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WOMEN ON SOUTHERN CITY COUNCILS: A DECADE OF CHANGE

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Over a decade ago in the first empirical study of the level of female representation on US city councils, Karnig and Walter reported that women were elected to less than 10 percent of the over 4000 municipal posts. The authors concluded that "in local politics, sex is even more critical than race in impeding equitable representation."¹

In probing into the question of why so few females are represented on local bodies (state and national, as well), scholars have focused on three major categories of explanations. The first, and most common, has been on factors restricting the candidacy of female officeseekers. These factors include attitudinal barriers, generally sex-role stereotyping on the part of voters, party leaders, and the potential candidates themselves, the effect being to restrict female candidacies and successes.²

Another common approach to the study of the success rate of female candidates has been to focus on environmental determinants, namely community demographic, socioeconomic, and political-cultural characteristics.³ For example, Karnig and Walter looked at the relationship between women's candidacy and election rates and city size, southern location, and various income and education measures. But unlike the literature on the determinants of racial and ethnic minority candidate success, they found that these independent measures "have only feeble impact on female candidacy and election levels."⁴ No single variable accounted for as much as 5 percent of the variance in any of the women's votes. Subsequent studies by other scholars produced similar results.⁵ Demographic and socioeconomic models have consistently been poor predictors of female success in getting elected to city councils throughout the US. As noted, this is a different result than that produced by the literature examining the socioeconomic factors associated with racial and ethnic minority electoral success.⁶

A third approach to the study of the determinants of female city council representation has been to look at the relationship between various governmental structural arrangements, such as at-large elections, council size, term of office, and

pay for office.⁷ In general, governmental structural variables, like demographic and socioeconomic variables, have not been very powerful predictors of female electoral success.⁸ For example, Karnig and Walter reported only a weak correlation (.12) between the percent candidates elected at large and the overall women's election rate; MacManus reported similarly weak coefficients.⁹ Welch and Karnig found that even when socioeconomic and office prestige factors were controlled for, "election type explained less than one percent of the variance in female representation."¹⁰

Interestingly, however, in light of their findings, Welch and Karnig predicted that "in the long run women might do better in district than in at-large races because of the greater name recognition and financial support necessary even to get the nomination in at-large contests."¹¹ The purpose of our research is to determine whether their prediction has, in fact, come true.

The Study

Using data from nearly a decade later (1986), we test whether Welch and Karnig's prediction has yet been realized with regard to greater female representation under single member district election systems. We also examine the impact of other governmental structural variables on female city council representation: council size, incumbency return rate, length of term, staggered terms, and majority vote requirements. Each of these structures has been suggested in earlier research to have a detrimental effect on levels of female city council representation.¹² We are curious as to whether these structures have become more important determinants as larger numbers of women have gained political office,¹³ gender-based stereotypes have eroded,¹⁴ and the socioeconomic gap has narrowed somewhat.¹⁵

We also examine whether these structures have significantly different impacts on black females. Research on black women has often posited that they are doubly disadvantaged in the political arena by race and gender.¹⁶ Other research suggests this interaction between race and sex is not as powerful as previously suggested.¹⁷ There has not been much evidence to suggest that electoral structures serve as a significant deterrent to the election of black females.

Our data were gathered in the spring of 1986 from the 211 cities with 1980 populations over 25,000 in 11 southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia). Some studies have suggested that the South is "the region most

likely to manifest differences between males and females toward the role of women and politics."¹⁸ As noted by Carver, "opportunities for women have been particularly limited in the South, where the myth of the southern lady has served as a golden cord binding women to traditional roles."¹⁹ Each of the earlier studies that used regional location as a predictor variable found that female representation levels were slightly lower in the South, but that the bivariate relationship between Southern location and the percent of females elected was very weak (statistically insignificant). Consequently, if we find no support for relationships between structural variables and female representation in the South, we would not expect these relationships to be significant in other regions.

