Do Local Election Officials Represent Their Constituents?*

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Abstract

Do local election officials descriptively and substantively represent their constituents? Election officials are uniquely situated to influence participation rates and alleviate persistent racial and ethnic disparities in voter participation. Yet recent surveys of election officials have found them to be overwhelmingly white. Using a newly collected panel of local election officials across hundreds of counties and over two decades, a series of race imputation methods, and large scale administrative and vendor datasets on turnout and race, I test whether minority election officials increase turnout and registration rates of their non-white constituents. I find that descriptive representation of Black voters is increasing among election officials, and that minority and white election officials administer elections in similar ways. Using an original survey experiment, I find modest empowerment benefits to racial representation in election administration. These findings have implications for the importance of representation among local election officials and may provide insight into reducing the racial turnout gap.

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1 Introduction

Unlike any other Western democracy, the US relies on a large number of autonomous local officials to conduct our elections (Hale, Montjoy, and Brown 2015). These officials have varying levels of discretion to carry out a wide range of election duties, including registering voters, maintaining registration lists, siting polling places, conducting early and Election Day voting, hiring and training poll workers, selecting and maintaining voting equipment, processing provisional and absentee ballots, and tabulating and certifying election results. According to the 2022 Democracy Fund/Reed College Local Election Official Survey, two-thirds of election officials consider increasing voter turnout to be an important component of their jobs, and more than one in three agree that they should work to reduce demographic disparities in voter turnout.[1].

Beyond a long history of de jure and de facto racial discrimination in elections (Keyssar 2000) and a series of new voting laws targeted at suppressing minority participation (Bentele and O'Brien 2013), a growing body of literature shows that racial and ethnic minorities continue to experience inequities in election administration. Local election officials respond to Black and Hispanic voters at lower rates than white voters (Hughes et al. 2020; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015), are assigned lower quality polling locations (Barreto, Cohen-Marks, and Woods 2009), experience significantly longer wait times at the polls (Ansolabehere 2009; Chen et al. 2020; Klain et al. 2020; Stein et al. 2020; Pettigrew 2017), have lower quality interactions with poll workers (Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009), are more likely to be asked to show photo identification (Atkeson et al. 2010; Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012), and are more likely to have their absentee (Baringer, Herron, and Smith 2020; Shino, Suttmann-Lea, and Smith 2021) and provisional (Merivaki and Smith 2020) ballots rejected. This environment contributes to lower levels of voter confidence among racial and ethnic minorities (Bowler et al. 2015), as well as ongoing disparities in voting participation rates (Fraga 2018). Turnout disparities are most acute for Latinos and Asians.

[1] `https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/crosstabs.html`

I examine the extent of racial/ethnic diversity among election officials over time and whether representation leads to improved voter participation and election administration. In order to do so, I combine an original panel of election officials across three Southern states, 247 counties, and 25 years with large-scale administrative and vendor datasets. I find that election administrators have become increasingly more diverse since 1996, from nearly all white to about 15% identifying as Black, Latino, or Asian. Utilizing a causally credible difference-in-differences design, I find that minority and white election officials oversee elections with similar levels of race-specific voter registration and turnout rates. They also pursue similar election administration policies. I also field a survey vignette experiment via the 2023 UCLA REPS Lab Omnibus Survey to examine the psychological benefits of co-ethnic election official representation, yielding modest positive results. These findings are encouraging in terms of descriptive representation, but they also suggest diversification is no panacea to correcting long-standing racial disparities in the administration of elections.

2 Representation and Local Election Officials

Descriptive representation can lead to both positive behavioral/attitudinal changes among voters and to altered policy outputs. First, the well-established minority empowerment hypothesis posits that when racial and ethnic minorities see themselves represented in government, this leads to increased political efficacy, trust in political institutions, and political participation (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001; Tate 2003). Most of this literature examines federal and state offices, but some has extended to looking at street-level bureaucrats such as school teachers (Stewart, Meier, and England 1989) and police officers (Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009). One recent study found that descriptively representative poll workers increases general confidence in election administration for African American and Hispanic voters (King and Barnes 2018).

Second, descipritve representation may lead policy makers and government bureaucrats to act in the interests of the minorities they represent, improving policy outputs. In other words, descriptive representation can improve substantive representation. While there is some literature on local offices such as city councils and policy officers (Ba et al. 2021), there has been no literature to date on the effects of minority representation on policy outcomes in local election administration.

Minority election officials could affect both attitudinal change and policy outputs. Descriptively representative election officials could increase voter confidence among traditionally excluded minorities which indirectly leads to increased participation. They could also make policy decisions designed to reduce racial disparities in the quality of election administration, directly boosting turnout and indirectly improving voter confidence.

According to the 2022 Democracy Fund/Reed College survey data, over 90% of local election officials are white.[2]. It appears slightly more appointed officials are non-white, but the numbers are extremely low for both elected and appointed officials. Using data from the 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College survey data, Ferrer and Geyn (2022) find that only 2.7% of appointed and 1.7% of elected officials are Black, 5.1% of appointed and 4.7% of elected officials are Latino, and 0.6% of appointed and 0.1% of elected officials are Asian. While this is discouraging from a descriptive representation perspective, it does mean that any positive effects of more minority election officials could potentially have a large impact when scaled to the population of administrators.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data

There are four major data components for the observational analysis in this paper: panel data of local election officials, data on the race/ethnicity of local election officials, county-

[2] https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/crosstabs.html

level race-disaggregated turnout and registration figures, and other election administration outcome data. I focus my analysis on states that collect racial/ethnic identity on voter registration forms (Cruz and Hayes 2009) and whose elections are administered at the county-level by a single official with sole or primary authority (Ferrer and Geyn 2022). Three states fit in this set: Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. Combined, they have 293 counties. In Alabama and Florida, all counties have a primary election official (probate judge in Alabama, supervisor of elections in Florida). In Georgia, elected probate judges historically administered elections, but counties have begun switching to appointed Boards of Elections. I use data from Ferrer (2022) to identify these switches and only include county-years where probate judges ran elections. This yields a total panel of 247 counties across 14 general elections.

I construct panel data of local election officials from 1996 to 2022 for Alabama, Florida, and Georgia using a combination of election results, archived state websites,[3] and administrative directories of local officials. County election official results are from Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson (2023). These are used to impute officeholders based on the fact that Florida supervisors and Georgia probate judges are elected to four-year terms and Alabama probate judges are elected to six-year terms. The Guide to Florida Government series[4] and Georgia Courts Directory[5] were both used as well. Where information conflicted, data from the published directories was privileged over the election results, as it was frequently the case that elected officials do not serve the entirety of their term. In total, I was able to obtain complete panel data for Alabama (2000–2022), Florida (1998–2022), and Georgia (1996–2022).[6]

I use two methods for determining the race/ethnicity of these officials. First, I search for photos and biographical information of the officials and subjectively code race based on this data. I was able to code about 75% of officials using this method. For the remaining observations, I employed L2 2018 and 2022 voter file data for each state with self-identified

[3] `https://www.sos.alabama.gov/city-county-lookup/probate-judges`
[4] `http://edocs.dlis.state.fl.us/fldocs/SERIALS/?oclc=3957358`
[5] Housed by the Digital Library of Georgia, available at: `https://dlg.usg.edu/`
[6] With the exception of two election-year vacancies in Georgia.

race/ethnicity information, matching on name, county, and approximate age. I linked about half of the remaining observations successfully. Race was imputed for most of the remaining officials by searching for identifiable relatives in the voter file or examining the race of voters with the same last name as the official within their county and selecting a race if there was a common one. In total, I was able to identify the race/ethnicity of 652 local election officials, a success rate of 97.5%.

