and was obtained from county websites and NACo.

H4: Counties with *at-large voting districts* are less likely to elect minority representatives (- coefficient). The literature has shown at-large elections result in the underrepresentation of minorities in local government elections (Karnig, 1976; Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Davidson & Korbel, 1981; Karnig & Welch, 1982; Trounstein & Valdina, 2008). This is the number of counties with at-large districts and was obtained from county websites and NACo.

H5: Counties with *larger board size* are more likely to elect minority representatives (+ coefficient). Research has shown that larger bodies are more likely to be diverse (Davidson & Korbel, 1981; Bullock & MacManus, 1990). The variable counts the number of elected board members. There are a number of different names given to the elected board members from across the country, but we treat all of them the same (i.e., Commissioners, Supervisors, Legislators, etc.). Data were obtained from county websites and NACo.

H6: Counties designated as *urban* are more likely to elect minority representatives (+ coefficient). Urban counties due to migration experience higher levels of minority concentrations and greater democratic representation, which increases the likelihood of elected minorities (Marschall, Ruhil, & Shah, 2010; Newport, 2013; Rusk, 2003). Data were obtained from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Descriptive Statistics

As previously stated, 290 of the 395 (72.5%) counties in the study had no minority representation, resulting in only 110 (27.5%) counties in the study with at least one minority representative. From a descriptive representation standpoint, using the value of an individual board seat (1 divided by the number of the board members, also known as the 'seat-value') against the minority population of a given county, the number of the counties expected to have a minority representative is 170 or 42% more than what actually existed in the study (Meier, 1975). However, seven of the 110 counties with a minority representative are those where the minority population was less than the minimum seat-value. A couple initial findings based on the descriptive total of 110 minority representatives presented in the study reveal that the mean percent for minority populations was 21.4%, barely above the minimum descriptive representation level for a five-member board. In addition, 83% of the counties in the study held partisan elections and only 19% of the counties in the study held at-large district elections.

From a regional perspective, 35.5% of the counties in the study were located in the South; however, 62.7% of the counties classified as non-urban were located outside of the

Southern region. In terms of the number of board members, 73.8% of the counties in the study had five or fewer board members, with five-member boards being the most frequent in the study at 162 counties (40.5%). Moreover, 133 of those 162 five-member board counties are actually classified as non-urban counties in the study. Additional descriptive statistics for the study can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1 Explaining Minority Representation on County Boards Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	\bar{x} Percent	Percent
Percent of County Minority Population	21.4%	-
Percent of Counties with At-Large District Elections	-	19.0%
Percent of Counties with Partisan Elections	-	83.0%
Percent of Southern Counties	-	35.5%
Percent of Urban Counties	-	19.0%
Size of County Governing Boards		
3 Member Board	-	33.3%
5 Member Board	-	40.5%

*Descriptive statistics for stratified random sample of 395 counties. Data obtained from the Five-Year Estimates of the American Community Survey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, county websites, and NACo.

Findings

The analysis sought to determine why some counties were more likely to provide a seat at the table and elect minority representatives to county governing boards than others. For those counties that do elect minority representatives, this study further sought to determine what factors explain electing additional minority representatives and improving leverage of minority-favored issues. To answer these questions, a Zero Inflated Negative Binomial (ZINB) analysis was conducted. ZINB models create two sets of predictors: one set using a logit regression to predict zero-values or “certain zeros” and a second negative binomial analysis to predict count-values or “non-certain zeros.” In the first stage of the analysis, all 395 cases were included, but, in the second stage of the analysis only those counties that had at least one minority representative were included (110 counties)¹. In other words, the initial inflate model (logistic regression) was used to determine what the likelihood is of a county having a minority representative. We then created a second set of predictors using a negative binomial model that addressed the count variable and its factors, which in this case is increasing minority representation (UCLA, n.d.). Table 2 below reports the results of the analysis as well as the Incidence Rate Ratios (IRR) to assist with interpretation.