Governmental Structures and Women

The previous review of the literature examining the relationship between various governmental structural arrangements and female representation in the 1970's reported only weak correlations. A decade later, we reexamine these relationships. We begin with a review of the hypothesized directions of impact.

Electoral Format: At-Large v. District Elections

Traditionally, scholars have found that at-large elections are more "women-friendly" than district-based election systems.²⁰ Weaver states that:

Any type of multimember district is more hospitable to women than the single member district system. This includes at-large systems, semi-proportional systems, such as the single transferable vote (rank order), or party list/proportional representation. The single member district system, by contrast, favors males from the largest ethnic group in each district.²¹

Weaver and others hypothesize that voters "are more apt to give one of several votes to a woman when they are limited to only one vote."²² Likewise, nominations are easier to come by in multiple seat settings because party and organizational slating groups are more prone to see the advantages of "balanced tickets." Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: At-large election systems will be characterized by higher percentages of female council members than district-based systems.

H1a: Purer at-large systems (non-district based) such as pure at-large and at-large, from posts will be characterized by

higher percentages of female council members than at-large systems with geographical residency requirements or mixed systems (some at-large; some single member district seats).

H2: At-large election systems will have the same positive effect on black female representation as on white female representation. At-large election systems will be characterized by higher percentages of black female council members than district-based systems.

Majority Vote Requirement (Runoffs)

This structural feature was alleged to have a discriminatory impact on female representation by Smeal (1984), although she offered no reasons why.²³ We do, however, have some notion of why racial minorities view runoffs as deterrents to electoral success. In his 1984 presidential campaign, Jesse Jackson alleged that runoffs offer whites the ability to coalesce and defeat a black that wins a primary with a plurality when the white vote was splintered.

Contrary to the speculations made by Smeal and Jackson, recent empirically-based research has not found their claims to be warranted. In their analyses of primary runoffs in Georgia between 1965 and 1982, Bullock and Johnson found that black and female party leaders fared as well in runoffs as white male front runners.²⁴ In the only study of the impact of runoffs at the municipal level, Fleischman and Stein also found "no systematic bias against minority and female front-runners forced into runoffs."²⁵ Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: Female representation levels on city council in cities that have majority vote requirements will not differ significantly from levels in cities that have plurality systems.

H4: Black female city council representation levels in cities that have majority-vote requirements will not differ significantly from levels in cities that have plurality systems.

Staggered Terms

Staggered terms have not been the focus of study with regard to their impact on females, but rather on minorities. Davidson described a scenario in which staggered terms could have a discriminatory impact, namely in anti-single shot systems (at-large, by post; at-large with residency districts). He suggested that staggered terms could effectively limit a minority group's ability to single-shot vote by reducing the number of

positions.²⁶ But a large scale empirical test of his hypothesis revealed no statistically significant difference between black representation levels in cities with staggered terms and those without.²⁷ Therefore we hypothesize that:

H5: Female representation levels in cities with staggered terms will not differ significantly from levels in cities with simultaneous terms.

H6: Black female representation levels in cities with staggered terms will not differ significantly from levels in cities with simultaneous terms.

Size of Council

Welch and Karnig hypothesized that larger councils would yield greater levels of female representation.²⁸ Their hypothesis was based on Diamond's study of state legislatures. Diamond's theory was that larger councils were indicative of an office being "less desirable and less important" which would enhance females' chances of winning it.²⁹ The results of Welch and Karnig's study did not confirm this hypothesis. The correlation coefficient between number of council seats and the female council proportion was a statistically insignificant .06.

While there is not much evidence of council size having an impact on female representation, there is some data suggesting larger councils enhance minority representation.³⁰ However, recent research suggests that the size of the council appears to be a structural feature whose impact on minority representation is rather weak and conditional, first on the size of the minority population³¹, and second on geographical residential patterns.³² We hypothesize that:

H7: Council size is not a significant predictor of female representation on city councils.