Registration and turnout rates that take into account citizenship and age are preferable to age-eligible figures, especially when calculating race-specific participation rates (Fraga 2018).[7] County-level race-disaggregated CVAP data has been calculated by the Census from ACS 5-year reports for 2000 and 2009-2020.[8] I linearly extrapolate this data to 1998 and to 2022, and linearly interpolate between 2000 and 2009 to create a full county-level CVAP panel for Black, Latino, Asian, and white voters. I then remove county-level race/ethnicity populations with fewer than 100 estimated values to reduce noisy low-sample participation rates.[9] This is used as the denominator in calculations of race-specific turnout and registration rates.[10]

County-level race-disaggregated registration rates are estimated using periodic voter file reports for each state at its November general elections.[11] I also estimate Georgia's race-disaggregated turnout rates using administrative reports.[12] Unfortunately, Alabama and Florida do not report data on race-disaggregated county-level voter turnout. I estimate

[7]Voting-eligible population (VEP) would be even better, since this takes into account disenfranchisement due to felony convictions (McDonald and Popkin 2001). They are not currently available at the county-level. However, VAP, CVAP, and VEP estimates should produce similar results in TWFE models unless there is a strong spurious relationship between the race of the local election official and race-specific participation rates.

[8]`https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/voting-rights/cvap.html`

[9]Fraga (2018) chooses a similarly arbitrary but more conservative population threshold, removing county-level race-specific population estimates of fewer than 1000. Using this threshold yields similar results.

[10]Even with this cutoff, the turnout and registration rates using CVAP estimates remain noisy, especially in combination with poorly maintained registration files. I exclude all race-disaggregated CVAP turnout rates greater than 1 and all race-disaggregated registration rates greater than 1.5.

[11]For Alabama, these are available at: `https://www.sos.alabama.gov/alabama-votes/voter/election-data`; for Florida, at: `https://dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/voter-registration-reports/`; and for Georgia, at: `https://sos.ga.gov/page/georgia-election-results`.

[12]`https://sos.ga.gov/page/georgia-election-results`

figures for these states by matching L2 voter history and voter demographic files together, then summing votes in each county by race. I use the 2022 Florida voter file to calculate 2018 and 2022 turnout rates and the 2018 Florida voter file to calculate 1996–2016 turnout rates. For Alabama, I use the 2018 voter file to calculate 1996–2016 turnout rates. The earlier election information is inaccurate, as only voters who were still registered in 2018 appear in that voter file. This exercise yields population samples of younger voters in the 1990s and 2000s elections. I address this in the analysis by running a series of models with differing inclusion criteria.

I assemble a set of county-level indicators of election administration policy using the US Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Surveys (EAVS) from 2004 to 2020.[13] This survey measures county-level outcomes in every even-year general election. I measure the number of polling places per 1,000 people, provisional ballots cast, provisional ballots rejected, absentee ballots rejected, and the number of registrants removed from the voter roll. Following Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson (2023) and Pettigrew (2017), I use data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study to measure the share of voters who had to wait at the polls for more than 30 minutes. This is available for general elections in 2006, 2008, and 2012–2018.

3.2 Research Design

I employ a difference-in-differences design, leveraging changes in the race/ethnicity of local election officials to measure the effects of switching between white and minority officials on voter turnout, registration, and election administration policies. This design overcomes confounding due to spurious connections between election official race and voter turnout including fixed factors (population, density, racial and political composition), and common time-varying factors (candidates on the ballot, public mood). The core assumption is that

[13] `https://www.eac.gov/research-and-data/datasets-codebooks-and-surveys`

jurisdictions that experience a switch are on similar voter participation and election administration trajectories.

I estimate a series of regressions of the form $Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta Minority_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$, where Y_{it} is a measure of voter turnout, registration, or election administration outcome in county i at election year t, α_i and δ_t are county and year fixed effects, respectively, and $Minority_{it}$ is a dummy variable taking 1 when counties have a racial/ethnic minority as their local election official and 0 when counties have a white official. β is the causal effect of a minority election official on voter participation and election administration outcomes.

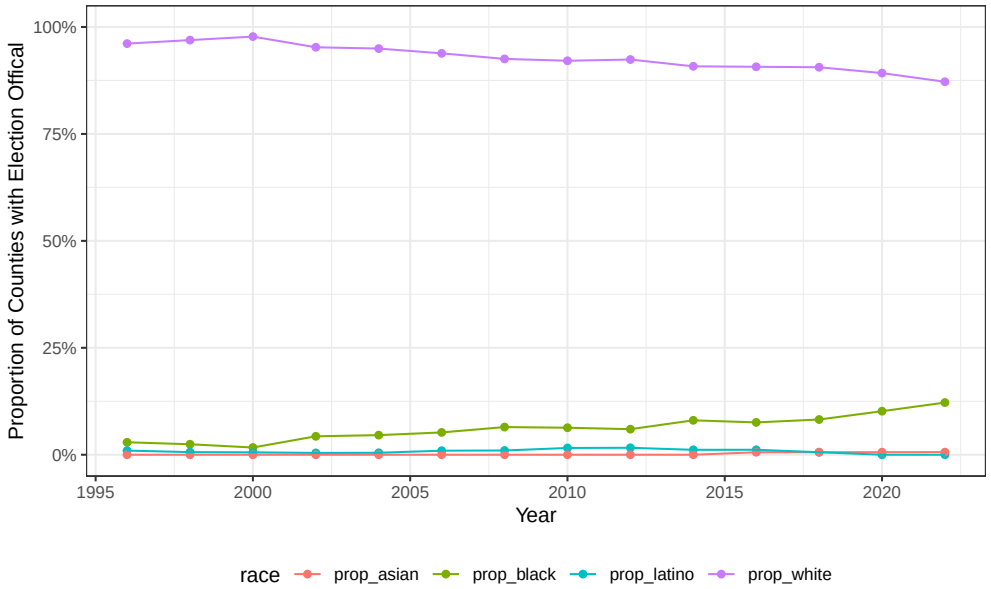
All main regression specifications include at the minimum Year by State fixed effects. This ensures that comparisons are only made between counties in the same state, addressing the possibility that states may be on different turnout trajectories. I further address parallel trending concerns by incorporating three additional sets of interacted fixed effects: Year by State by Non-Hispanic white population share, Year by State by Population, and Year by State by Democratic vote share fixed effects. The Year by Non-Hispanic white population fixed effect compares within-county over time change to other counties with similar racial demographics, whereas the Year by Democratic vote share fixed effect compares counties with similar partisan makeup and the Year by Population fixed effect compares counties with similar populations. These account for the possibility that counties that switch to a minority election official may also happen to shift demographics, population, or partisan trends in ways that are systematically related to turnout. All three interacted fixed effects are divided into quartiles and measured pretreatment for each state.[14]

4 Descriptive Results

In this section, I present evidence that the number of minority local election officials in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia has increased over time. Existing surveys show that the

[14]I measure Democratic vote share as votes for the top-ticket Democratic candidate divided by votes for the top-ticket Democratic and Republican candidates.

Figure 1: **Alabama, Florida, and Georgia Local Election Administrator Race, 1996-2022**. This graph displays over time change in the race of county election officials in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. Proportions are relative to the total number of counties that have individual officials with primary authority to run elections—between 131 and 30 counties in Georgia and 67 counties each in Alabama and Florida.



population of local election officials are overwhelmingly white. However, all surveys to date have been cross-sectional samples and are therefore unable to clearly answer whether the descriptive representation of racial and ethnic minorities has increased. Survey samples also may produce noisy estimates of the population of election officials, and may also induce bias due to sampling and response rates. My panel data on administrator race overcomes these hurdles, conveying information on whether descriptive representation has increased over time without introducing any sampling or bias response issues.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of Black, Latino, Asian, and White election officials in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia that administered each even-year general election between 1996 and 2022. Each point is a pooled average of officials across all three states. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, over 95% of local election officials were white. This has slowly changed over the past 20 years, with the percentage of white election officials reaching a low of 87% in 2022.

Figure 2: **Alabama, Florida, and Georgia Minority Local Election Administrators, 1996-2022**. This graph displays over time change in the percentage of minority county election officials in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. Proportions are relative to the number of counties in each state that have individual officials with primary authority to run elections—between 131 and 30 counties in Georgia and 67 counties each in Alabama and Florida.

