

The Unequal Representation of Latinos and Whites^{*}

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^{*} A previous version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 7-10, 2005, Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, Illinois. We thank Barry Burden, Zoltan Hajnal, Rodney Hero, Marvin Overby, Gary Segura, Jennifer Victor, and anonymous JOP reviewers for helpful comments. Darlene Luebbert provided excellent research assistance. We thank The University of Notre Dame Office of Research and the Pepperdine University Provost's Office for their support of this project.

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Abstract

We compare the ideological proximity of Latinos and whites to their Members of Congress (MCs), demonstrating the degree to which Latinos are underrepresented compared to whites. We show how this representation gap varies with group differences in electoral turnout and income, district ethnic composition, and MCs' ethnicity and party affiliation. We find that Latinos' unequal representation is not simply a function of the group's numerical minority status. Concentrating Latinos in congressional districts does not necessarily translate into more equal representation. However, several factors can enhance the equality of Latinos' representation -- participation in elections and representation by both Latinos and Democrats.

The U.S. prizes political equality, yet its citizens may not be equally represented in government action. As Sidney Verba (2003, 663) put it, “the equal consideration of the preferences and interests of all citizens” is “one of the bedrock principles in a democracy.” However, commentators have documented the many, often unique obstacles to political equality Latinos as a group confront, such as their numerical minority status in most electoral districts, their linguistic and citizenship barriers (de la Garza 2004), their generally lower rates of political participation and engagement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), the infrequency with which political parties have targeted them for mobilization (something that is changing) (Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000; Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001), and dilution of their voting strength based on districting and electoral rules (Pachon and Desipio 1992; Lublin 1997), to name just a few. This state of affairs has led observers to comment that there is “little or no direct or indirect substantive representation of Latinos” (Hero and Tolbert 1995, 648).

We ask two questions here. First, to what extent are whites’ preferences better represented than Latinos’ preferences in congressional roll call voting? Second, how do electoral turnout, district racial composition, descriptive representation, and legislator party affiliation affect the relative representation of these groups? Answering these questions tells us much about the state of representation in contemporary American politics, pointing to potential avenues for equalizing the representation of ethnic groups. We observe, first, that white constituents’ preferences are much “closer” ideologically to their MCs’ behavior than are Latinos’ preferences. Second, we find that Latinos’ relative proximity to their MCs does not increase linearly in electoral districts as they comprise a larger share of the population. In fact, in districts where Latinos comprise a significant but non-majority portion of the population, MCs vote *much* closer to their white constituents’ preferences than those of their Latino constituents. Moreover,

it is in these districts that descriptive representation yields substantial proximity gains for Latinos. Finally, turnout, higher incomes, and representation by Democrats put Latinos on more equal footing with whites.

Our analysis offers three novel contributions. First, we focus explicitly on questions of *equal* representation. Most studies of minority representation focus on the representation of one particular group in isolation from other groups. For example, studies examine the impact legislators' race has on their representation of African American constituents, comparing African Americans represented by white MCs to African Americans represented by African American MCs (e.g., Lublin 1997; Canon 1999; Tate 2003). Other studies assess how the concentration of minorities in electoral districts shapes various political outcomes, like public policies (e.g., Radcliff and Saiz 1995), Democrats' and minorities' electoral success (e.g., Grofman, Griffin, and Glazer 1992; Guinier 1994), and legislators' activities in office, typically their roll call behavior (e.g., Whitby 1997; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Lublin 1997; Canon 1999). These studies essentially examine the circumstances under which racial or ethnic minorities are better, rather than equally, represented.

Moreover, we usually cannot infer the unequal representation of minorities from these works. For example, we know that Latino MCs tend to vote more liberally than Democratic, non-Latino white MCs (e.g., Lublin 1997), but this does not definitively tell us whether Latino MCs tend to represent their Latino constituents more than their white constituents for two reasons. First, Latinos are not a monolithic political community (e.g., de la Garza, et al. 1992; Leal 2002), so more liberal MCs may not be more representative of their Latino constituents. Indeed, as we show below, Latinos who are represented by Latinos are ideologically more *conservative* on average than Latinos represented by non-Latino whites. Second, we will show

that whites in districts represented by a Latino MC are somewhat more liberal than whites in other districts, perhaps because Latino MCs tend to hail from more urban districts. Therefore, liberal Latino MCs may be acting in ways more in line with their liberal white constituents' preferences than their more moderate Latino constituents' preferences. The point is, we do not know whether descriptive representation improves the representation of descriptively represented groups *relative to* the dominant group when these groups disagree.

We shift the analysis more explicitly toward the concept of political equality by asking the extent to which whites are better represented than Latinos, an often asserted but less often documented claim (e.g., Hajnal, Gerber, and Louch 2002). This is significant because minorities appear to care about outcomes both in an absolute sense and in relation to whites, and because political equality is an important touchstone in a democracy (Dahl 1956). On the first point, the NAACP's chief objective, according to its mission statement, is to ensure "the political, educational, social and economic equality of all citizens."¹ This clearly emphasizes citizens' relative standing. In addition, experimental results of the "ultimatum game" -- in which one participant proposes a division of money and a second participant either accepts the proposal or rejects it in which case neither participant receives anything -- suggest that African Americans tend to prefer outcomes that are equal across races to outcomes that are unequal, even when the latter may produce a higher absolute payoff to both players (Eckel and Grossman 2001). This difference is likely to extend to Latinos. Finally, every two years from 1984 to 2000 (except 1998) the American National Election Studies have asked Americans whether they agreed with the statement, "The country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are." Over this period, fully 52% of whites agreed somewhat or strongly with this statement, while just

¹ See <http://www.naacp.org/about/mission/>.

46% of Latinos and 38% of African Americans did so. All of this evidence points to a special concern with equality among racial and ethnic minorities.

Second, we build on the efforts of others who examine Latino representation (e.g., Welch and Hibbing 1984; Hero and Tolbert 1995; Kerr and Miller 1997; Espino 2004). Most work on race and representation examines the representation of African Americans (e.g., Swain 1993; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997; Canon 1999; Tate 2003). It is essential to study whether the patterns of minority representation found in the African American context extend to the Latino context, especially since Latinos are now the nation's largest and fastest-growing minority group.