H8: Black female representation on city councils will not be enhanced by larger council size.

Length of Term

Longer terms of office are viewed as more attractive than shorter terms. It is another of what Welch and Karnig view as an indicator of the desirability and importance of a political office.³³ Thus, they hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between length of term and female representation levels.

However, their results showed an even weaker and insignificant relationship between length of term and female representation (-.00) than council size. Therefore, we do not expect to find a relationship either.

H9: Length of term is not a significant predictor of female representation on city councils.

There is also very little evidence of longer terms being disadvantageous to blacks.³⁴ The argument in favor of longer terms is often related to election costs. Karnig and Welch actually found higher levels of black representation in cities with longer council terms, although not a significantly greater number. They attributed this to the attractiveness and prestige of the longer term. In a later study based on 1986 data, Bullock and MacManus found that length of term was not a significant predictor of black representation.³⁵ Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H10: Length of term is not a significant predictor of black female representation.

Incumbency

Most studies recognize incumbency as powerful in explaining municipal electoral outcomes, particularly in nonpartisan settings.³⁶ High incumbency return rates are still a deterrent to the entry of women and minorities into political office, especially where there are none at present.³⁷ But where women and blacks are represented, incumbency has no significant racial-or-gender-based differentials in its impact. For example, Bullock found that incumbency advantages both minorities and whites.³⁸ Black incumbents tend to get more white crossover votes each time they run, perhaps because white fears are eased by a successful performance.³⁹

Incumbency works the same across gender groups according to Darcy, Welch, and Clark.⁴⁰ Women incumbents have just about the same advantage as male incumbents. Therefore, based on studies showing no gender or racial-biased differentials in incumbency return rates (the measure we use in our study), we hypothesize that:

H11: Incumbency return rate is not a significant predictor of female city council representational level.

H12: Incumbency return rate is not a significant predic-

tor of black female city council representational level.

In summary, we expect to find higher levels of female city council representation in the 1980's but little support for governmental structures as determinants of electoral success.

Findings

Across the 211 cities in the 11 southern states, there were 252 women on city councils in the spring of 1986. The average percent of females on city councils was 17, up considerably from the figures reported in studies based on data from the 1970's (Karnig and Walter, mid-1975 - 9.7%; MacManus, 1976 - 10%; Welch and Karnig, 1978 - 13%) although those were national averages, not just from the South.⁴¹ In the aggregate, only one-third of our cities had no female representation. In contrast, Welch and Karnig's study showed a much larger percent of councils without any women (44 percent).⁴² However, as the figures in Table 1 show, the percentage of cities with no women on their councils varies sharply across the 11 southern states. Women have achieved representation on a larger number of councils in Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. They have fared badly in Alabama and Arkansas.

In 11 of our cities, women constituted at least half the council. The highest percentage of women councilmembers occurred in Orlando and North Miami where women made up two-thirds of the councils. Table 1 shows that the share of council seats held by women varies across states. At the low end were Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana where the average proportion of councilwomen was less than 12%. At the upper end were North Carolina, Florida, and Virginia. In each of these states women averaged more than one in five council seats and in North Carolina, the figure was closer to one in three.

The states where larger percentages of women serve on city councils are those characterized by higher population growth rates. Some scholars have found that the in-migration of persons from other regions has helped break down racial and gender stereotypes in the South.⁴³

Electoral Districting Format

There is less range in the proportion of females across the five types of electoral formats. Women were somewhat more likely to serve in cities in which elections were pure at-large, from single member districts, or in which some members were elected at-large while others ran in single member districts. Fewer women were chosen when elections were citywide but individuals ran for a specific post or were required to live in a residency district. However, as Table 2 demonstrates, the range is narrow,