Almost all of representational change has been fueled by growth in the proportion of election officials that are Black. Less than 2% of election officials in each of these heavily African-American states were Black in 2000; today, more than 12% of election officials are Black. Unfortunately, there has been little improvement in the representation of Latinos or Asians. Latino representation reached a peak of 1.6% of the population of election officials in these states in 2012, but has since declined to zero. There is almost no Asian representation.

Figure 2 breaks down the percentage of minority election officials by state. All three states have seen similar growth over time in the diversification of their election officials, from near zero at the turn of the century to 10–20% today. Florida initially led the surge, but its diversity has plateaued since 2010. Both Alabama and Georgia have shown steady increases, mainly due to the election of several Black probate judges in both states. Whereas in 1996 three of 101 probate judges who administered elections in Georgia were Black, in 2022 five of the 30 probate judges responsive for running elections were Black.

In summary, this descriptive evidence shows a positive trend in representation of racial minorities in election administration. In three states with large racial/ethnic minority populations, those tasked with running America's elections are look more like the voters they work for than they did a few decades ago. However, there remains a large disparity between the racial makeup of these states and the racial makeup of the pool of local election officials. According to data from the 2020 Census, Alabama's population is 27% Black, 5% Latino, 2% Asian, and 35% minority overall; Florida's makeup is 17% Black, 27% Latino, 3% Asian, and 47% minority overall; and Georgia's demographics are 32% Black, 4% Asian, 10% Latino, and 49% minority overall.[15] In no state does the percentage of minority election officials equal even half that of the state's minority population, and Latinos remain virtually completely unrepresented by their election officials despite making up significant portions of the population in Florida and Georgia. I turn next to whether minority officials act differently or empower voters of color to participate at higher rates.

5 Statistical Results

In this section, I present evidence that minority and white local election officials produce similar levels of race-specific participation rates and pursue similar election administration policies. I then validate the staggered rollout design and explore the validity of the parallel trends assumption.

5.1 Minority and White Officials Produce Similar Levels of Race-Specific Voter Participation

Does descriptive representation improve participation for racial minorities? I test race-specific voter turnout and registration in this section using a combination of state administrative data and L2 voter files combined with a series of difference-in-difference estimates.

[15] `https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL,FL,GA/PST045222`

All regressions include, at the minimum, both county and Year by State fixed effects.[16] This ensures that differential participation trends between Alabama, Florida, and Georgia are not driving the results and that comparisons are only made of turnout differences between white- and minority-administered counties within the same state and election year. All estimates include robust standard errors clustered by county.

Table 1 displays difference-in-differences specifications testing the effects of minority election administration on Black voter participation, Table 2 shows the effects on Latino participation, Table 3 shows the effects on Asian participation, and Table 4 shows the effects on white participation. Across all specifications, Black, Asian, and Latino election officials are pooled together as minority officials to maximize my statistical power. Because 38 of the 44 minority election officials included in the sample are Black, these estimates are mostly powered by a switch between white and Black election officials. While Black officials might provide some representational benefits to other minorities due to a shared "people of color" racial affiliation (Pérez 2021), I expect point estimates to be largest for Black voter participation. In all four tables, column 1, my preferred specification, uses a combination of Georgia administrative and L2 voter file data from 2012 onward to test the effects of minority election administration on race-specific voter turnout. Column 2 uses both Georgia administrative data and the full L2 data, calculating turnout rates back to 1996. For Tables 1 and 4 testing Black and white turnout rates, respectively, there is enough administrative data from Georgia to use it exclusively. This is done in column 3. In all four tables, the final column tests race-specific registration rates using administrative data.

All specifications result in near-zero point estimates that are relatively precisely estimated. For instance, the point estimate in column 1 of Table 1 can be interpreted as a county switch from a white to a non-white local election official results in an average boost to Black voter turnout by 0.1 percentage points. Effects larger than two percentage points

[16] I also run specifications that include three additional interacted fixed effects: Year by State by Nonwhite quartile, Year by State by Population quartile, and Year by State by Democratic Vote Share quartile. The results are substantively similar.

Table 1: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Black Participation Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Black Voter Turnout			Black Reg
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	0.001	0.007	−0.008	−0.004
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.022)	(0.016)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,641	2,184	842	2,447

Table 2: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Latino Participation Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Latino Voter Turnout		Latino Reg
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Minority	−0.009	0.002	−0.011
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.013)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin
Observations	944	1,587	1,230

Table 3: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Asian Participation Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Asian Voter Turnout		Asian Reg
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Minority	0.020	0.002	0.014
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.032)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin
Observations	518	887	631

Table 4: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect White Participation Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	White Voter Turnout			White Reg
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	−0.008	−0.008	−0.010	−0.021
	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.030)	(0.013)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,682	2,228	879	2,495

can be confidently ruled out. No point estimate in these tables strongly deviates from zero, nor can any point estimate be confidently distinguished from a null effect.

I also run a set of specifications using race-specific turnout and registration shares in order to further increase the precision of my estimates. The results, found in Section A.1 in the Online Appendix, are similarly null and more precisely estimated. Specifications testing Black participation rates specifically for switches to Black local election officials are found in Section A.2 in the Online Appendix and also result in null estimates.

These null results carry over to difference-in-difference tests of overall registration and turnout rates. Section A.3 in the Online Appendix shows that minority election officials do not significantly improve voter participation rates, but rather oversee elections with similar levels of participation as white election officials.

5.2 Minority and White Officials Administer Elections Similarly

I use EAVS and CCES data to explore whether minority and white election officials pursue different election administration policies. The results, found in Section 5, suggest that minority and white administrators run elections with similar provisional ballot usage, provisional rejection rates, and absentee ballot rejection rates. There is suggestive evidence that minority election officials increase the number of polling places per 1,000 residents, though the estimate is noisy. On the other hand, minority officials increase the rate of registration removals and increase the share of voters who wait longer than 30 minutes to vote.

These findings, especially on polling places and voter wait times, point in opposite directions. Increasing the number of polling places should improve convenience for voters and reduce voter wait times. Taken together, there does not appear to be significant systematic differences in the election administration policies pursued by minority and white election officials.

Table 5: Minority Election Officials Pursue Different Administration Policies (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Polling Places Places	Prov Share	Prov Rejection	Absentee Rejection	Reg Removal	Wait Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Minority	0.200	0.001	0.005	−0.002	0.013	0.079
	(0.126)	(0.001)	(0.043)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.026)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,088	1,139	978	1,142	1,400	720

5.3 Validating the Effect of Minority Election Officials on Voter Participation

In this section, I undertake validation exercises to ensure the findings are causally valid. I utilize alternative difference-in-difference estimators and examine the validity of the parallel trends assumption.

5.3.1 Validating the Staggered Rollout Design

Recent scholarship has identified potential problems with the standard generalized two-way fixed effects estimator when used in staggered adoption designs (Baker, Larcker, and Wang 2022; Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess 2021; de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille 2020; Callaway and Sant'Anna 2021). These issues stem from heterogeneous treatment effects. If treatment effects vary across time or units, the estimate will be biased due to the assignment of negative weights to some comparison groups. This is because units that switch early on from control to treatment are treated as controls in some comparisons and subtracted from the difference-in-difference estimator, even if they continue to experience dynamic treatment

effects. I employ an additional estimator to ensure the results are not biased by heterogeneous treatment effects.

I utilize the de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille (2020) alternative estimator for heterogeneous treatment effects to validate my results. I run my preferred specification of turnout results for Black, Latino, and Asian turnout rates (column 1 in Tables 1, 2, and 3). The results, found in Section A.4 of the Online Appendix, are largely in line with the main analysis. The dynamic effect of switching from a white to a non-white election official on minority turnout is close to zero.

