

Return to Normalcy?

Recent Elections in New Orleans

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Abstract

Since flooding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, a number of elections took place in the city under unusual circumstances, with voting centers being provided outside the city limits. The state elections in the fall of 2007 were the first contests to take place largely under “normal” voting arrangements, with displaced voters casting ballots either by voting early at the offices of the Orleans Parish Board of Elections or via absentee ballot. This return to normalcy, coupled with the lack of a high-salience, potentially racially-divisive contest at the top of the ballot, provided an opportunity to determine the composition of the city’s likely persistent electorate.

In this paper, I examine four recent electoral contests in Orleans Parish: the 2007 gubernatorial contest (October 2007), two at-large runoff elections for a city council seat and judgeship (both held in November 2007), and the 2008 Democratic presidential preference primary (February 2008). In all four contests, substantial differences between black and white voting behavior were evident, although the degree of racial bloc voting differed substantially between contests. Furthermore, in the three general election contests studied, African Americans made up between 47.8% and 50.6% of the voting population, suggesting that New Orleans’ status as a “majority-minority” jurisdiction remains in doubt.

The degree of racial polarization in voting in the New Orleans area has been of academic interest in the past. Notably, Liu (2001) and Liu and Vanderleeuw (2001) found (using King’s ecological inference method) that white voters’ proclivity to vote for black candidates in the city was apparently not influenced by “racial threat”; in other words, white voters were no less likely to support black candidates if they lived in precincts and neighborhoods that had higher concentrations of black voters; similarly, in combination with the recent elections in Memphis, Tennessee, Vanderleeuw, Liu and Marsh (2004) and Liu (2006) identify the emergence of a “new trend of biracial coalitions” emerging in urban settings.

Yet New Orleans and its surrounding suburbs have also served as the backdrop for other contests that have not been so racially harmonious. Giles and Buckner (1993) examined voting in the 1990 U.S. Senate contest between David Duke and Bennett Johnston and found persistent evidence in support of the racial threat theory, although their findings have been called into question (see Voss 1996a; Giles and Buckner 1996; Voss 1996b). More recently, the biracial coalition that backed the election of Ray Nagin as mayor of New Orleans in 2002 fractured in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, with most whites opting to support white chal-

Election	Voters	% Black
Gubernatorial (Oct. 20)	76,554	50.6%
Runoff (Nov. 17)	53,246	47.8%
Democratic Pres. Primary (Feb. 9)	45,068	75.5%

Table 1: Voter Participation in Recent Elections, Orleans Parish

lenger (and incumbent Louisiana lieutenant governor) Mitch Landrieu during Nagin’s 2006 reelection bid. The “new trend” identified by Liu et al. may not have held up in racially-charged context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

This paper examines the political dynamics of post-Katrina New Orleans, looking at a series of elections during late 2007 and early 2008. Three of these contests featured prominent African-American candidates facing one or more white challengers, thus providing an opportunity to examine the level of racial division in the voting behavior of local citizens.

1 Data and Methods

The data used for this analysis were provided on the website of the office of the Louisiana Secretary of State. Data for voting in Orleans Parish, coextensive with the city of New Orleans, were obtained for the October 20, 2007 gubernatorial contest, the November 17, 2007 runoff elections for Judge, Criminal District Court, Section A and Councilmember at Large, and the February 9, 2008 Democratic Presidential Preference Primary. As Louisiana retains voter registration and turnout statistics by party and race, it is relatively easy to determine voter participation rates. However, since Orleans Parish has not purged its voter rolls since Hurricane Katrina, the number of registered voters almost certainly exceeds the true number of eligible voters remaining in the city; as such, estimated voter turnout statistics are deflated. The number of voters in each election and the proportion of voters who were African-American is presented in Table 1, while maps illustrating vote choice and voter turnout by precinct are shown in figures 1–3.

Initially noteworthy is the proportion of voters who are African-American. According to the 2000 Census, 67.3% of the city's population was black, as was 62.2% of the voting-age population. Except for the Democratic primary, which was only open to registered Democratic voters, black voter turnout was substantially below this ratio. By contrast, in the 2004 presidential election, prior to Katrina, blacks made up 65.4% of voters casting ballots. Even in the Democratic primary, the 75.5% of voters who were black lagged the 78.1% of Democratic voters who were black in the 2004 contest. These figures suggest either a substantial decline in the share of the black voting age population, a substantial disengagement of the black population from politics in the city, or both.

