

THE IMPACT OF OFFICE ON CROSS-RACIAL VOTING

Evidence from the 1996 Milwaukee Mayoral Election

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The results of the 1996 Milwaukee mayoral election and the 1996 Milwaukee County circuit judge election provide an opportunity to examine the impact of deracialization on cross-racial voting while considering the symbolic importance of the office. The author finds that a deracialized mayoral election produced lower levels of cross-racial voting than a racialized circuit judge election on the same ballot. This finding suggests that in the future, researchers should consider the office at stake as a relevant factor in studies of deracialization and cross-racial voting.

Deracialization is defined as an “electoral strategy in which the black candidate attempts to defuse the polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit references to race-specific issues and emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent” (McCormick and Jones 1993, 76). There are many examples of African-American and Latino candidates forming biracial electoral coalitions and winning elections through deracialization strategies (see, e.g., Underwood 1997; Perry and Stokes 1987).

The concept of deracialization has been challenged on a number of grounds. Characterizing an election as deracialized is difficult because campaigns that seem deracialized may in fact appeal to race in subtle ways (Starks 1991). White and black candidates may make racial appeals by using racial cues, code words, or slogans that resonate with their respective racial group. “Coded” racial appeals can also be made by emphasizing public policy issues



such as crime and welfare in which the racial dimensions are implicit (e.g., Gilens 1996; Edsall and Edsall 1992).

Continued case study research is necessary, and different dimensions of deracialization must be considered to improve research and the use of this framework. Given that the symbolic aspects of issues influence how voters interpret candidates and campaigns, it is logical that symbolic aspects of certain elected offices also influence voters and the efficacy of deracialization. However, research on cross-racial voting in urban elections using the deracialization framework has not explicitly considered this issue.

Racial stereotypes linking minorities to welfare spending and crime (Gilens 1996; Edsall and Edsall 1992) may influence how some white voters believe concerns such as property taxes and crime will be addressed by a minority elected official. Given low voter information and attention to politics, it is likely that much of the racial coding of issues that occurs is communicated through the race of the candidate (Terkildsen 1993). This linkage between issues and the race of the candidate is especially relevant for mayoral elections and candidates.

The symbolism associated with mayors has been considered in case studies of urban economic development. For example, Reed's (1987) study of Atlanta politics illustrates the different symbolism associated with Maynard Jackson. A minority-led city can represent, for some white voters, a city in decline. In the 1973 Atlanta mayoral election, Massell argued that the election of Maynard Jackson would harm the city's economy and property values (Jones 1978, 107). However, for African-Americans, Jackson "was packaged for black voters as a symbol of racial aspirations" (Reed 1987, 208). Business elites, on the other hand, saw advantages in making Atlanta "the next great international city" by electing a black mayor (Reed 1987, 205). In this context, according to Reed, "the coming of black political power could be turned into a benefit" by incorporating black leadership into a marketing image of Atlanta as a progressive, international, and cultural city (p. 205).

These symbolic and strategic considerations suggest that deracialization may be more effective in particular cities at certain times. The success of deracialization, especially for mayoral elections, is partially dependent on the ability of minority candidates to overcome the negative images associated with minority leadership—and implied policy and economic consequences—and reinforce positive images. This exploratory study of the 1996 Milwaukee mayoral election takes a preliminary step toward incorporating the symbolic importance of the office on racial crossover voting. The impact of symbolic importance of the office is examined using media coverage and comparing levels of racial crossover voting in two elections: a deracialized mayoral election and a racialized circuit judge election.

THE ELECTORAL CONTESTS

The 1996 Milwaukee mayoral election presents an opportunity to examine the impact of deracialization, considering the symbolic importance of the office for several reasons. First, crossover voting is necessary for an African-American candidate because Milwaukee's population is approximately 60% white, 30% black, and 10% Latino and "other" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). Second, both mayoral candidates had a history of winning elections through the use of deracialized campaigns and building multiracial coalitions. Third, a racialized and salient election was held down ballot, making comparisons between different offices possible.

Incumbent Mayor John Norquist (white) was first elected in 1988 by a biracial coalition of liberal whites and blacks. Norquist holds "progressive" views on issues such as transportation, the environment, and minority employment. Norquist's vision of urban development is guided by his application of "new urbanism" principles to city planning and policy making. However, because of a variety of policy positions and decisions, the police officers union, the teachers union, other union members, and some factions of the Democratic Party opposed Norquist. Residency requirements for city and school district employees meant that there were thousands of potential voters for a challenger in 1996.