5.3.2 Validating the Parallel Trends Assumption

The difference-in-differences design depends on an assumption of parallel trends in order to be causally credible. In other words, the observed effect is assumed to be due to the effect of switching the race/ethnicity of the local election official rather than differing trends in counties that experienced a switch in the race of their election official from those that did not. There are theoretically grounded reasons for expecting counties that switch from white to minority officials to already differ in time-varying ways that lead them to have different participation rates.

Positive pretrending seems of particular concern, leading to false positive results. Places that switch to a non-white election official may have increasing minority populations. Since racial and ethnic minority population size is the greatest predictor of the turnout gap in participation between racial groups (Fraga 2018), counties that switch to a non-white election official may appear to have higher minority participation rates even if the effect of the switch itself is null. This is especially a concern because almost all of the demographic change in Southern states has been due to increasing Latino/Asian populations.

It is impossible to prove that the parallel trends assumption is met. Rather, I validate my design by conducting a generalized synthetic control matching exercise using Xu (2017) to ensure that counties that switch are only compared to those that do not with similar

pretreatment turnout trajectories. The results, found in Section A.5 in the Online Appendix, are similar to those found in the main analysis. In short, it appears that pretrending did not cause false null results.

6 Experimental Results

The minority empowerment hypothesis (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001; Tate 2003) suggests that descriptively representative officials should increase confidence among minorities and lead them to be more trusting in government. In the case of election administration, descriptively representative officials could increase voter confidence among traditionally excluded minorities and make them feel that voting is worthwhile. I conducted a survey experiment module in the 2023 UCLA REPS Lab Omnibus Survey to test whether minority voters trust co-ethnic election officials to fairly administer elections more than they do white officials. This survey was a multi-investigator study fielded between March and June 2023. It included a convenience sample of 548 undergraduate participants from UCLA, US Riverside, UC Irvine, and Howard University recruited by professors in high-enrollment political science courses.

Respondents read a short vignette of a local election official who was described as determining the eligibility of absentee ballots in Fayette County, GA in the 2020 presidential election, a highly salient election and county. The race/ethnicity of the official was included in the description, as well as their job tenure, party affiliation, age, geographic background, and views on voter identification and absentee voting. Respondents were randomly assigned into two conditions: one describing the official as white (control) and one describing the official as the same race/ethnicity as the respondent (treatment). All other variables were held constant except for the race of the official. Respondents were asked two questions: whether they trust that official to fairly administer elections, and whether they would be more or less likely to vote if that official was their election administrator. Both were measured on a

5-point Likert response scale. Technical details about the study can be found in Section A.6 in the Online Appendix.

Table 6 displays difference-in-means estimations pooled across Black, Latino, and Asian respondents. Column 1 shows that respondents tend to trust co-ethnic local election officials to fairly administer elections slightly more than white election officials, on average. Minority respondents give an average trust rating of 3.12 out of 5 to co-ethnic election officials, compared with 2.91 to white officials otherwise identically described, a standardized effect size of 0.24. Column 2 shows that minority respondents report being slightly more likely to vote when their election official shares their ethnic/racial affiliation than when they are white, although the effect size is similarly modest. Regressions run separately for Black, Latino, and Asian respondents, found in A.6 in the Online Appendix, yield similar results.

Table 6: Experiment: Coethinic Local Election Officials Boost Voter Confidence and Participation Willingness

	Trust Official	Likelier to Vote
	(1)	(2)
Coethnic LEO	0.209*	0.224**
	(0.112)	(0.094)
Constant	2.906***	2.838***
	(0.079)	(0.066)
Observations	230	230

The results show some evidence that descriptive representation among election officials matters, but the magnitude of the effect is rather small.

7 Why Do Black and White Officials Administer Elections Similarly?

Given the evidence in previous literature for the minority empowerment hypothesis, the null effects of descriptive representation on policy outputs, and the rather modest effects found in survey experiments, why have I failed here to find a stronger link between descriptive representation and improved administrative outcomes? I explore first why minority election officials might fail to affect behavioral or attitudinal change in their constituents and second why minority officials may pursue similar policies to white officials. I then test whether minority election officials see altered election expenditure environments.

Minority empowerment depends on the visibility of the official and interactions between the official and their constituents. Election officials tend to have minimal visibility and only interact with a small percentage of their constituents. Unlike President, Senator, or even Mayor, election administration is not a high-profile job. Additionally, election officials in most states bear multiple responsibilities and may have nonintuitive titles. In both Alabama and Georgia, election officials are probate judges and also carry out the responsibilities of judge. A decline in local news coverage has generally led to less informed citizens (Rubado and Jennings 2020). Finally, voters typically interact with poll workers who volunteer to work on Election Day rather than the actual chief election officer for their jurisdiction. All of these factors reduce the ability of minority election officials to increase non-white turnout through empowerment.

What about policy outcomes? Recent literature suggests differences between election officials might be overblown. Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson (2023) find that Democratic and Republican election officials produce similar levels of presidential Democratic vote share and turnout rates. They also administer elections similarly across the broad range of policy indicators tested in Table 5. If Democrats and Republicans administer elections similarly, it makes sense that white and Black officials do so as well.

Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson (2023) examined four explanations for their finding of minimal partisanship: the reelection incentive forces election officials to moderate in order to win, officials face a collective action problem in altering election outcomes, election officials are less polarized in their election policy views than the general public, and administration policies do not make much of an impact of outcomes such as registration and turnout rates. The evidence led them to support the latter two conclusions. Election officials appear to be self-selecting and truly seek to do the best job possible given limited resources and technical demands. In this case, this means both minority and white officials may seek to boost voter participation rates and alleviate racial disparities in turnout. This would result in the null results observed. Additionally, it is likely that election administration policies may not have that big of an effect on turnout. (Clinton et al. 2020) This means that observed differences in election administration policies will not clearly translate into differences in race-specific participation rates.

7.1 Do Restrictive Administrative Environments Explain the Results?

I test one additional explanation: that minority election officials face hostile political environments when they come into office. Perhaps these officials sincerely seek to increase resources for their minority constituents, providing more polling places, better election equipment, and more staffing. However, final decisions on expenditures usually rest with other county bodies such as the County Executive or County Supervisors. If these election officials are starved of resources by other actors, it could also explain the null results observed. I test this using election administration expenditure data from Mohr et al. (2018). This dataset includes estimated yearly election administration costs for each county in Florida and Georgia starting from as early as 2005, though there is significant missingness and high within-county variance. Table 7 displays the results of a difference-in-differences regression testing the effects of switching to a minority election official on logged total county election expenditures.

Table 7: Minority Local Election Officials Have No Clear Effect on Election Expenditures (FL, and GA, 2005-2017)

	Log Total Election Expenditures			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	−0.055	0.106	0.100	−0.199
	(0.123)	(0.185)	(0.177)	(0.265)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	No	No	No
Year x State x Nonwhite FEs	No	Yes	No	No
Year x State x Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No
Year x State x Dem VS FEs	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	313	313	313	313

While the results are fairly imprecise, there is no clear pattern of increased or decreased election expenditures once non-white election officials assume office. It appears that minority election officials do not see their budgets significantly reduced, but nor are they able to appreciably grow their budgets more than white officials.

8 Conclusion

Local election officials are the front-line workers of America's democracy. But do they represent their voters? Using original data and a causally credible research design, I show that white and minority local election officials typically administer elections in similar ways. They produce similar levels of registration and turnout rates among Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and whites, as well as pursue similar election administration policies. Using an original survey experiment, I find that minority respondents trust coethnic officials to administer elections more fairly than white officials and claim that they are more likely to vote when the official administering their elections shares their race/ethnicity.

These findings have both positive and negative implications. It is normatively desirable that a diversifying America is starting to be reflected in those tasked with running its democracy. Twenty years ago, virtually all election officials in the South were white. Today, that is no longer the case. Additionally, it is reassuring that the reality of an unrepresentative class of election administrators does not obviously translate into inferior election quality outcomes.