Determining the preferences of voters in these contests is somewhat more problematic, given the secrecy of individual ballots. As discussed by King (1997), recent advances in computational power and statistical methods have increased the feasibility of *ecological inference*—determining individual behavior from aggregate data. Imai, Lu and Strauss (2008) recently developed a nonparametric approach to the ecological inference problem, which leads to improved estimates of the population and sample proportions when the voting behavior of the groups is not distributed per the model assumptions and which allows the estimation of contextual (neighborhood) effects without identifying a variable related to those contextual effects. As such, the nonparametric NCAR (not coarsened at random) model allows for fairly precise estimates of individual votes without specific *a priori* knowledge of precinct-level variations in voters' proclivity to engage in bloc voting.

Accordingly, the data were analyzed in the *R* statistical computing environment (R Development Core Team 2008) by using the *ecoNP* procedure in the *eco* package (Imai, Lu and Strauss 2007), which fits the Imai, Lu and Strauss nonparametric ecological inference model for 2×2 tables.¹

¹Each model was fitted using 70,000 draws (with the first 20,000 discarded and the remainder of the chain thinned by a factor of 9, leaving a total of 3,000 samples) from a Gibbs sampler. Precincts with all voters being of one race were excluded from the analysis due to limitations in the procedure; as a result, only 354 of the parish's