The challenger, Sheriff Richard Artison (African-American), was a former police officer and Secret Service agent. Artison began his first term as sheriff in 1984 and was subsequently reelected five times in predominantly white Milwaukee County. Artison was considered a viable challenger by local political analysts because of his law enforcement background, positive public image, his proven ability to attract white voters, and the growing number of potential anti-Norquist voters. A poll taken in October 1995 found that Norquist and Artison were the two most popular elected officials in Milwaukee. A random sample of likely voters found that Norquist would receive 48% and Artison would receive 40% of the vote (Murphy 1996).

Norquist was profiled in two *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* articles. An article four months prior to the election discussed Norquist's transformation from an inexperienced, confrontational, and dispassionate policy "wonk" to a politically sophisticated mayor. Much of the article focused on the mayor's family and what was described as his hard work ethic (10 December 1995). A preelection profile was titled "Norquist shows passion for particulars: Mayor points with pride to his track record of freezing taxes, shrinking city government" (22 February 1996). Although aspects of Norquist's record were discussed critically, the overall image of the mayor conveyed in the article was

that the mayor is hardworking and knowledgeable but somewhat out of touch.

Artison was profiled one day after Norquist in an article titled "Popular Artison battled over budget, staff: Former sheriff set ethical tone, but his years in office saw overtime costs soar, arrests drop" (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 23 February 1996). The lead paragraph described Artison's public image as a "competent, upstanding, and unflappable" person. However, the rest of the profile suggested that Artison's public image was not substantiated by his record as sheriff. The newspaper article noted that the sheriff's department budget grew by 153% and that the number of arrests declined. Artison's explanation that state mandates and Milwaukee County policy caused the changes was portrayed as indicative of his tendency to "pass the buck" (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 23 February 1996).

An article summarizing each candidate's stand on key issues suggested that the election was deracialized. An article titled "Norquist, Artison agree on most issues" (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 3 March 1996) emphasized that the candidates differed very little on most salient issues. The article argued that the election was really a matter of style rather than substance. According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* analysis, the candidates held similar positions on major issues, including crime, taxes, and downtown development. On the issues of race and race relations, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* analysis noted that "neither candidate has made it an issue" (3 March 1996).

The contest between incumbent Circuit Judge Russell Stamper (black) and Robert Crawford (white) was racialized and characterized by negative campaigning. In addition to accusations of spouse abuse, Crawford linked Stamper to a "black militant" who advocated the creation of a separate majority black city and the use of violence to receive more economic and political resources. Crawford also criticized Stamper's support of electing judges by single-member districts rather than at large as *racial gerrymandering*, a term that has a negative racial connotation.

Media coverage of the candidates and the content of the Norquist and Artison campaigns suggest that the campaigns and the election were positive and not explicitly racialized. The Crawford and Stamper campaigns were negative and racialized. Despite the deracialized election, Norquist won the election by a 20% margin (60% to 40%). Incumbency played a role in Norquist's victory, but considering that four months prior to the election the margin was 8% suggests that other factors played a role. Stamper narrowly won the city of Milwaukee wards by a 1% margin (51% to 49%) but lost the election because the circuit judge is a countywide office. The fact that incumbent

judges rarely lose reelection reflects the unusually high salience of the election as well as the possible impact of racial voting patterns.

According to a scientific exit poll, Norquist supporters claimed that the main reason they voted for him was that he was "most competent for the job" (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 29 March 1996). It is likely that many whites judged Artison as less competent on nonracial grounds. However, some whites also probably questioned Artison's competence based on his race. According to the exit poll, blacks did not mention competence as a relevant factor in their voting decision (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 29 March 1996). Determining whether, how, and for which voters *competence* is a racial code word is beyond the scope of this study. However, racial voting patterns—particularly shifts in white voters who did not support Norquist in the past but did when he had an African-American opponent—can be compared to examine the impact of the symbolic importance of the office.

RACIAL VOTING PATTERNS IN A DERACIALIZED ELECTION

Ecological regression analysis is used to estimate levels of racial cross-over voting.¹ The analysis is based on 325 voting wards that have unchanged boundaries from 1992 to 1996. The percentage white (nonblack) in a ward has a strong, positive linear correlation with the percentage vote for Norquist ($r = .97$). To obtain estimates of racial voting patterns, the percentage white is regressed on the percentage vote for Norquist. Ward racial characteristics explain 93% of the variation in the voting patterns. The ecological regression estimates that 96% of blacks ($100 - 3.96 + .72(0)$) and 76% of whites ($3.96 + .72(100)$) voted for the candidate of the same race (see Table 1, column 1).