In a different light, these results are discouraging for correcting long-standing racial and ethnic disparities in voter participation and the quality of election administration. It appears electing more Black and Brown officials is not a panacea to ensuring equity in the voting experience. There are still potential benefits to better representation of racial minorities among election officials. Survey evidence helps uncover these effects, such as improvements to voter confidence. More observational data could uncover effects that are not identified with the current data sample.

I am preparing a follow-up study to the 2023 UCLA REPS Lab Omnibus Survey that will include a more representative sample and a more realistic vignette experiment. Additionally, I am working on expanding my observational dataset beyond Alabama, Florida, and Georgia to all 30 states that have county-level individual officials with primary responsibility to administer elections.

Minority election officials differ from white officials on many dimensions beyond simply their skin color and ancestry. They are more likely to belong to the Democratic than the Republican party, probably hold more liberal election policy views, may be younger on average, and may be more likely to be appointed than white officials (Ferrer and Geyn 2022). Racial treatment effects bundle all of these differences together. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, pinpointing more exact treatment causes would be helpful to disentangle competing mechanisms. I plan to decompose the treatment effect by conducting heterogeneity tests leveraging variation in partisan affiliation.

Finally, I plan to leverage variation in selection methods to test whether certain institutional mechanisms such as direct elections, consolidated authority, or partisan labels on the ballot moderate the effects of descriptive representation. Certain forms of election administration are artifacts of a dark history of racism. For instance, in the 1960s, counties in the South eliminated elected offices in the wake of the Voting Rights Act for the express purpose of maintaining white power (Komisarchik 2018). Most counties in states such as Alabama, Georgia, and Texas maintain separate registration and election administration officers which were originally instituted in order to prevent African Americans from registering to vote. Recently, legislators in Georgia have pushed through changes to election official selection, some of which have shifted power from longstanding Black officials to partisan-minded white appointees.[17].

An increasingly polarized and dangerous national environment for elections may spillover into the local level, and has made it ever more important that the local officials responsible for running America's elections in a professional and nonpartisan manner are up to the task. It also makes it more important that these officials descriptively and substantively represent their constituents and gain their trust in the endeavor of preserving our shared democracy.

[17] https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/03/14/georgia-elections-fraud-purge/

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Online Appendix

Intended for online publication only.

Contents

A.1 Minority and White Officials Produce Similar Levels of Race-Specific Voter Turnout Shares

Participation tests in the main analysis used race-specific CVAP. For Table A.1, turnout is calculated as the share of Black voters divided by total turnout, whereas registration is calculated as the share of Black registrants divided by the total number of registered voters. Tables A.2, A.3, and A.4 similarly use participation shares for Latinos, Asians, and whites, respectively. The main advantage of using turnout and registration shares is that they do not rely on estimates of the eligible voter participation, which can be quite noisy.

Table A.1: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Share of Black Participation (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Black Turnout Share			Black Reg Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	0.004	0.005	0.001	0.014
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.009)	(0.006)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,683	2,229	879	2,496

The estimates produced from participation-share specifications are more precisely estimated than the turnout and registration rates estimated in the main analysis. They also result in point estimates that more tightly cluster around zero. For instance, the first column of Table A.1 can be interpreted to mean that when a county switches from a white to a minority election administrator, the Black share of voters increases by about 0.4 percentage points. Effects larger than 1 percentage point can be confidently ruled out. Out of these specifications, only one estimate is statistically distinguishable from null. Column 4 shows that switching to a Black election official leads to an increase of the share of registrants that

Table A.2: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Share of Latino Participation (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Latino Turnout Share		Latino Reg Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Minority	−0.002	0.003	−0.001
	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.004)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin
Observations	1,285	2,225	1,620

Table A.3: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Share of Asian Participation (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Asian Turnout Share		Asian Reg Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Minority	0.0004	0.0004	0.0005
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin
Observations	1,117	2,216	1,139

Table A.4: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Share of White Participation (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	White Turnout Share			White Reg Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	0.0004	−0.006	0.010	−0.014
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.010)	(0.007)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,683	2,229	879	2,496

are Black by about 1.4 percentage points. On the whole, however, it appears that white and minority election officials oversee elections with similar rates of racial minority participation.

A.2 Black Election Officials Produce Similar Levels of Black Participation as Non-Black Officials

The main estimates presented in Section 5 pooled Black, Latino, and Asian local election officials together as minorities. In this section, I explore whether switching to a Black local election official ("LEO") improves Black participation rates. Table A.5 shows the effects of switching to a Black election official on Black turnout and registration rates, whereas Table A.6 shows the effects of switching to a Black election official on Black turnout and registration shares.

Table A.5: Black Election Officials Do Not Affect Black Participation Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Black Voter Turnout			Black Reg
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black LEO	0.010	0.011	0.001	0.001
	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.022)	(0.017)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,641	2,184	842	2,447

The results do not substantively differ from those presented in the Tables 1 and A.1 in the main analysis. It does not appear that Black representation in the local election official boosts Black voter turnout or registration.

Table A.6: Black Election Officials Do Not Affect Share of Black Participation (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Black Turnout Share			Black Reg Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black LEO	0.004	0.005	−0.001	0.015
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.010)	(0.007)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	Admin + L2	Admin + L2 Full	Admin	Admin
Observations	1,683	2,229	879	2,496

A.3 Minority and White Officials Produce Similar Levels of Overall Voter Participation

Do minority election officials positively impact aggregate turnout and registration rates? I employ county-level turnout and registration data from Dave Leip's Election Atlas[18] and county-level voting-age population (VAP) from the U.S. National Cancer Institute.[19]

Table A.7 displays the results of a two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effects of switching from a white to a minority local election official on overall voter turnout. Column 1 shows that counties switching from white to minority election officials see an average decrease in overall voter turnout of 1.1 percentage points. The result is precisely estimated but does not attain conventional levels of statistical significance. Column 2 tightens the comparisons to counties within the same state with similar pretreatment demographic makeups, column 3 makes comparisons between counties with similar pretreatment populations, and column 4 compares counties with similar partisan makeups. In all three, the point estimate is less than 1 percentage point and fails to attain statistical significance. Notably, none of these estimates show a positive effect of descriptive representation on turnout rates.

Table A.8 displays the output of regression specifications testing the effects of minority local election administration on overall voter registration rates. The results are nearly identical to Table A.7 albeit slightly noisier, with negative point estimates that cannot be confidently distinguished from zero.[20]

In total, these findings suggest that minority election officials do not significantly improve voter participation rates, but rather oversee elections with similar levels of participation as white election officials.

[18] `https://uselectionatlas.org/`

[19] `https://seer.cancer.gov/popdata/`

[20] For both turnout and registration rates, regressions including only Presidential contests yield substantively identical findings.

Table A.7: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Overall Turnout Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Voter Turnout			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	−0.011	−0.007	−0.009	−0.005
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	No	No	No
Year x State x Nonwhite FEs	No	Yes	No	No
Year x State x Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No
Year x State x Dem VS FEs	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	2,531	2,531	2,531	2,531

Table A.8: Minority Election Officials Do Not Affect Overall Registration Rates (AL, FL, and GA, 1996-2022)

	Voter Registration			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	−0.014	−0.008	−0.006	−0.013
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.013)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year x State FEs	Yes	No	No	No
Year x State x Nonwhite FEs	No	Yes	No	No
Year x State x Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No
Year x State x Dem VS FEs	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	1,831	1,831	1,831	1,831

A.4 Validating the Staggered Rollout Design

I run the de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille (2020) estimator for Black, Latino, and Asian-specific turnout rates. The results are displayed in Tables A.1, A.2, and A.3, respectively. Each general election (x-axis) is two years apart. The results broadly align with those found in Section 5: switching to a minority election official does not appreciable boost minority voter turnout.

Figure A.1: **de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfoeuille Estimator for the Effect of Minority Election Officials on Black Turnout.** This graph displays the dynamic effect of a switch to a minority election official on Black voter turnout in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia using the (de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille 2020) heterogeneous-robust two-way fixed effects estimator.