Figure 1: Orleans Parish Vote, 2007 Gubernatorial Election

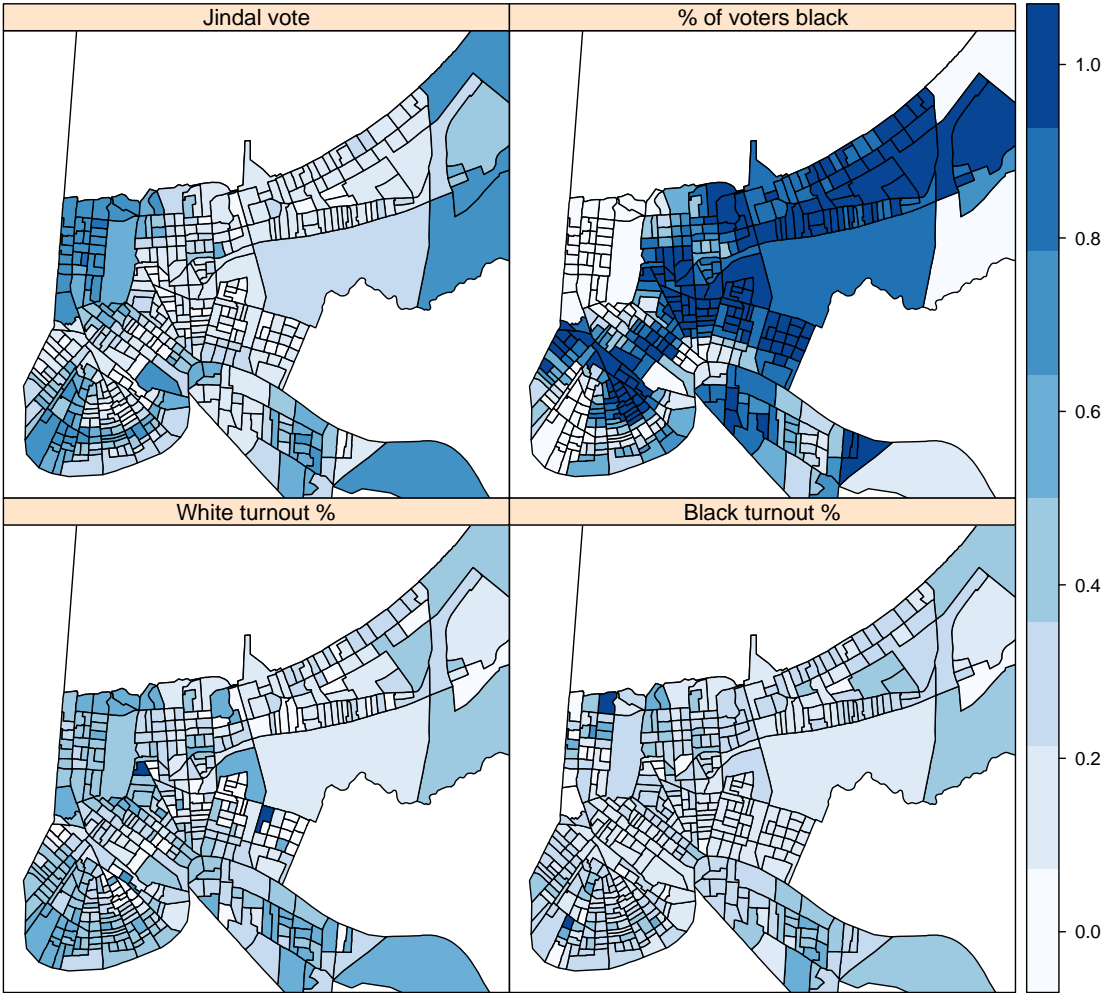