Third, we contribute to the longstanding study of political equality by focusing on the equality of government actions.² Such a focus is relatively novel. As Sidney Verba observed, “[T]he literature on the receipt of messages and the [equal] response to them is not as well developed as that on the [equality of the] messages sent” (2003, 666). Although some studies have asked whether government policies tend to reflect the preferences of the wealthy, whites, and business interests (Hill and Leighley 1992; Hero 1998; Hajnal, Gerber, and Louch 2002), research has much less often investigated whether the decisions of individual government actors respond more to some groups than others. This leaves a black box in our understanding of how some citizens become privileged in the policy process. Those studies that have focused on the decisions and attitudes of individual government actors have tended to compare the representation of income, rather than racial groups (Bartels 2007). This leaves unexamined the effect of race and ethnicity on relative representation.

² By this we mean roll call votes, not ultimately policy outcomes. We explore policy outcomes elsewhere (Griffin and Newman forthcoming)

Reasons to Expect Unequal Representation

Several factors may affect the equality of Latinos' representation relative to whites. Discussing them will highlight our expectation that Latinos will be unequally represented, and identify a series of factors that should alter the extent of Latino underrepresentation. First, the link between political activity and representation suggests that Latinos' preferences are represented worse than whites'. For a variety of reasons identified in the representation literature, voters' preferences tend to be better represented than those of nonvoters (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Bartels 1998; Griffin and Newman 2005), and Latinos vote at considerably lower rates than whites (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For example, according to data from the Census Bureau, reported turnout among non-Latino whites in the 2004 election was 65.4%, while just 47.2% of Latinos reported voting. Thus, relative political participation rates lead to an expectation that Latinos are not equally represented.

Latinos may also be underrepresented because they tend to earn lower incomes. Recent research (e.g., Bartels 2007; Gilens 2005) finds that those earning higher incomes are better represented than lower income earners, highlighting long-standing concerns that citizens with greater economic resources tend to be better represented (e.g., Dahl 1961; Schattschneider 1960; Jacobs and Page 2005). According to 2003 Census data, Latino households earned a median income of \$33,000, just 69% of the median income for non-Latino white households (\$48,000). So, income differences between whites and Latinos also lead us to anticipate group differences in representation.

A third factor that may affect Latinos' relative representation is the size of the Latino population in congressional districts. On average, Latinos make up just 13% of congressional district populations. In general, we would expect larger groups in a constituency to attract more

of an MC's attention and exert greater influence on an MC's voting decisions than smaller groups (Fiorina 1974). Given Latinos' minority status in most congressional districts and whites' majority status in most districts, simple numbers might lead us to expect Latinos generally to be worse off. At first blush, we might also expect Latinos to be better represented where the group comprises more and more of a district's population. However, some prior studies show evidence of "white backlash" where the minority proportion of an electoral district is greater (e.g., Key 1949; Blalock 1967; Bullock and Rodgers 1976; Giles and Buckner 1993; but see Lublin 1997). Whites tend both to be more conservative and to be politically mobilized where minority populations comprise a considerable size – around 40% of the district. Such districts have come to be known as "threat" or "influence" districts (Lublin 1997). This suggests that even where Latino populations are larger, MCs may not be more representative of Latinos, but may actually represent Latinos in such districts worse.

The preponderance of Latinos represented by non-Latino MCs is a fourth factor likely to affect Latinos' relative representation. Only about one-fifth of the Latinos in the U.S. are represented by a Latino MC.³ To be sure, the scholarly literature examining the consequences of descriptive representation has generated a mixed record. Some argue that white officials can represent racial/ethnic minorities just as well as African American and Latino officials can (Swain 1993). In this view, MCs' electoral incentives to be accountable to their constituents obtain regardless of the officials' race or ethnicity. However, others claim that minority MCs' roll call votes better reflect their minority constituents' preferences (e.g., Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997; Canon 1999). Furthermore, descriptive representation is likely to enhance substantive representation by, among other things, changing the nature of deliberation (Mansbridge 1999), altering the legislative agenda (Canon 1999), engaging minorities in the political process (Gay

³ About 1% of the nation's non-Latino whites are represented by a Latino MC.

2002; Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004; Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 2004), decreasing political alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003), and placing in office representatives who may be more likely to share the preferences of these groups (Tate 2003).

Finally, MCs' party affiliations may alter Latinos' representation. MC party affiliation accounts for a large portion of the variation in roll call voting, making it an obvious factor to examine (Espino 2004). In particular, party affiliation is closely tied to minority representation. The Democratic Party has long been the home of racial minority groups (e.g., Carmines and Stimson 1989). Although this may be more true for African Americans than Latinos, we might expect that Democratic MCs would be closer to their Latino constituents than are Republican MCs. This could be the result of at least two factors. First, candidates and office holders who identify with the Democratic Party may simply hold policy views more in line with Latinos' views. Although there are obviously exceptions, Democratic MCs tend to be more liberal, as do Latino constituents. Second, Democratic candidates often rely on minority votes as critical elements of their voting coalition (Canon 1999). As a result, they may work especially hard to act in accordance with the preferences of their minority constituents (Bullock and Brady 1983).

Measuring Proximity to MCs

To gauge the extent of (in)equality in governmental outputs, we rely on an established measure of dyadic representation, what Achen (1978) calls the *proximity* between legislators and constituents to assess an elected officials' level of representation (see also Miller 1964; Powell 1982; Wright 1978; Griffin and Flavin 2007).⁴ We adopt this approach, asking whether, on

⁴ Following the lead of Miller and Stokes (1963), many works examine the extent to which representatives' roll call votes relate to some summary statistic of their district's characteristics, like its mean opinion or some proxy thereof (e.g., Bullock and Brady 1983; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). This approach, which Achen (1978) termed "responsiveness," estimates the extent to which liberal

average, individual Latinos are ideologically “closer to” or “farther from” their MCs than are white constituents. This will tell us whether one group’s “ideological view is . . . given special treatment” (Achen 1978, 488). We do so by examining House members’ roll call voting behavior in the 107th Congress (2001-2002), in light of Latinos’ and whites’ preferences as measured in the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). We relate Latinos’ and whites’ preferences to their legislator’s decisions, measuring each group’s ideological “proximity” to their MCs. This will reveal the extent to which Latinos are “farther” than whites from their MCs. This proximity also is important in its own right because the extent of opinion correspondence between constituents and MCs influences constituents’ evaluations of MCs’ performance (Wright 1978; Powell 1989).