Table 1
Incidence of Women on City Councils by State

| | Number of Cities | Incidence of Women | | | % With No Female on Council |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|------|-----------------------------------|
| | | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | |
| Alabama | 15 | 0% | 44% | 7% | 73% |
| Arkansas | 10 | 0 | 29 | 8 | 70 |
| Florida | 48 | 0 | 67 | 25 | 19 |
| Georgia | 12 | 0 | 33 | 17 | 25 |
| Louisiana | 12 | 0 | 43 | 11 | 50 |
| Mississippi | 9 | 0 | 33 | 13 | 44 |
| North Carolina | 17 | 0 | 63 | 31 | 18 |
| South Carolina | 8 | 0 | 33 | 14 | 25 |
| Tennessee | 13 | 0 | 23 | 10 | 31 |
| Texas | 52 | 0 | 50 | 13 | 38 |
| Virginia | 15 | 0 | 44 | 21 | 13 |

with the mean running from 13 to 19%. Each type of system included some cities in which no female served in 1986. It appears, then, that the type of election system is still not a significant predictor of female city council representation. Welch and Karnig's predictions about single member districts yielding greater representation has not yet come true, although the gap between pure at-large and districts has narrowed. (Welch and Karnig's 1978 data showed an average of 10% elected under single member district systems and 15% under pure at-large;⁴⁴ our 1986 data shows 17% for single member districts and 19% for at-large.)

Table 2**Incidence of Women on City Councils
by Type of Electoral Districting**

| | Number of Cities | Incidence of Women | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|------|
| | | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Pure At-Large | 54 | 0% | 67% | 19% |
| At-Large by Post | 32 | 0 | 40 | 13 |
| At-Large by Residency | 23 | 0 | 43 | 13 |
| Mixed | 54 | 0 | 55 | 18 |
| Single-Member Districts | 48 | 0 | 67 | 17 |

Majority Vote Requirement (Runoffs)

More than 80% of the cities had a runoff provision. Despite former NOW President Eleanor Smeal's contention that runoffs are "no help to women,"⁴⁵ there is no evidence that having to poll a majority reduces the presence of women on the council. The mean for runoff and plurality cities is identical, confirming what Fleischman and Stein found in Texas cities.⁴⁶ While the means in Table 3 are identical, all of the cities with the largest percentages of women employ a runoff. No plurality city has a female majority; seven runoff cities had a female majority.

Table 3**Incidence of Women on City Councils
by Share of Vote Needed for Election**

| | Number of Cities | Incidence of Women | | |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|------|
| | | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Plurality Vote | 33 | 0% | 50% | 17% |
| Majority Vote | 178 | 0 | 67 | 17 |

Staggered Terms

The use of staggered terms, like a majority vote requirement, bears no consistent relationship to the size of the female component on a city council. Table 4 reports that the range in percent female in cities that stagger terms and those that elect all members simultaneously is almost identical, confirming our hypothesis. The difference in means for the two groups is less than four percentage points.

Table 4

Incidence of Women on City Councils
by Whether Terms are Staggered

| | Number of Cities | Incidence of Women | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|------|
| | | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Simultaneous Terms | 83 | 0% | 63% | 15% |
| Staggered Terms | 128 | 0 | 67 | 18 |

Size of Council

The size of council bears no relationship to the incidence of women. The slope when percent female is regressed on size of council is (.0015) which is half as large as its standard error (.0032).

Length of Term

The presence of female councilors is unaffected by the length of a city's council terms. While there is a slight indication that women councilors are less frequent in cities in which terms are longer ($b = -.005$), the relationship is not statistically significant from zero (standard error = .012).

The insignificant relationships between the size of the council and length of council term suggest that the office-prestige theory as an explanation for female representation is not well-supported, at least at the municipal level.

Incumbency

The rate at which incumbents were returned in the previous elections is not related to the percent women on the council. When percent female is regressed on the proportion of incumbents reelected, the slope (.033) is somewhat smaller than its standard error (.042). This result confirms our hypothesis and the findings of other scholars.