Figure 2: Orleans Parish Vote, November 2007 Runoffs

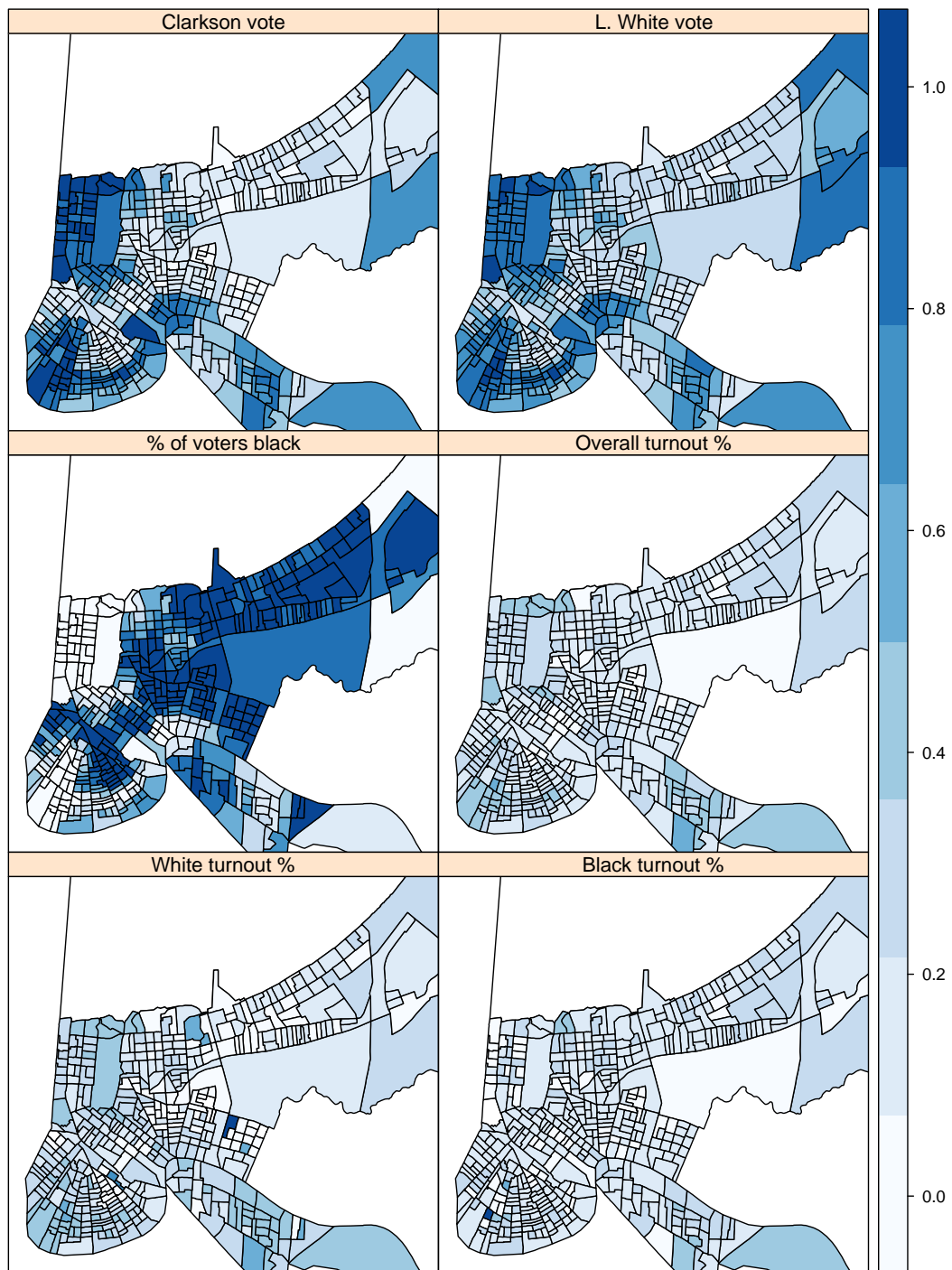
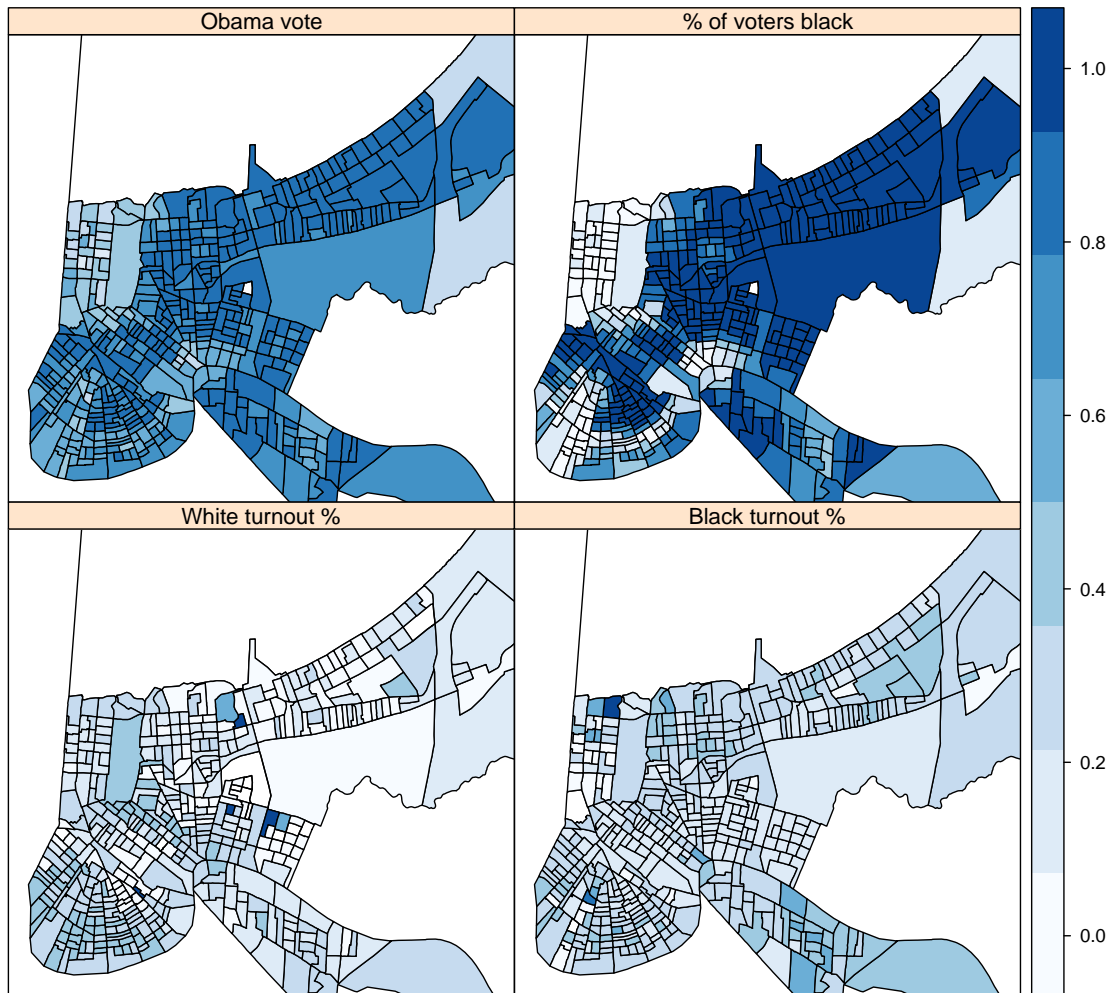