However, measures of proximity raise an important methodological challenge: they require indicators of constituent preferences and MC behavior that are on the same scale. The lack of a common scale for legislators and their constituents has confounded legislative scholars for decades (Miller 1964; Achen 1978; Wright 1978; Powell 1982; Burden 2004). For example, there are plenty of survey measures of constituents’ preferences on a 5- or 7-point scale, but most measures of MC behavior consist of some type of roll call score on a -1 to 1 or 0 to 100 scale. The earliest approach to resolving this scaling problem, and one still advocated today, was simply to transform the scales measuring MCs’ decisions and constituents’ attitudes to the same

legislators represent liberal constituencies and conservative legislators represent conservative constituencies. This technique theoretically could be adopted to study of representation among groups within districts (e.g., Bartels 2007). As a practical matter, though, the data requirements for this framework are difficult to meet when studying populations as small as congressional districts, and even more so when studying groups *within* districts. Predictably, these small samples provide unreliable estimates of district-level Latino preferences. Therefore, we cannot adopt this common design. Even if we were able to conduct a study of responsiveness, examining proximity (as we do) is in some respects preferable. As Powell (1982, 663) pointed out, using the responsiveness approach “one could find a perfect correlation even if liberal districts elected Democrats consistently to the left of the citizen mean and conservative districts elected Republicans consistently to the right of the citizen mean.” Thus, both responsiveness and proximity are important aspects of representation.

range (Miller 1964; Achen 1978; Burden 2004). Another tack was to transform MCs' decisions to a somewhat narrower range than the opinions of constituents since few ideologically extreme legislators are elected (Powell 1982, 1989).⁵ Yet another method was to standardize both measures in various ways (Wright 1978). Each of these approaches has been subject to criticism of one form or another.⁶ Rather than adjudicating among these measures, we use as many of them as possible in our analysis to increase our confidence in the results.

One advantage to our focus on relative representation is that it eases the burdens of measurement. We recognize that these measures are somewhat flawed. However, they are likely *equally* flawed across ethnic groups. Therefore, if we observe, for example, that the *relative* distance between Latinos and their MC shrinks when the group is represented by a Latino compared to when the group is represented by a white MC, we can be fairly confident that Latinos really have made a relative representation gain.⁷

⁵ More precisely, Powell used "knowledgeable" contributors' placements of incumbents to map legislators' interest group scores onto an ideological scale (1989). The result of this mapping was that legislators ranged from 2.0 to 6.1 on the 1 to 7 scale (278).

⁶ For instance, Powell (1982, 663) questioned the underlying assumption of many of these measures that the means and variances of incumbents' and citizens' positions are equal.

⁷ One concern is that the ideology measure may have greater error for Latinos since many members of this group tend to be economically liberal, but socially conservative. If Latinos' ideology is measured with greater error, they may appear farther from their MCs than they really are. However, it seems unlikely that there is greater error in the ideology measure for Latinos *only* when, for example, they reside in majority-white districts and when they are not descriptively represented. Therefore, if we find that concentrating Latinos in majority-Latino districts and descriptive representation promote Latino representation, greater error in the measure of Latinos' opinions would need to be specific to district racial composition and MC ethnicity to generate misleading inferences. In addition, to be sure the ideology item is not driving our results, we investigated whether measuring policy preferences differently affected our findings. Analyses of a NAES item which probed whether respondents believed that the amount Americans pay in taxes is a serious problem generated similar results to those we report below.

Data and Specific Operationalization

As a measure of MCs' aggregate voting behavior, we use their first dimension W-NOMINATE coordinates for the 107th Congress. These scores range continuously from -1 to +1 with higher scores more conservative (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997). These coordinates are usually interpreted as measuring MCs' spatial location on a left-right ideological continuum, given their revealed preferences. Studies of congressional roll call voting have employed various types of NOMINATE scores as a dependent variable (e.g., Jenkins 1999; Bartels 2007; Griffin and Newman 2005). We obtained the ethnicity of MCs from the Library of Congress.⁸

For measures of citizen opinion and ethnicity, we use the 2000 NAES⁹ 5-point ideological orientation self-placement item ("very liberal" to "very conservative").¹⁰ In doing so, we are able to leverage the information of more than 57,000 respondents, including more than 5,000 Latinos, drawn in a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) sample of the national adult population with telephone service.¹¹ When compared to Census data, the NAES generated a sample that appears to be quite representative.¹²

⁸ In 1995, the Government Printing Office directed the preparation of *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822-1995*, prepared by the Library of Congress. The Library maintains an updated list of Latino MCs at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/congress/>.

⁹ Our data are a combination of the NAES national cross-section data obtained between December 1999 and January 2001, the Super Tuesday cross-section, and the Second Tuesday cross-section, for a total of 57,197 respondents (Romer et al. 2004).

¹⁰ The NAES asked respondents, "Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?" Respondent race is based on the question "What is your race? White, Black, Asian, or some other race?" Then, "Are you of Spanish or Hispanic origin or descent?" Respondents who answered the second item affirmatively were coded as Latino regardless of how they responded to the first item.

¹¹ In survey data generated by telephone, response rates are of some concern. According to Romer et al. (2004, 15) "Response rates for the NAES were comparable to those obtained by most contemporary telephone surveys in both the cooperation rate – the proportion of respondents who agreed to participate in the survey once they had been successfully reached by an interviewer [53%] – and the overall response

Our measures of proximity compare constituents' ideology and their MC's W-NOMINATE score, mapping each NAES respondent's attitudes onto their MC's decisions by the respondent's congressional district. For each distance measure, we calculate relative proximity across ethnic groups by measuring the absolute distance between MCs' decisions and each of their NAES constituents. Since these measures do not specify causal direction, and MCs' voting behavior can influence constituency opinion (e.g., Hill and Hurley 1999; Hurley and Hill 2003), we try to limit the possibility of reciprocal effects by utilizing W-NOMINATE scores from the 107th Congress, which immediately followed the NAES. We return to this issue below.

For our first measure of proximity, following Miller (1964), Achen (1978), and Burden (2004) (hereinafter *MAB*) we rescaled the W-NOMINATE scores to match the 1 – 5 range of the NAES ideology item.¹³ Next, like Powell (1982), we rescaled the roll call scores to a similarly narrow range.¹⁴ Finally, as in Wright (1978), we standardized the W-NOMINATE scores and the NAES ideology item. Specifically, we use the mean and variance of strong partisans' ideologies to standardize the distribution of all respondents, while standardizing the distribution of legislators to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.¹⁵

rate, which accounts for both refusals and those potential participants interviewers were unable to contact despite repeated attempts [31%].”

¹² We compared the demographics of the NAES data to state demographics in the 2000 U.S. Census. The Latino proportion state populations in the NAES and in the Census correlate at .98. State median income correlates with the NAES income self-placement scale at a .85 level. The percentage of urban residents and college graduates in states in the NAES and the Census correlate at .88 and .87, respectively.

¹³ We convert NOMINATE scores to the range of the ideological scale as follows: $\text{NOMINATE} * 2 + 3$.