The correlation between Norquist's 1992 and 1996 ward-level vote is $-.42$, suggesting wards that Norquist won in 1996 were lost in 1992. Table 1, column 2 presents ecological regression estimates of racial voting patterns in the 1992 mayoral election. Norquist received an estimated 62% of the white vote ($74.3 - .13(100)$) and 74% of the black vote ($74.3 - .13(0)$) when he ran against a conservative white candidate. Norquist received higher levels of support in white wards in 1996 compared to 1992, and his support in African-American wards declined.

Change in support for Norquist in 1996 is examined as a function of the ideology and racial composition of the ward. Liberal whites are an important source of support for African-American candidates who run deracialized campaigns.² The percentage of liberal voters in a ward is measured using the percentage of voters who voted yes on a handgun ban referendum election

TABLE 1: Cross-Racial Voting in the Two Milwaukee Elections, 1996 (*N* = 325)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Norquist 1996</i>	<i>Norquist 1992</i>	<i>Change in Norquist Vote</i>	<i>Crawford 1996</i>
Constant	3.96*	74.3*	-.53*	20.0*
% white	.72*	-.13*	.012*	.38*
% liberal	—	—	-.012*	—
<i>R</i> ²	.93	.19	.88	.84
<i>F</i>	4445.6*	73.9*	1215.9*	1639.4*

SOURCE: City of Milwaukee, Elections Division (1992-1997).

**p* < .001.

held in 1994.³ In 1992, the correlation between the Norquist vote and support for the gun ban is .78, suggesting that he drew his support from liberal voters. However, the correlation between support for Norquist in 1996 and voting yes for the gun ban is -.23, reflecting a shift to more conservative voters.

The analysis indicates that the percentage white and the percentage liberal are associated with change in support for Norquist (see Table 1, column 3). The adjusted *R*² indicates that about 88% of the change in support for Norquist in 1996 can be explained by the independent variables. Wards with more white and conservative voters have larger positive changes in support for Norquist in 1996 compared to 1992 voting patterns. Conversely, wards with more African-American voters and more liberal voters have larger negative changes in support for Norquist.

These racial voting patterns in the deracialized mayoral election are more polarized than in the racialized election between Crawford and Stamper. In a ward with 100% white voters, Crawford received an estimated 58% of the vote. In a ward with 100% black voters, Crawford received an estimated 20% (see Table 1, column 4). Thus an estimated additional 18% of whites (76% – 58%) and 16% of African-Americans (20% – 4%) engaged in crossover voting in the racially polarized down-ballot election compared to the nonracialized mayoral election.

DISCUSSION

A single city study with limited data can only shed light on the effectiveness of deracialization, considering the impact of the symbolic importance of the office. However, the racial voting patterns tentatively indicate that the symbolic aspect of an office is a relevant factor. Campaign strategies and candidate images, although influenced by deracialization, probably account for

only a portion of the levels of crossover voting. The Stamper-Crawford election was racialized, but Stamper received more white support than Artison. It is not that white voters are not willing to vote for black candidates generally (and vice versa), but they are less willing for certain offices. Additional research needs to be done, including exit polls, random sample surveys, and experimental designs using more direct measures of individual-level attitudes about certain offices and whether the race of the candidate takes on different symbolic meanings for certain offices.

This study also illustrates the continued need for case studies of urban elections that examine deracialization, media coverage of campaigns, and election results. The case of Milwaukee illustrates that racial coding can take on many forms; without supportive media coverage of the African-American candidate, there were few options available. If Artison had challenged the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* characterization of his record as unfair, this would have racialized the election. The need for a third party—for example, the media or a coalition of business community leaders—to make the case for minority leadership is possibly a necessary condition of a successful deracialization strategy. Thus one consequence of symbolic politics and racial code is that deracialization is not under the full control of the candidate.

NOTES

1. Ecological regression is commonly used in studies of cross-racial voting in urban elections. See, for recent examples, DeLorenzo, Kohfeld, and Stein (1997) and Underwood (1997). Individual-level inferences cannot be drawn from aggregate-level data. Instead, differences in ward-level characteristics are examined in relation to different voting patterns.
2. The dependent variable change in the support for Norquist is calculated by subtracting Norquist's percentage vote in 1996 from Norquist's percentage vote in 1992, divided by the Norquist vote in 1992.
3. The percentage of voters in a ward who voted yes on the gun ban is an indirect measure of ideology. It is assumed that the liberal voters are more likely to support a total handgun ban than conservative voters.

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