In analyzing the Inflate model, the research attempts to understand which counties are more likely to have minority representation and which ones are not. Because we are predicting zero representation, a negative coefficient indicates an increased likelihood of having representation. In our model, we observe that five of the six variables tested were significant with the exception of partisan election and four of the five significant variables indicated a negative influence on minority representation. For example, minority population

registered as negative influence on the dependent variable. This indicates that the larger the minority population, the more likely you are to have minority representation or to be excluded from the zero category of having no minority representation. A negative South variable indicates that counties geographically located in the south are more likely to have minority representation than not, and that the size of the county governing board increases the likelihood of having minority representation. Furthermore, both partisan elections and urban designations increase the likelihood of a county having minority representatives. All of these findings are consistent with the research's hypothesis previously presented. In other words, increased minority population, Southern region, the size of the county governing boards, and urban designation all decrease the likelihood of a county not having a minority representative. Whereas, counties with at-large district elections provided a coefficient of 5.490, indicating the opposite. Counties with at-large districts increased the likelihood of a county being a zero or predicting that the county would have no minority representatives. All the results for the model are consistent with the directions initially hypothesized.

Since the ZINB coefficient results are non-linear, the conversion of the coefficients, which are the exponents of the natural log are used to derive the IRR. Using the IRR allows for more practical interpretation of ZINB results. The inflate model from Table 2 reports minority population with a coefficient of -0.778 and an IRR of 0.459, indicating that a unit increase in the minority population would decrease the odds of being a zero (in the "certain zero" group) by 54.1%. The same ratio analysis is consistent with South, size of county governing boards and urban at 99.6%, 17.4%, and 93%, respectively. At-large district reported a positive relationship and a coefficient of 5.490, which translated to an IRR of 242.12 and indicated that counties with at-large districts are 241% more likely to be a zero or in the "certain zero" group.

The difference between the inflate model, which uses logistic regression to predict the likelihood of being a zero, and the negative binomial model, is that the negative binomial model looks at those counties that are considered a non-certain zero and predicts the ability of a particular variable to increase or decrease the level of minority representation (count of minority representative) on a county's governing board. The first observation from the second model (NBRM) is that, although urban was statistically significant in the inflate model in reducing the odds of a zero-value for a county, urban does not have an effect on count for counties that are in the non-certain zero group. Similarly, partisan elections, which is not significant in predicting the likelihood of a county's minority representation in terms of having a minority representative or not, was found to have an effect on the number of minority representatives (count) for counties that are categorized as non-certain zero.

Also, consistent with our hypotheses, minority populations, South, size of county governing boards, and partisan elections have positive relationships, indicating that a unit increase in each variable would increase minority representation by a factor of 1.04x, 1.61x, 1.08x and 1.65x, respectively, holding all other variables in the model constant. As in the logit model, at-large districts has a negative relationship with minority representation with a coefficient of -0.614 and an IRR of 0.541. This implies that counties with at-large district elections decrease the chances of minority representation by 45.9%, while holding all other variables constant.

Table 2 Explaining Minority Representation on County Boards (Zero Inflated Negative Binomial Model)

Independent Variable	Co-efficients	Standard Errors ^a	IRR
Inflate: Counties with no minority			
Minority Population	-.778*	.269	.459
South	-5.609*	2.350	.004
Size of County Governing Boards	-.191*	.096	.826
Partisan Elections	-1.014	1.427	.363
At Large District	5.490*	2.372	242.12
Urban/Non-Urban	-2.662*	1.158	.070
Counties with minority			
Minority Population	.038**	.003	1.039
South	.475**	.145	1.608
Size of County Governing Boards	.074**	.008	1.077
Partisan Elections	.498*	.232	1.645
At Large District	-.614**	.192	.541
Urban/Non-Urban	.212	.131	1.236

Summary statistics

N = 395

Nonzero Obs = 110

Zero Obs = 285

$\chi^2 = 296.96$

Pseudo R2 = -223.73

Significant at the $p < .05$ level. **Significant at the $p < .001$ level.

a. We report the Robust Standard Errors

b. Dependent variable is a count of the number of minority commissioners.

Discussion and Conclusion

Counties across the country are taking on greater responsibilities to provide essential services, such as an increased public health role during pandemics to populations in constant fluctuation. Many of these county operations, such as airports, hospitals, fire, and police services, are often indispensable to larger regional economies. These augment the importance of county government and require continued research and understanding of county governing boards.