¹⁴ The formula we use to place narrowed NOMINATE scores to the ideological self-placement scale is $\text{NOMINATE} * 1.5 + 3$. This narrows the scale 14% on each end. When Powell narrowed the scale for legislators it was reduced by 10% on each end.

¹⁵ Wright (1978, 450) argued that strong partisans' preferences should be used to standardize all citizens' preferences when they are to be compared with the actions of legislators because the distribution of opinion among strong partisans more closely approximated the distribution of legislators.

Results

For one group to be better represented than another, the groups must hold different preferences about government action.¹⁶ There is little doubt that as groups Latinos and whites hold different political preferences (e.g., de la Garza et al. 1992). One recent study concluded that there appear to be “more differences than similarities in the opinions of Anglos and Latinos” (Leal 2002, 33). In terms of ideological outlook, the NAES data show that whites were more conservative on average than Latinos (see Table 1). While some may view these differences as substantively underwhelming, we simply note that smaller differences in preferences will make it more difficult for us to uncover ethnic differences in representation.

[Table 1 about here]

It is important to note that “Latino opinion” is something of a misnomer because the Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latino populations that comprise this group often differ markedly in their attitudes (e.g., De la Garza et al. 1992; Leal 2002). Our data are not especially well designed to examine such differences simply because the sample includes relatively few respondents from some of the groups.¹⁷ We will say more about this below.

Describing Latinos’ Relative Representation

Next, we ask whether non-Latino MCs’ decisions are systematically closer to the preferences of their white constituents than their Latino constituents. Figure 1 reports the

¹⁶ Otherwise, representation of one group’s preferences effectively represents the other group’s preferences, and we also cannot know which group, if just one, is being represented.

¹⁷ The NAES sample includes 2,739 respondents of Mexican origin, 647 respondents of Puerto Rican origin, and 191 respondents of Cuban origin. In each cases, country of origin is self-identified.

difference between the average distance of Latinos' and whites' ideologies from their MCs' W-NOMINATE scores when Latinos are not represented by Latinos. A positive difference in the Figure indicates that Latinos are farther on average from their MCs than are whites. For example, using the MAB measure of distance, whites are .981 points away from their white MCs on average, while Latinos are 1.061 points away from white MCs on average. Subtracting these distances shows that Latinos are .080 points farther from their white MCs, which is the distance graphed in the first white column in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

When whites and Latinos are represented by whites, all three measures find Latinos farther on average from their MCs ($p < .01$, see Figure 1, white columns). At least in the bivariate context, this pattern is even starker in districts represented by African Americans (see black columns). This pattern points to the potential for tensions among African Americans and Latinos represented by African Americans (McClain and Karnig 1990; Kaufmann 2003). However, we will see below that in a multivariate context Latinos' relative representation does not necessarily suffer when they are represented by African American as opposed to white MCs.¹⁸

One way to illustrate the substantive importance of these differences is to compare them to differences in proximity among other politically relevant groups. For instance, many have claimed that political outcomes are influenced more by the preferences of the wealthy than by other income groups (Bartels 2007; Gilens 2005). We compared the average proximity of citizens whose household incomes were less than or equal to \$25,000 to those whose incomes

¹⁸ It may be that Latinos are underrepresented simply because they are less often represented by MCs who share their partisanship. However, even among those respondents who share party affiliation with their members, Latinos are significantly farther than whites from their MCs. In addition, if we limit the analysis to freshmen MCs, limiting the impact MCs' roll call votes on constituents' preferences, we continue to see Latinos farther than whites from MCs. See additional analyses at www.journalofpolitics.org.

were equal to or greater than \$75,000.¹⁹ We do so using the Wright measure, which we use in all the remaining analyses to avoid presenting three sets of analyses at every step. We note, however, that our results do not depend on the specific choice of measure (see additional analyses at www.journalofpolitics.org). As Figure 2 shows, lower income constituents are about .07 points farther from their MCs than higher income constituents. However, the white/Latino difference in proximity (.10) exceeds this income difference in proximity. Indeed, the difference in proximity between whites and Latinos was greater than any of the other proximity gaps we examined based on gender, education, age, and even race (African Americans/whites).

[Figure 2 about here]

In light of the diversity of Latino opinion by national origin and (relatedly) by region, we also examined the relative representation of Latino subgroups, finding some important variation. Latinos of Puerto Rican and especially Mexican origin are substantially farther than whites from their MCs (.04 and .13 points farther, respectively).²⁰ In contrast, Latinos of Cuban descent are actually .16 points closer than whites on average, though we hesitate to draw inferences based on the small Cuban sample. To the extent that this finding holds, we suspect that this is attributable to the rather homogenous ideological conservatism of Cuban-Americans, a group that is usually represented by Republicans. Regionally, Latinos in the Pacific Coast and Mountain states and Latinos in the Southeast and South Central states show the largest proximity gap compared to whites (.09 and .10 respectively), while the gap is somewhat smaller in the Northeast (.06).

Variation in Latinos' Relative Representation

¹⁹ Coincidentally, these cutoffs are close to the cutoffs for the 25th and 75th percentiles of the distribution.

²⁰ When we control for turnout, income, whether a district is a threat district, and MC ethnicity and party affiliation, the only substantial change in the results is that Latinos of Puerto Rican origin are no longer significantly further than whites from their MCs. See analyses at www.journalofpolitics.org.

To unpack the general finding that whites are better represented than Latinos, we move to a regression framework in which each respondent's proximity from their MC serves as the dependent variable (again we present results using the Wright measure). First, we simply model proximity as a function of whether the respondent is a Latino (see Table 2, column 1). We estimate this model only among respondents who reported voting or not voting and who reported their household income because we eventually control for turnout and income and want to trace the magnitude of the estimate for the Latino indicator across comparable samples.²¹ We only include white and Latino constituents in these models, so a positive Latino indicator measures Latinos' greater distance from their MCs compared to whites' distance. The significant and positive coefficient for the Latino indicator extends what we already know from Figure 1—Latino constituents are farther than whites from not just non-Latino MCs, but all MCs.

[Table 2 about here]

We then add reported turnout to the model (see column 2). As expected, turnout generally brings representation gains, with voters about .07 points closer than non-voters to their MCs (see Griffin and Newman 2005). More importantly for our purposes, controlling for turnout reduces the proximity gap between whites and Latinos by about a quarter, from .074 to .055. Thus, group differences in turnout appear to account for some of the differences in representation.