Multivariate Analysis

The results of the bivariate analysis offers little reason to expect that the set of independent variables used here will be successful in predicting in the incidence of female councilors. Our expectations are borne out. A number of combinations of predictors were tried and the most successful one included three predictors: the dichotomous variables indicating the presence of staggered terms, election at-large to posts and election at-large but with a residency requirement. This model explains only 3% of the variance and none of the predictors has a coefficient twice as large as its standard error. The signs for the predictors indicate a weak tendency for women to serve in cities that have staggered terms and do not elect at-large for specific posts or from residency districts.

Black Female Councilmembers

Of the 252 women serving on southern city councils, 51 (20 percent) were black. Despite the small number of black women on councils, an exploration was launched to determine if their presence was systematically related to the three election-related variables considered in this paper. We hypothesized that they would not be. It is assumed that the primary factor in the election of black women is the percentage black in the city. This assumption is based on the large body of literature cited earlier that examines the determinants of black city council representation. Therefore the percent black in a city's population is interacted with dichotomous variables for each of several features relating to electoral formats. Since each interaction term includes percent black, it is not possible to estimate a single equation as was done in the preceding section. (A model that includes percent black with terms for electoral districting, majority vote and use of staggered terms has serious collinearity problems.)

The model that incorporates measures of electoral format explains 9% of the variance. The coefficients for interaction terms created by multiplying percent black and three of the electoral systems (pure at-large, at-large with residency requirements and mixed) were twice as large as their standard errors. No other terms in Table 5 were statistically significant. The impact of the interaction terms for pure at-large elections (BLPURE) and at-large with residency requirements (BLRESIDE) is reduced when we adjust for the negative values of the dummy variables associated with those terms (that is, PURE and RESIDE).⁴⁷ It is interesting that single member districts (BLSMD) are not strongly associated with the election of black women, again confirming our hypothesis. An extensive literature has reported that single

Table 5

**Model for Percentage of Black Councilwomen
and Types of Elections**

$$\begin{aligned}
 \% \text{ Black Women} = & .034 + .123 \text{ BLPURE} + .219 \text{ BLRESIDE} + .096 \text{ BLMIXED} \\
 & \quad (.055) \quad \quad (.103) \quad \quad (.041) \\
 & + .022 \text{ BLSMD} + .117 \text{ BLPOST} - .013 \text{ PURE} \\
 & \quad (.039) \quad \quad (.076) \quad \quad (.019) \\
 & - .011 \text{ POST} - .032 \text{ RESIDE} + .002 \text{ SIZE} \\
 & \quad (.020) \quad \quad (.024) \quad \quad (.001) \\
 & - .006 \text{ LENGTH} - .023 \text{ PCTINC} \\
 & \quad (.005) \quad \quad (.016)
 \end{aligned}$$

R² = .14

Adjusted R² = .09

| | |
|----------|--|
| BLPURE | = percent black in population * pure at-large elections |
| BLRESIDE | = percent black in population * at-large with residency requirement |
| BLMIXED | = percent black in population * mixed systems |
| BLSMD | = percent black in population * single-member districts |
| BLPOST | = percent black in population * at-large, run for posts |
| PURE | = dummy variable for pure at-large elections |
| POST | = dummy variable for at-large elections in which candidates run for specific posts |
| RESIDE | = dummy variable for at-large election systems that have residency requirements |
| SIZE | = number of council seats |
| LENGTH | = length of council terms |
| PCTINC | = proportion of incumbents returned in most recent election |

positive value for the dummy variable indicating that a city has a runoff provision (MAJVOTE) is included. Predictions for runoff and plurality cities comparable on the other components included on the model diverge as the percent black in the city increases. The low R-square signals that predictions based on this model will often be wide of the mark. Therefore it would be dangerous to conclude that either a majority vote requirement or a particular type of districting is related in a consistent fashion to higher or lower levels of black female council presence.