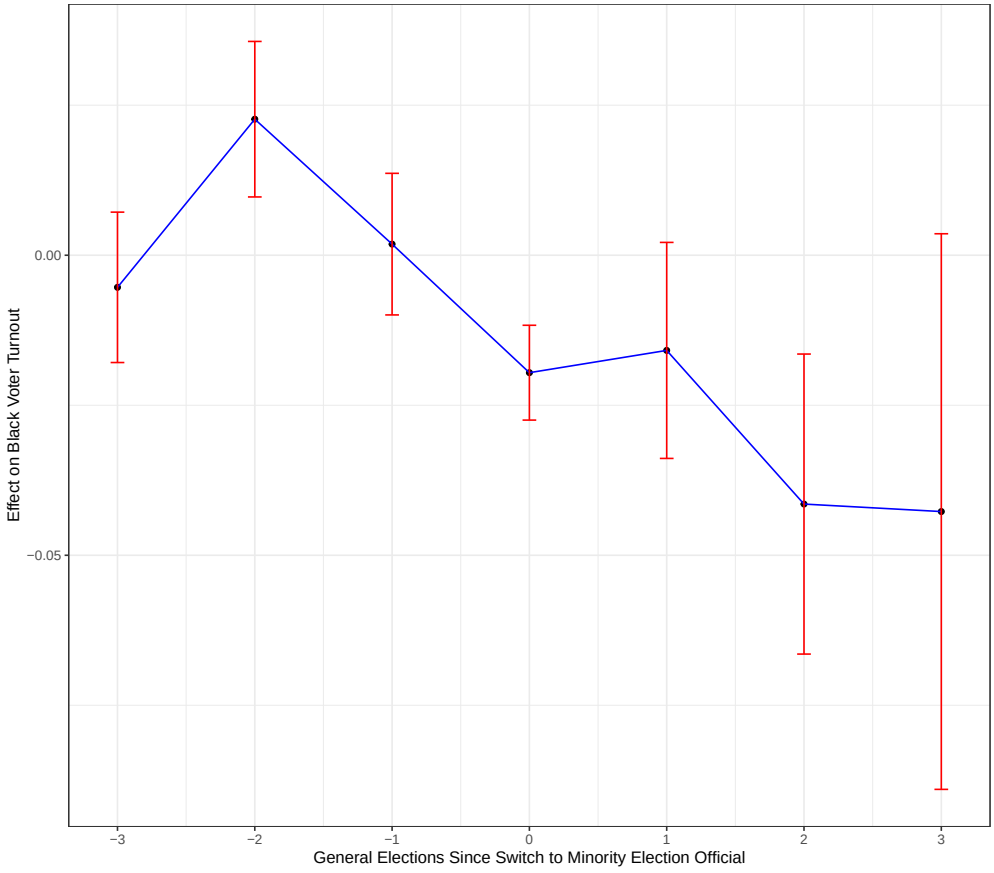


Figure A.2: **de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfoeuille Estimator for the Effect of Minority Election Officials on Latino Turnout.** This graph displays the dynamic effect of a switch to a minority election official on Latino voter turnout in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia using the (de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille 2020) heterogeneous-robust two-way fixed effects estimator.

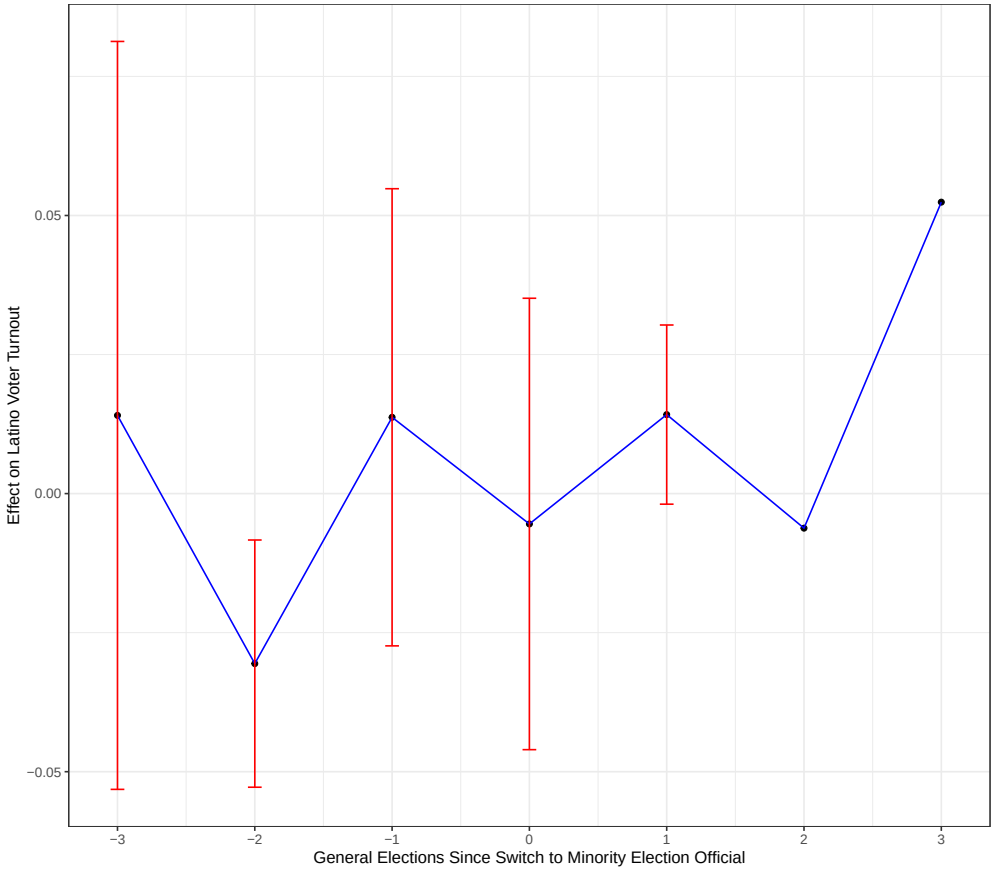
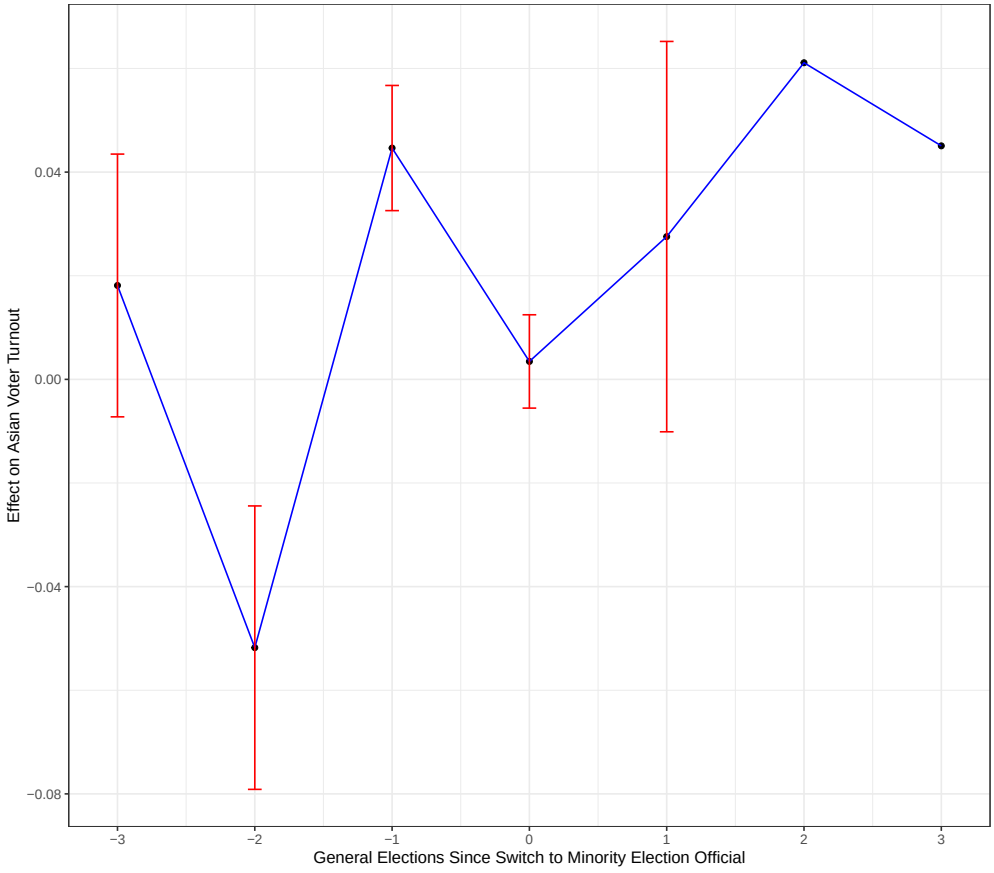