²¹ Turnout is based on reported participation in the 1996 presidential election. We opted for this item rather than reported turnout in 2000 because more than twice as many NAES respondents (58% of the sample) were asked whether they voted in 1996, compared to whether they voted in 2000. The two samples (all NAES respondents versus those asked and responding to the turnout and income items) were quite similar. The partisanship and educational attainment of the two groups were statistically indistinguishable. The group that was asked the turnout question was slightly more African American, slightly younger, and slightly more male than the group that was not asked.

Then we add household income to the model (see column 3). Income's statistically and substantively significant negative effect confirms what others have shown using other approaches – citizens earning higher incomes are better represented (e.g. Bartels 2007; Gilens 2005). Most important for our purposes, controlling for income further attenuates the proximity difference between whites and Latinos, but only very slightly, from .055 to .049. Thus, income differences between the groups do not fully account for the representation gap. Both ethnicity and income are related to representation.

Before we account for district racial composition, recall that some have found evidence of “white backlash” against minorities as minority populations increase in size. This would induce a non-linear relationship between district racial composition and minority representation. Figure 3 plots the proximity of whites and Latinos to their MCs for districts with different percentages of Latino constituents. At the far left of the Figure, we see that in districts with non-Latino MCs and that are also less than 12% Latino (the national mean for congressional districts), non-Latino white constituents (denoted by the diamond markers in the Figure) are about .094 points closer to their MCs than are Latinos (square markers). Remember from Figure 2 that such a gap exceeds other prominent representation gaps in American politics. Both groups are a bit farther from their MCs in districts composed of between 12-25% Latinos, but the proximity gap between Latino and white constituents shrinks slightly (.079). Both groups are closer to their MCs in districts composed of 25-40% Latinos, such that Latinos in these districts are closer to their MCs than are Latino constituents in districts with very few Latinos. Latinos make gains relative to whites in these districts as well, as the proximity gap shrinks to .042, a gap slightly smaller than that between high and low income groups.

By far the most impressive point in the figure arises in districts that are between 40-50% Latino. Latinos are *much* farther from their MCs in absolute terms and the proximity gap spikes to .38 points in these districts. This gap dwarfs all other gaps represented in Figure 2. We interpret this evidence as consistent with the “white backlash” hypothesis. Moreover, this appears to us evidence that the greater distance between Latino constituents and their MCs as compared to white constituents is not simply a function of Latinos’ numerical minority status. When the Latino population rises to 40 – 50 percent of the constituency, Latinos are less well represented.²² Finally, although white backlash is the starkest effect in the figure, there is also evidence that in majority Latino districts, Latinos’ relative proximity substantially improves such that Latino and white constituents are equally proximate to their MCs.²³

We will return to majority Latino districts below, but for now we focus on “threat districts” made up of 40 to 50 percent Latinos. To demonstrate Latinos’ greater relative distance from MCs in these districts, we added an indicator for threat districts and an interaction between Latino respondents and residence in a threat district to our model (see Table 2, column 4). The positive and statistically significant interaction demonstrates that even in a multivariate context, residence in a threat district translates into substantial proximity losses. In this model, all Latinos are now only .034 points farther from their MCs than are whites, but Latinos living in threat districts are an additional .235 points farther from whites who live in the same districts.

[Figure 3 about here]

²² This general pattern holds when we look only at Democrat MCs or Republican MCs. For both groups, the greatest proximity difference occurs in districts with between 40 and 50 percent Latinos. Thus, the “backlash” we observe seems to occur in both parties.

²³ This result mirrors Espino’s (2004) finding that MC support for Latino interests first decreases as the percentage of Latinos in the district increases, then increases at higher levels of Latino population.

Testing whether descriptive representation brings gains in substantive representation involves another interaction term. The model in Table 2, column 5 includes an indicator for Latino MCs and an interaction between Latino MC and Latino respondent. The negative parameter estimate for this interaction variable indicates that descriptive representation is associated with a significant decrease in the distance between Latinos and their MCs at a .08 significance level (two-tailed test). All else equal, descriptively represented Latinos are .093 points closer to their MC compared to non-descriptively represented Latinos. When combining the coefficients for Latino constituents and the benefit from descriptive representation, we see that, after accounting for turnout, income, and threat districts, descriptive representation appears to turn the tables on whites, as Latinos in these districts are actually closer than whites to their MCs (.047 - .093).²⁴ All else equal, whites represented by Latino MCs are about .045 points farther than Latinos from their MCs.²⁵

We also included an interaction between Latino constituents and African American MCs to test whether African American MCs alter the proximity gap. These results suggest that the descriptive finding above that African American MCs represent whites much better than Latinos is not supported in a multivariate setting. However, we point out that while Latinos do not

²⁴ To determine the joint significance of the difference in the Latino indicator coefficient and the Latino/Latino MC interaction coefficient, we first created four indicators of whether an individual was a Latino represented by a non-Latino MC, a Latino represented by a Latino MC, a non-Latino represented by a non-Latino MC, or a non-Latino represented by a Latino MC. We then regressed the Wright distance measure on the indicators, excluding the Latino, non-Latino MC indicator for comparative purposes. The estimate of the Latino, Latino MC indicator was negative (-.056) and statistically significant ($p=.04$), indicating that descriptively represented Latinos are significantly closer to their MCs than non-descriptively represented Latinos.

²⁵ This gap is roughly one-third the size of the gap in districts represented by whites (see Figure 1). We note two potential reasons why whites represented by Latino MCs are not underrepresented to the same extent as Latinos represented by white MCs. First, in many districts represented by white MCs, Latinos comprise a small portion of the electorate, while whites comprise a large portion of the constituency even in majority minority districts. Second, white constituents in districts represented by Latino MCs tend to be more liberal than whites in other districts (see below), so they will be closer to the typically more liberal Latino MCs than, for example, liberal Latino constituents represented by white Republican MCs.

clearly lose ground on whites when represented by African Americans, compared to when both groups are represented by whites, it is significant that African American MCs appear not to improve the relative representation of Latinos.