Other variables considered had only weak relationships with the percentage of black councilwomen. Interaction terms for staggered and non-staggered terms were not statistically different from zero. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the proportion of incumbents returned in the last election was weakly related to the presence of black women on councils while black women were slightly more likely on larger councils and when terms were shorter. None of these variables yielded values statistically different from zero.

Because of the small number of black councilwomen, even when the regression model produces statistically significant coefficients, there is no substantive difference for most of the range in percent black across cities. Thus the percentage of black women predicted for southern councils for each of the types of electoral formats are all within a few percentage points of each other.

Conclusions

In this paper the impact of several structural variables on the incidence of women on the city councils of the South has been explored to determine if structure has become more important over time. While we occasionally observed variations across the categories considered, the overwhelming thrust of our findings is that structural features are not associated with whether women serve as council members. The same conclusion is appropriate for the incidence of black female councilors.

In the South, women are not disadvantaged by majority vote requirements or the use of staggered terms. Nor are they especially likely to serve on the councils of cities that elect some or all members from single member districts. In some contexts, women and racial or ethnic minorities are lumped together as groups that are disadvantaged vis-a-vis white males. The structural features listed above are often pointed to as ones that dilute the ability of blacks and Hispanics to elect the candidates they prefer. We have previously found that at least in the South, there is some indication that blacks are more likely to serve on city

councils elected from single member districts.⁵¹ Thus at least for that electoral feature, the impact on women and blacks is different. But this finding merely confirms what other researchers had already reported in an earlier decade. On the other features, the findings for this set of cities is essentially the same for women and blacks.

Just as in the 1970's, our research shows that structural features are not significant determinants of female representation on city councils (nor black female representation). This holds true in spite of growing numbers of women on councils. Gender may still be somewhat of an impediment to representation—but electoral structures are not.

FOOTNOTES

¹Albert K. Karnig and Oliver Walter, "Election of Women to City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 56, 1976, p. 107.

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⁵MacManus, 1976, op. cit.; Karnig and Welch, 1979, op. cit.

⁶See for example, Leonard Cole, "Electing Blacks to Municipal Office: Structural and Social Determinants," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 10, September 1974, pp. 17-39; Albert K. Karnig, "Black Representation on City Councils: The Impact of District Elections and Socioeconomic Factors," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 12, December 1976, pp. 223-242; Susan A. MacManus, "City Council Election Procedures and Minority Representation: Are They Related?," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, June 1978, pp. 153-161; Theodore Robinson and Thomas R. Dye, "Reformism and Black Representation on City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, June 1978, pp. 133-141; Delbert Taebel, "Minority Representation on City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, June 1978, pp. 142-152; Albert K. Karnig and Susan Welch, *Black Representation and Urban Policy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Richard L. Engstrom and Michael D. McDonald, "The Election of Blacks to City Councils: Clarifying the Impact of Electoral Arrangements on the Seats/Population Relationship," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 75, June 1981, pp. 344-354; Albert K. Karnig and Susan Welch, "Electoral Structure and Black Representation on City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 63, March 1982, pp. 99-114.

⁷See Karnig and Walter, op. cit.; MacManus, 1976, op. cit.; Welch, op. cit.; Welch and Karnig, 1979, op. cit.

⁸Karnig and Walter, op. cit.

⁹MacManus, 1976, op. cit.

¹⁰Welch and Karnig, op. cit., p. 490

¹¹Welch and Karnig, op. cit., p. 491

¹²See Karnig and Welch, op. cit.; Welch and Karnig, op. cit.; Eleanor Smeal, "Eleanor Smeal Report," *Eleanor Smeal Newsletter*, Vol. 2, June 28, 1984, p. 1.

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²²Ibid.

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²⁴Bullock and Johnson, op. cit.; Charles S. Bullock, III and Loch Johnson, "Runoff Elections in Georgia," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, August 1985, pp. 937-946.

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³⁵Charles S. Bullock, III and Susan A. MacManus, "Structural Features of Municipal Elections and Black Representation," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, 1987.

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