This research sought to understand what explains the likelihood of minority representation on county governing boards and the factors that facilitate minority selection. We used a count variable using ZINB, rather than the percentage of minorities on boards, as much of the previous research on minority representation has done. The use of the count variable with ZINB is one of the strengths of this study. Moreover, this study focuses on minority representation at the county government level, which as previously stated, is an understudied area of minority representation research.

This research sought to determine the extent to which there is minority representation on county governing boards. We find a significant lack of minority representation across the country on county governing boards. Minority representation is complex with multiple elements contributing to why some counties have minority representatives and others do not. We find that the structure of elections is a major factor in defining if a county will have minority representation. Consistent with previous literature on the state and municipal governing bodies, at-large district elections continue to be an obstacle for the selection of minorities to county governing boards. The size of county governing boards, and its seat-value were significant in both predicting the likelihood of a minority representative and the number (count) of minority representatives as well as creating a barrier in communities with minority populations, especially for smaller boards. In fact, as the size of the board grew, it had a positive effect on minority representation, in essence reducing the structural barrier created by smaller board size. Ironically, it should be noted that the majority of minority-controlled boards in the study were small county governing boards (with five or fewer seats). However, these boards were located in communities made up of predominantly racialized-minority populations.

Our study finds that partisan elections do not play a significant role in determining the likelihood of a county having a minority representative but is significant as a variable, predicting increased (count) representation. Partisan elections have been recognized as providing cues for party affiliation and may provide a benefit to minorities in initial elections (Welch & Bledsoe, 1986; Stein & Fleischmann, 1987; McDermott, 1998). It may be that minority candidates for county government offices benefit from partisan elections due to limited advertising and lower name recognitions. While partisan elections played a positive role, at-large district elections proved to be a significant barrier to minority representation as hypothesized. The study also looked at the relationship of urban and non-urban counties to determine if where county governments were located proved significant. Urban counties were more likely to elect a minority representative, and this was particularly true in the South. Interestingly, urban counties were not more likely to have a significant increase in the number of minority representatives. This latter point may be a function of the size of the urban county boards. The findings indicated that the larger the board, the greater the likelihood of having an increase number of minority board members. Thus, while urban county boards, regardless of size may increase the odds of having a minority board member, the size of those boards may actually work against increasing the number of minorities. This study highlighted the structural inequity of small board size and seat-value. The majority of county boards across the country have only three or five member boards, with over 33% of the counties in the study having only three members. Given that minority population size is the predominate predictor, minority communities with average populations of less than 21% in the study and a seat-value of 33, face structural barriers that are both insurmountable and socially inequitable. In essence, if one wanted to decrease minority representation in county governance maintaining a small board would achieve that goal.

In summary, using ZINB provided valuable information to assess minority representation given the overwhelming number of counties with no minority board members. While simultaneously analyzing the factors that predict multiple minority board members, this parsimonious approach in the separation of zeros takes into account that not all counties with zeros are the same. Addressing this element is a key factor in the analysis of minority representation at any level of government, but especially at the county level and its small boards.

Although the literature for minority representation is limited at the county level, we believe this research is important because it goes beyond traditional descriptive representation statistical approaches and begins to dissect and unravel the complexity underlying the lack of minority representation at the county level of government. Extensive research has been done on minority representation at the state and local level of government. However, understanding county governing boards that are different and often smaller in size is fundamental to understanding descriptive representation.

The concept of equity is not an abstract philosophical issue, but it has been playing out on issues of policing and health care especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both of these issues have shown disparate impacts on minorities and highlighted the need for government to respond in an equitable fashion. A fundamental tenant of governance in the United States is that elected officials are important and should be responsive to the citizenry. It has long been argued that one mechanism to ensure a responsive government is to have elected officials “look like” those they represent. Understanding minority representation allows counties to recognize and eliminate obstructions to minority selection. Furthermore, it increases the responsibility of these bodies to create policies, rules and advance laws that create more equitable governance.

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