Finally, we can see whether Democrats represent Latino preferences better by including an indicator for Republican MCs and an interaction between Republican MCs and Latino constituents. Doing so is important for understanding the effects of descriptive representation. Because 16 of the 19 Latino MCs in the 107th House were Democrats, descriptive representation is to some degree a proxy for representation by a Democrat MC. As column 6 shows, the Republican MC*Latino constituent interaction is statistically significant and positive, indicating that Latinos represented by Republicans are farther from their MCs than are Latinos represented by Democrats. In addition, controlling for MC partisanship attenuates the effect of descriptive representation. It appears that much of the effect of descriptive representation across all districts is a party effect. The estimate of the Latino MC*Latino constituent interaction decreases from -0.093 to -0.061, pushing the p-value to .28 (two-tailed test). Finally, accounting for MC party affiliation drives the estimate for the Latino indicator to zero, suggesting that we have identified the chief factors leading to Latinos' unequal representation.²⁶

²⁶ To further explore a number of possible relationships, we estimated a number of additional models. First, we note that MC party affiliation alone does not completely account for the representation gap observed in Table 2 column 1. When controlling for MC party affiliation and the Latino interaction with MC party in Table 2 column 1, the estimate of the Latino indicator remains positive (.049) and statistically significant ($p=.02$, two-tailed test). Second, we recognize that the percentage of Latinos in a district does not capture the entire racial context in some districts. For example, a district with 20% Latinos, 40% African Americans, and 40% whites may have a very different set of political forces than a district with 20% Latinos and 80% whites. To better gauge the multi-racial nature of districts, we added a control for the percentage of each district composed of African Americans. With this additional control, the estimates for the model in Table 2 column 6 are virtually unchanged. Finally, one point where the heterogeneity of Latino opinion might influence our results relates to the impact of MC party. While Republican MCs may be farther from liberal Latinos, they may actually represent the more conservative Cuban American population quite well. Thus, for Cuban Americans, we might expect the Latino*Republican MC interaction term to be negative, while we would expect it to be positive for other Latino groups. If this is the case, our estimate of the extent to which Republicans are more distant from

A Closer Look at Descriptive Representation

Scholars have worked to understand the links between descriptive and substantive representation, while policymakers have implemented reforms to increase the number of minority representatives, mainly by drawing majority-minority and “influence” districts with at least 40% minority constituents. Given the importance of descriptive representation both to scholars and practitioners, we devote the remainder of our discussion to exploring its effects. One of the challenges in determining descriptive representation’s impact is its connections to other related variables like turnout, MC party, and district racial composition. Evaluating the way descriptive representation relates to these variables will help us understand when and how descriptive representation is consequential.

We begin by establishing a baseline estimate of descriptive representation’s effect, estimating an OLS model of distance from one’s MC including indicators for Latino constituents and constituents represented by a Latino, along with an interaction between constituent ethnicity and MC ethnicity equal to 1 if both are Latino (see Table 3). This mirrors the variables in Table 2, columns 5 and 6, but excludes other control variables (though we do limit the sample to respondents reporting whether they voted). Similar to what we saw in Table 2, the descriptive representation interaction indicates that descriptively represented Latinos are .084 points closer to their MCs, although the estimate is a bit imprecise ($p = .08$, two-tailed test). One reason that this relationship is not more precise is an interesting “mismatch” between descriptive

Latinos than whites will be attenuated. To see whether this is so, we re-estimated the model in Table 2 column 6 excluding Cuban American respondents and Cuban American MCs. This slightly increases the magnitude of the interaction term, from .09 to .10. Along similar lines, when we excluded Republican Latino MCs, the interaction term increased from .09 to .11. Thus, we conclude that the representation gap may be slightly more strongly related to partisanship for non-Cuban Latinos than is estimated in Table 2 column 6. See www.journalofpolitics.org.

representation and Latino ideology we noted above – namely that Latinos who are represented by Latinos are ideologically more conservative on average (3.18) than Latinos represented by non-Latino whites (3.08), $p=.01$, and that the mean ideology of whites represented by Latino MCs (3.16) is a little more liberal than that of whites represented by non-Latino MCs (3.20), $p=.15$.

One reason why descriptive representation may boost proximity is its impact on turnout. There is some evidence that descriptive representation boosts overall turnout among descriptively represented groups, perhaps only modestly (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001; Espino 2004; but see Griffin and Keane 2006). As we saw above, turnout is related to proximity, so if descriptive representation works to the benefit of Latinos' representation by stimulating turnout, controlling for turnout will attenuate the effect of descriptive representation. As column 2 shows, turnout is related to proximity, but controlling for it barely attenuates the relationship between descriptive representation and proximity at all.

[Table 3 about here]

Next, as mentioned above, Carol Swain (1993) claims that descriptive representation does little to advance minority groups' interests beyond electing a Democrat, a claim that has been contested (e.g., Canon 1999). One way to see whether descriptive representation adds anything beyond representation by a Democrat is to control for MCs' party affiliation. As we saw above, doing so attenuates the relationship between descriptive representation and proximity (see Table 2, columns 5 and 6). Another way to confront Swain's claim head-on is to ask whether descriptive representation boosts Latinos' relative proximity to their MC compared to representation by a non-Latino Democrat. To do this, we estimate the model only for Democratic MCs (column 3). Among those represented by Democrats, Latinos represented by Latino MCs are .052 points closer to their MC than Latinos represented by non-Latino

Democrats. However, the estimate is so imprecise that we cannot conclude that *in general* descriptive representation yields gains for Latinos beyond being represented by a Democrat.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that descriptive representation is ineffectual. As we have seen, Latinos fare worst in districts where Latinos comprise a substantial part, but not a majority of the population. Descriptive representation may have an independent impact on the equality of representation in these districts. As column 4 shows, when we examine only “threat” districts, descriptive representation is strongly related to proximity. This remains true even after we account for legislators’ party affiliations (column 5) or limit the sample to respondents who both reside in a threat district and are represented by a Democrat MC (column 6). We note, however, that these conclusions are based on relatively few districts, so caution is warranted. Finally, we examine districts where Latinos constitute a majority of the constituency to see whether descriptive representation has an impact in these districts where the proximity gap is the smallest (see column 7). The statistically insignificant result points to no additional impact of descriptive representation in these districts. Thus, it appears that descriptive representation advances Latino representation in precisely the threat districts where Latinos are worst off compared to whites.

Conclusion

In summary, most members of the House of Representatives tend to vote in ways that better reflect the political preferences of their white constituents than those of their Latino constituents. In fact, the proximity gap exceeds representation differences based on income, gender, age, education, and race. Likely to be disappointing to some observers, this is largely unsurprising given Latinos’ numerical minority status in most congressional districts. More

surprising perhaps is that Latinos remain unequally represented, and in fact are especially unequal, in districts where they comprise a substantial part (>40%) but not a majority of the population. In this sense, Latinos' relative representation declines where the size of the Latino constituency is greater. In addition, Latinos' lower turnout rates and household incomes appear to contribute to this group's unequal representation compared to whites. We also found preliminary evidence that descriptive representation tends to boost the proximity of Latinos over and above the effect of related factors such as district racial composition and legislator party affiliation in "threat" districts. These are precisely the districts where Latinos fare worst when they are not descriptively represented.

