

Crossover Appeal

According to Janie Boschma at the National Journal, there's a stark contrast in Congress when it comes to white and minority Representatives. Districts in which whites constitute most of the population are much less likely to elect a minority legislator; when racial minorities are the majority in a district, it is more probable that a minority will represent that district. This is especially apparent when the numbers reveal that minority lawmakers hold only 15 of the 318 districts where whites represent a majority of the population, while white Representatives command 44 of 117 House seats in which minorities comprise the majority of the population (Boschma 1). The author posits 4 theories (T1-T4) as to why this occurs: 1) Minority politicians are more comfortable campaigning in districts boasting sizable minority populations 2) The incumbency advantage - most of whom are white 3) The challenges facing many minority candidates in garnering substantial numbers of white votes 4) The Republican Party has been better than Democrats at recruiting/supporting minority candidates in majority white districts by utilizing "*crossover appeal*."

I argue that 2014 voter trends have produced these results primarily due to T4 – Republicans have used crossover appeal to out strategize Democrats in mostly white districts by appealing to voters outside their demographic – and secondly due to T2, the incumbency advantage. Since this article was written in early January 2015 (after the 2014 midterm elections), the statistics have changed. For example, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) unseated 10-term incumbent Joe Crowley, who is white, by about 15 percentage points just a few districts away from where I live in New York. This is an example of the Democratic Party making grounds in a majority minority community with a quality minority candidate in

AOC, evidenced by the fact that she cruised to re-election in 2020 despite GOP attack ads aimed at making her a one-term Representative. Additionally, the other 3 members of “The Squad” – Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley – that also came into office in 2018 all won reelection in the 2020 midterms. These women of color haven’t all unseated white incumbents like AOC did in 2018, but their election victories do provide a bit of optimism for top level Democratic Party officials, who may now challenge Republicans more closely in races where minority candidates are on the ballot.

While there are 4 theories postulated, I agree with Arturo Vargas, the executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, and his central premise that the 2014 midterm elections showed that Republicans simply outperformed Democrats in majority minority communities with white candidates and mostly white districts with minority candidates by utilizing crossover appeal. According to Vargas, “The Republican Party has done a considerably better job than Democrats at recruiting and supporting minority candidates in mostly white districts... They are high quality candidates who weren’t running as Hispanics” (3). In other words, Vargas suggests that Republican election strategists were simply better than their Democratic opponents at running minority candidates who *didn’t run as Hispanics*. We live in an era of identity politics in 2020. It seems as though voters are lumped into giant groups based off their racial identity and are then fed half-truths by politicians who solely want to appease each individual group. When a Presidential campaign is in full swing, we often see both Republican and Democratic hopefuls flip-flip on major issues to placate an individual racial voter coalition. Vargas says that in the 2014 midterms, Hispanic Republicans didn’t try to play the race card, which some Americans are sick of, and instead were better than Democrats at using crossover appeal to win House seats. “They were running as strong Republicans in election

years where Republicans had big gains. You have good candidates who are running in districts that represent their values” (3). It’s important to note that in 2014, a Democrat was in office; in 2018 a Republican held the presidency. How much of these 2014 Republican gains and 2018 Democratic gains are attributable to the fact that the incumbent party typically loses seats in the midterms? It certainly has an impact, the extent of which we may never know for these particular election years. When the book is written on these elections 20 years from now, I believe these voting trends will be the direct result of T4, with help from T2, as stated below.

I also liked how the author mentioned T2 – potential minority lawmakers are disincentivized to run in districts where an establishment white politician (Diane Feinstein, Mitch McConnell, Lindsay Graham, etc.) is virtually guaranteed victory due to their incumbency advantage. “As long incumbents, most of whom today are white, can... win the trust and support of their minority communities, minority politicians often see little opening to launch a challenge” (2). Why would a minority candidate subject themselves to the onslaught of personal attacks a political campaign would bring if they know they have little to no chance of overcoming the white incumbency advantage? I’m not sure how this issue will be rectified, and I’ve heard people in classes at UNC mention that we should have a quota for minority legislators. In my opinion, that’s a slippery slope because what if the country rejects this idea? Will the federal or state governments be responsible for setting and enforcing the number of minority politicians in certain districts? The point is that I don’t know how the details would be worked out with a quota, and I don’t think anyone else does for that matter. This also can be extended to Presidential politics, where we just witnessed two octogenarian, white politicians battle it out for the Presidency. I certainly believe the time for a minority president is soon, yet we have yet to

see a minority candidate do well in practically any Presidential primary, both on the Republican and Democratic ticket.

However bleak the numbers may have appeared for Democrats in 2014, they have also successfully utilized crossover appeal. For example, former Mayor Cleaver of Kansas City and Representative Janice Hahn, both Democrats, have bucked the trend. Cleaver, a black man, went on to represent a 65.5% white congressional district. Hahn, a white woman who descends from a political dynasty, represents the least-white district of all those represented by racially white House Members and the third-most-diverse district in the nation (5). So, while a combination of T4 and T2 (with more T4) produced the 2014 midterm results, and 2018 turning out the way it did, there's still a lot of hope for the Democratic Party.