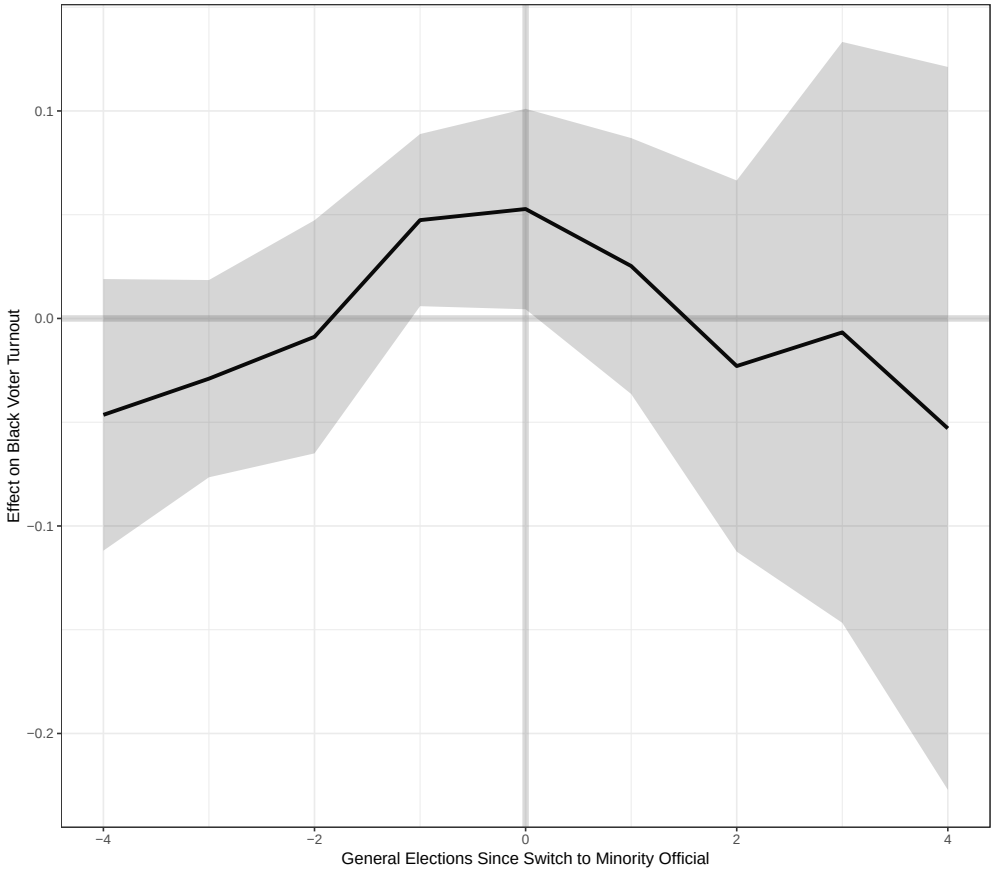
Figure A.3: **de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfoeuille Estimator for the Effect of Minority Election Officials on Asian Turnout.** This graph displays the dynamic effect of a switch to a minority election official on Asian voter turnout in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia using the (de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille 2020) heterogeneous-robust two-way fixed effects estimator.



A.5 Validating the Parallel Trends Assumption

Figures A.4, A.5, and A.6 displays output from the Xu (2017) generalized synthetic control estimator for Black, Latino, and Asian turnout, respectively, measuring the average effect of switching from a white to a minority election official. This method allows for a relaxation of the parallel trends assumption by matching treated and untreated units to create balance pre-treatment.

Figure A.4: **Estimated ATT of Generalized Synthetic Control - Black Turnout**. This graph displays a generalized synthetic control method of the two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effects of minority election officials on Black voter turnout. The specification includes two-way additive county and year fixed effects, a cross-validation procedure to select the number of unobserved factors within the interval of 0 and 2 general elections, and a parametric bootstrap procedure with 1000 samples. The black line is a dynamic estimated ATT effect of minority election officials on turnout and the band is a 95% confidence interval.



The figures, while imprecisely estimated, show little evidence for a large positive boost to minority voter turnout after counties switch from white to minority chief election officials. Overall, it appears that once the sample is rebalanced to eliminate concerns about pretrending, the null effect observed in the main analysis remains.

Figure A.5: **Estimated ATT of Generalized Synthetic Control - Latino Turnout**. This graph displays a generalized synthetic control method of the two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effects of minority election officials on Latino voter turnout. The specification includes two-way additive county and year fixed effects, a cross-validation procedure to select the number of unobserved factors within the interval of 0 and 2 general elections, and a parametric bootstrap procedure with 1000 samples. The black line is a dynamic estimated ATT effect of minority election officials on turnout and the band is a 95% confidence interval.