Before discussing the implications of these findings, three caveats must be noted. First, districts Latinos represent may be distinct in ways that we have not explored. If so, "mandating" more descriptive representation in other districts may not necessarily achieve equal representation in all districts. Second, we examine dyadic rather than national, "collective" representation (Weissberg 1978). Espino (2004) found MCs to be somewhat responsive to changes in the demographics in neighboring districts, tending to support Latino interests more as the Latino population in neighboring districts rises. Our research design does not account for such a phenomenon. Moreover, it may be that tinkering with the ethnic composition of electoral districts, the ethnicity of legislators, and turnout will generate representation gains for a few Latino constituents, but leads to a legislature that is overall more distant from most Latinos (e.g. Cameron, et al. 1996). These are matters for additional research. Third, our measure of ideological distance captures only one of myriad facets of representation. Other works have examined many other more nuanced aspects of representation like symbolic representation (e.g., Tate 2003) and the significance of deliberation (e.g., Mansbridge 1999). Significantly, though,

measures of policy congruence like those employed here have “become the elusive ‘holy grail’ ...in empirical studies of political representation” (Tate 2001, 625).

These caveats notwithstanding, we show that Latinos’ preferences are not represented as well as those of whites, providing empirical evidence of one aspect of political inequality in government action. To the many studies documenting inequalities in political participation—the inputs into the system—we add evidence of inequality in government actions—the system’s outputs (see, e.g., Hero 1998). Further, our analyses point to potentially fruitful means of equalizing Latino and white representation. First, boosting Latino turnout has the potential to reduce the representation gap, though we did not examine whether Latinos and whites benefit from voting to the same degree. Of course, increasing voter turnout is not easy. It would require overcoming a host of linguistic, citizenship, and other challenges. Second, electing more Latino and Democrat MCs will improve Latinos’ relative representation, at least in many instances. Unfortunately, these goals may work at cross purposes since the easiest way to elect minority MCs is by creating majority-minority districts, which can dilute the number of Democrats in surrounding districts, ultimately decreasing the number of Democrat MCs elected (e.g., Lublin 1997). Third, our results imply that racial and ethnic inequalities are not always reducible to differences in income, political activity, or to the relatively small size of racial minority groups. Boosting Latinos’ incomes and population size may not directly lead to large representation gains vis-à-vis whites. Of course, increasing Latinos’ incomes would have a host of other effects, some of which may indirectly affect the representation gap (e.g., a wealthier Latino population may vote at higher rates). In addition, increases in the Latino population eventually bring equal representation, but only once Latinos become the majority in electoral districts.

These results also advance our understanding of well established findings reported elsewhere. For example, racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to participate in elections (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), in part because minorities feel less politically efficacious than do whites. Our results provide a reason for this — Latinos' views are generally less well reflected in their representatives' actions. Unequal policy representation may depress turnout among Latinos, which will further undermine their chances for equal representation (Bartels 1998; Griffin and Newman 2005).

We close with a final note on the promise of electing minority representatives. Despite finding some benefits related to descriptive representation, our results suggest some limits to Latino gains from electing African American MCs. For Latinos, descriptive representation's benefits may require not just a minority MC, but a specific match between constituent and MC ethnicity. This issue warrants further investigation with data better suited to analyze it more directly, for it may have significant political consequences. If Latinos are no more proximate to an African American MC than they are to a non-Latino white MC, Latinos and African Americans may see each other as political competitors rather than potential allies. Because the American public continues to become more diverse as Latino, Asian American, and other minority groups increase in size, we must continue to reckon with the ways various groups interact in democratic politics.

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TABLE 1: IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS AMONG NON-LATINO WHITES
AND LATINOS, 2000

	Whites	Latinos
Mean	3.19	3.10
Standard Deviation	.93	.98
p-value	---	.001
N	49,930	5,259

p-values denote probability that the ideology of Latinos is equal to that of whites.

TABLE 2: MODELS OF IDEOLOGICAL PROXIMITY, 107TH HOUSE

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Latino	0.074** [0.016]	0.055** [0.016]	0.049** [0.016]	0.034* [0.016]	0.046* [0.018]	0.000 [0.026]
Turnout		-0.070** [0.010]	-0.064** [0.010]	-0.063** [0.010]	-0.063** [0.010]	-0.063** [0.010]
Household Income			-0.007** [0.002]	-0.007** [0.002]	-0.007** [0.002]	-0.007** [0.002]
Threat District				0.099 [0.061]	0.079 [0.062]	0.081 [0.062]
Latino * Threat District				0.235* [0.093]	0.242* [0.096]	0.246* [0.096]
Latino MC					0.023 [0.040]	0.035 [0.040]
Latino * Latino MC					-0.093 [0.056]	-0.061 [0.057]
African American MC					0.063* [0.025]	0.078** [0.025]
Latino * African American MC					-0.005 [0.065]	0.039 [0.067]
Republican MC						0.029** [0.010]
Latino * Republican MC						0.087** [0.034]
Constant	1.070** [0.005]	1.122** [0.009]	1.154** [0.014]	1.152** [0.014]	1.150** [0.014]	1.132** [0.015]
N	30,329	30,329	30,329	30,329	30,329	30,329

** denotes $p < .01$; * denotes $p < .05$, two-tailed test. Standard errors in brackets.

TABLE 3: THE ROBUSTNESS OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION'S EFFECT

<i>Sample</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Democrat MC</i>	<i>Threat District</i>	<i>Threat District</i>	<i>Dem. MC/Threat District</i>	<i>Dem. MC/ Majority Latino District</i>
Latino * Latino MC	-0.084 [0.052]	-0.083 [0.052]	-0.052 [0.056]	-0.822** [0.203]	-0.718** [0.199]	-0.724** [0.223]	-0.129 [0.136]
Latino	0.084** [0.016]	0.064** [0.016]	0.070** [0.022]	0.560** [0.121]	0.468** [0.119]	0.489** [0.151]	0.161 [0.122]
Latino MC	0.039 [0.037]	0.037 [0.037]	0.066 [0.039]	0.277* [0.134]	0.060 [0.139]	0.066 [0.152]	0.072 [0.098]
Turnout		-0.071** [0.010]	0.060** [0.014]	-0.090 [0.103]	-0.055 [0.100]	-0.009 [0.119]	0.039 [0.058]
MC Republican					-0.528** [0.120]		
Constant	1.066** [0.004]	1.119** [0.009]	1.013** [0.012]	1.121** [0.111]	1.315** [0.117]	1.279** [0.138]	0.996** [0.094]
N	33,817	33,817	14,872	328	328	254	817

* denotes $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test. Standard errors in brackets.