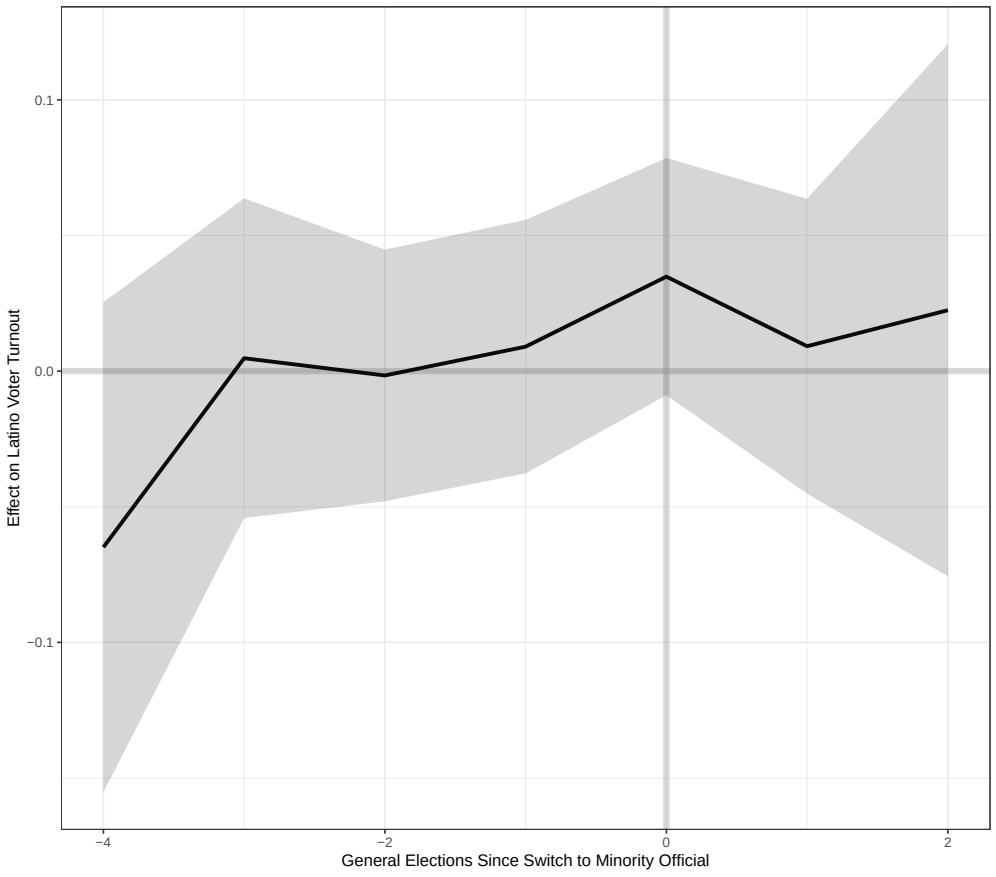
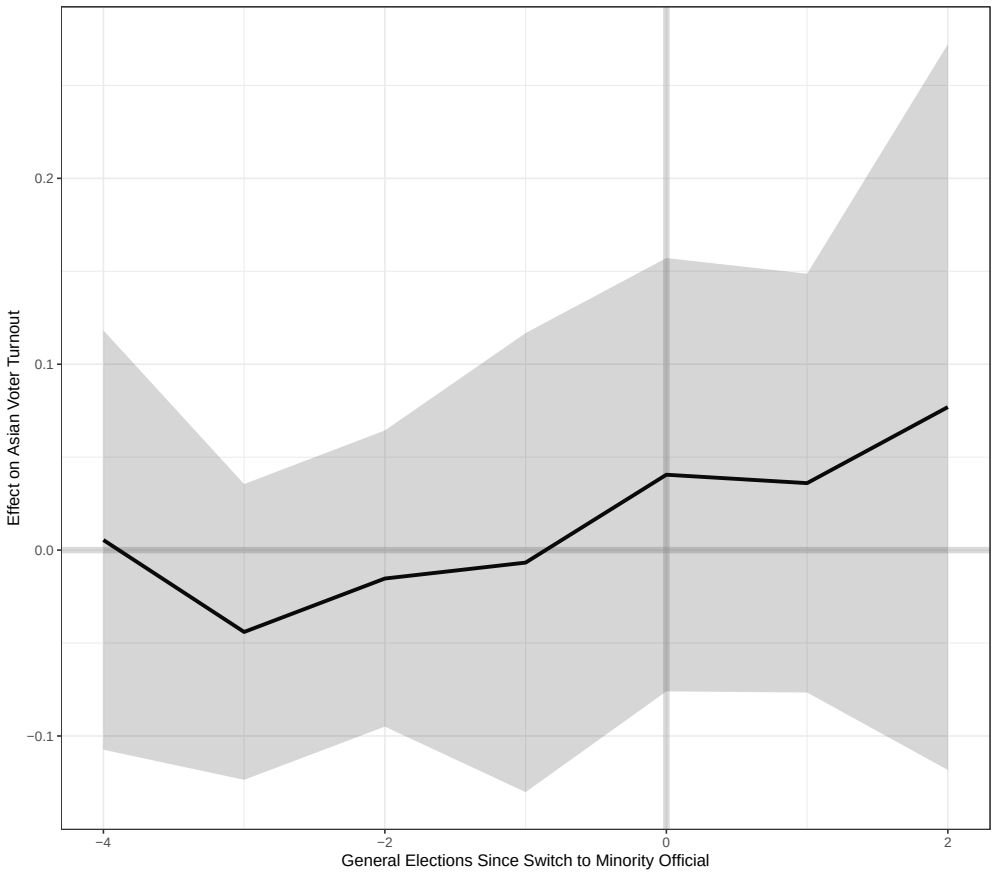


Figure A.6: **Estimated ATT of Generalized Synthetic Control - Asian Turnout**. This graph displays a generalized synthetic control method of the two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effects of minority election officials on Asian voter turnout. The specification includes two-way additive county and year fixed effects, a cross-validation procedure to select the number of unobserved factors within the interval of 0 and 2 general elections, and a parametric bootstrap procedure with 1000 samples. The black line is a dynamic estimated ATT effect of minority election officials on turnout and the band is a 95% confidence interval.



A.6 Experimental Results Technical Appendix

The 2023 UCLA REPS Lab Omnibus Survey was run by Efrén Pérez and received approval by the UCLA IRB. The survey asked a range of demographic questions about each participant before the experimental modules. Respondents were debriefed at the end of the study about the fictitious nature of the vignette description and the purpose of the experiment. Respondents received course credit for participation in the study and were notified about their right to choose not to participate or withdraw from participation at any time. This section includes the full survey instrument and additional regression analysis.

A.6.1 Survey Instrument

For Black respondents: Don Brown has been the Elections Administrator of Fayette County, Georgia for the past eight years. He is [Black/white], identifies with the Democratic Party, is 53 years of age, and has lived in Fayette County his whole life. Don supports stricter voter identification laws and expanding absentee voting opportunities for voters. In the 2020 presidential election, he was in charge of determining the eligibility of 10,000 absentee ballots received by the county, and rejected those that did not meet state requirements.

Do you trust Don Brown to fairly administer elections? 1 = Strongly distrust, 2 = distrust, 3= neither trust nor distrust, 4 = trust, 5 = strongly trust

If Don Brown was your election administrator, would you be more or less likely to vote in the next presidential election? 1 = Much less likely, 2 = less likely, 3 = no difference, 4 = more likely, 5 = much more likely

For Latino respondents: [David Marin/ Davíd Marín] has been the Elections Administrator of Fayette County, Georgia for the past eight years. He is [Latino/white], identifies with the Democratic Party, is 53 years of age, and has lived in Fayette County his whole life. Don supports stricter voter identification laws and expanding absentee voting opportunities for voters. In the 2020 presidential election, he was in charge of determining the eligibility

of 10,000 absentee ballots received by the county, and rejected those that did not meet state requirements.

Do you trust [David Marin/ Davíd Marín] to fairly administer elections? 1 = Strongly distrust, 2 = distrust, 3= neither trust nor distrust, 4 = trust, 5 = strongly trust

If [David Marin/ Davíd Marín] was your election administrator, would you be more or less likely to vote in the next presidential election? 1 = Much less likely, 2 = less likely, 3 = no difference, 4 = more likely, 5 = much more likely

For Asian respondents: Eric Lee has been the Elections Administrator of Fayette County, Georgia for the past eight years. He is [Asian/white], identifies with the Democratic Party, is 53 years of age, and has lived in Fayette County his whole life. Don supports stricter voter identification laws and expanding absentee voting opportunities for voters. In the 2020 presidential election, he was in charge of determining the eligibility of 10,000 absentee ballots received by the county, and rejected those that did not meet state requirements.

Do you trust Eric Lee to fairly administer elections? 1 = Strongly distrust, 2 = distrust, 3= neither trust nor distrust, 4 = trust, 5 = strongly trust

If Eric Lee was your election administrator, would you be more or less likely to vote in the next presidential election? 1 = Much less likely, 2 = less likely, 3 = no difference, 4 = more likely, 5 = much more likely

A.6.2 Additional Experimental Analysis

Table A.9 displays difference-in-means regressions similar to those displayed in the main analysis, although rather than pooled across race/ethnicity a separate regression is run for Black, Latino, and Asian respondents. The results are noisier due to the small sample sizes, though they provide a similar overall picture of modest positive effects due to descriptive representation.

Table A.9: Experiment: Coethinic Local Election Officials Boost Voter Confidence and Participation Willingness

	Trust Official			Likelier to Vote		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Coethnic LEO	0.151	0.322^{*}	0.118	-0.151	0.554^{***}	0.529
	(0.163)	(0.169)	(0.343)	(0.139)	(0.119)	(0.320)
Constant	2.925^{***}	2.957^{***}	2.706^{***}	3.038^{***}	2.702^{***}	2.588^{***}
	(0.115)	(0.117)	(0.243)	(0.098)	(0.082)	(0.226)
Race	Latino	Asian	Black	Latino	Asian	Black
Observations	106	90	34	106	90	34