FIGURE 1: DIFFERENCES IN PROXIMITY, NON-LATINO MCS

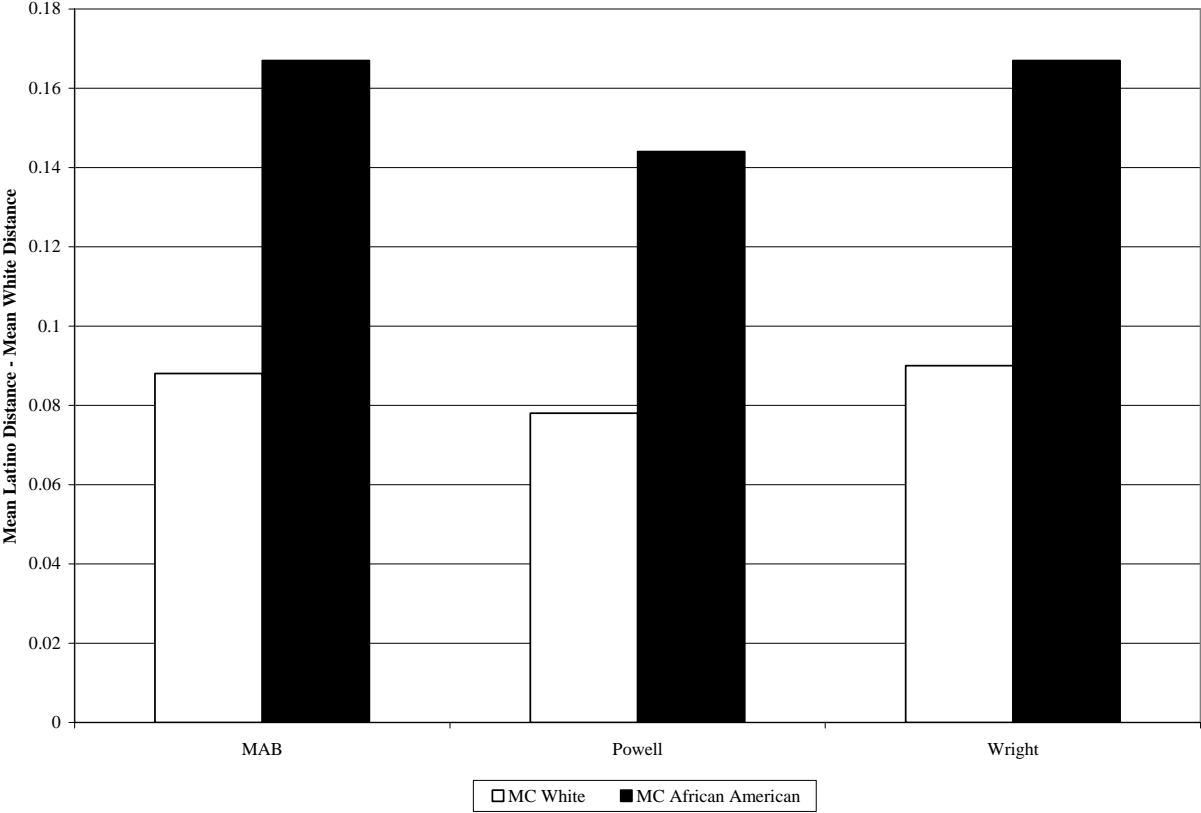


FIGURE 2: SIZE OF THE PROXIMITY GAP FOR VARIOUS GROUPS, 2000

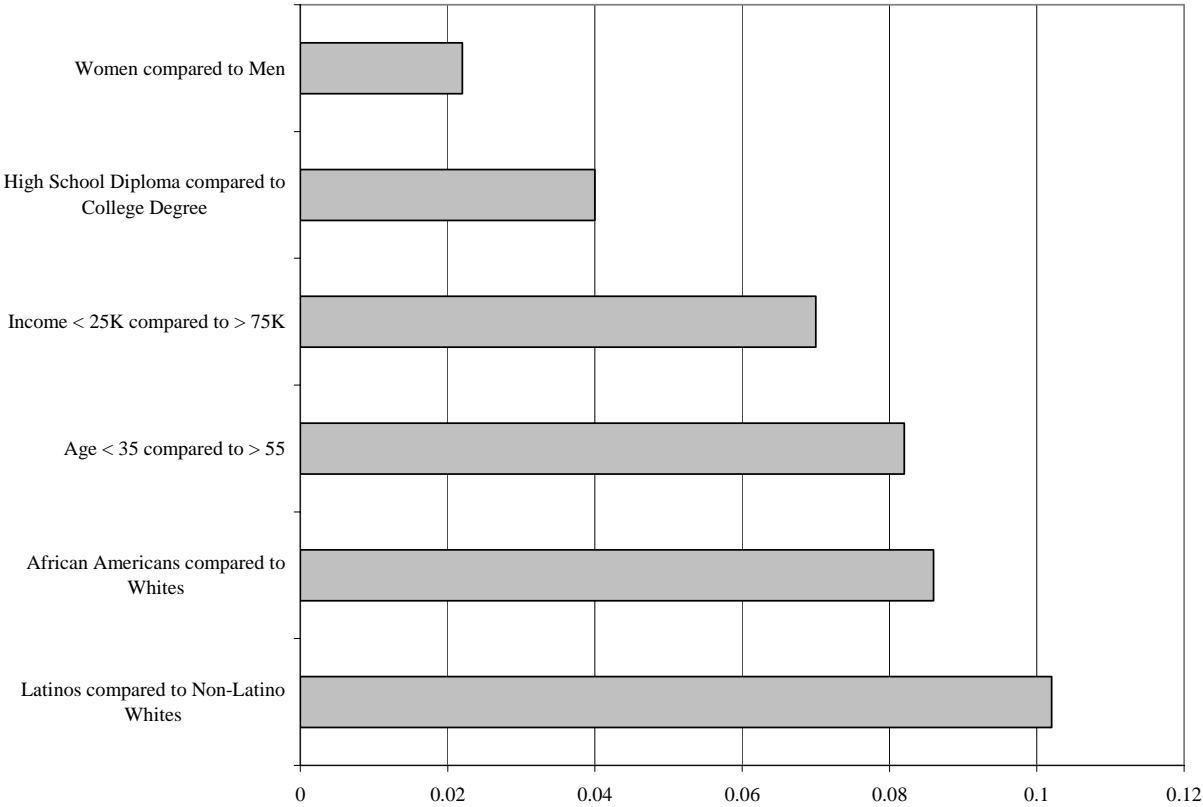


FIGURE 3: DISTANCE FROM NON-LATINO MCS, BY DISTRICT % LATINO