Figure 3: Orleans Parish Vote, Democratic Presidential Preference Primary



Group	% Supporting Jindal	95% Confidence Bounds	
Blacks	12.8%	10.6%	15.5%
Whites	58.2%	55.3%	60.5%

Table 2: Gubernatorial Contest Estimates

2 Results

The nonparametric ecological inference models indicate that the degree of racial polarization in voting varied significantly between contests. In the 2007 gubernatorial contest (Table 2), the only contest studied without an African-American candidate, white voters demonstrated significantly higher levels of support for Bobby Jindal than blacks; while the EI estimates suggest that Jindal, an Indian-American, won approximately 58.2% of the white vote in the parish, most black voters (approximately 87.2%) backed other candidates, contributing to white independent candidate John Georges’ narrow plurality win in the parish.² Jindal appears to have done better overall in the predominantly-white precincts of the city, most of which are part of his former congressional district. Despite Jindal being a member of a fellow ethnic minority group, he appears to have attracted relatively little black support, perhaps due to both his conservative Republican identity and being opposed by five candidates who adopted the Democratic party label.

The parish-wide runoff elections in November 2007 demonstrated even higher levels of polarization, as we might expect given that the runoffs pitted a white candidate against a black candidate. In the judicial contest for Criminal Court Section A, white attorney Laurie White faced former public defender Juana Marine Lombard in a contest notable for its nastiness, with White accusing Lombard of covering up the legal troubles of Lombard’s ex-

442 precincts are included in the analysis. Another minor limitation of the analysis is the assumption that voters whose races were not identified as either white or black were distributed by race within precincts at the same proportion as racially-identified voters; if this assumption is invalid, the degree of racial polarization estimated may be inaccurate.

²Jindal, a resident of neighboring Jefferson Parish, received 34.6% of the overall vote in the parish, trailing New Orleans businessman Georges who received 36.1% of the vote (Georges did not place ahead of Jindal in any other parish of the state).

Group	% Supporting Laurie White	95% Confidence Bounds	
Blacks	23.3%	21.4%	25.8%
Whites	89.6%	87.4%	91.4%

Table 3: Municipal Court Judge Estimates

Group	% Supporting Clarkson	95% Confidence Bounds	
Blacks	13.2%	11.6%	15.4%
Whites	92.3%	90.2%	93.8%

Table 4: City Council Estimates

husband.³ White defeated Lombard with 56.3% of the citywide vote. The nonparametric ecological inference estimates in Table 3 indicate that White’s share of the African-American vote was 23.3%, while she received about 89.6% of the white vote.

The runoff for the vacant city council at-large position between former District C councilwoman Jackie Clarkson and current District E councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis was even more polarized. Clarkson, the white candidate, won narrowly with 52.7% of the overall vote; the ecological inference estimates presented in Table 4 suggest she received approximately 92.3% of the white vote while only gaining 13.2% of the African-American vote. The outcome of the contest led to the city council becoming majority-white for the first time since 1985.⁴

The Democratic presidential preference primary also exhibited significant racial differences in voting behavior. Although presumably most conservative whites either voted in the Republican primary or were independents excluded from voting in the Democratic contest, Barack Obama claimed only 43.5% of the white vote in what had (by February 9th) effectively become a two-way contest with Hillary Clinton; see Table 5. Among blacks, Obama’s results mirrored his overwhelming black support in other deep south states, with Obama receiving 85.4% of the African-American vote. On the other hand, when compared with the other New Orleans contests studied, Obama’s vote share among whites was significantly larger. Overall,

³Filosa, Gwen. “Judicial hopefuls clash at N.O. forum; Lombard and White call each other liars.” *The Times-Picayune*, November 15, 2007.

⁴Donze, Frank. “Clarkson wins at-large Council seat.” *The Times-Picayune*, November 17, 2007.

Group	% Supporting Obama	95% Confidence Bounds	
Black Democrats	85.4%	83.8%	86.7%
White Democrats	43.5%	39.7%	48.5%

Table 5: Democratic Presidential Preference Primary Estimates

Obama won 75.4% of the Democratic vote in New Orleans, with Clinton receiving 22.5%.

3 Conclusions

The analysis of these three recent elections in New Orleans suggests that Hurricane Katrina and the demographic effects left in its wake have disturbed the process of strategic accommodation by whites to black-majority rule identified by Vanderleeuw, Liu and Marsh (2004) in the city before the storm. While the exact numbers will likely remain unclear until after the release of the results of the 2010 Census, it appears unlikely—barring major changes in public policy or the local economy or a concerted effort to repatriate displaced New Orleanians who, after over two years, seem increasingly unlikely to return from their new homes in other cities and states—that African Americans will return to the dominant position in voting-age population and turnout that they enjoyed prior to the storm or during the initial burst of post-Katrina enthusiasm found in the May 2006 mayoral contest. Given the intensity of the most recent mayoral contest and the demonstrated ability of whites to elect their preferred candidates to city-wide office in the face of serious black opposition, strategic accommodation and biracial coalition-building seems likely to give way to renewed polarization in voting along racial lines, particularly in non-judicial city-wide offices such as at-large city council seats and the mayor’s office.

More broadly, it appears that much of the “strategic accommodation” identified by other authors seems conditional on the lack of emergence by credible challengers to incumbents with nominally cross-racial support. When these challengers emerge, as was the case in Jackson in 2005 (where incumbent mayor Harvey Johnson was challenged by local business-

man Frank Melton in the Democratic primary) and New Orleans in 2006 (when Nagin faced a challenge from the popular Mitch Landrieu), and as nearly occurred in Memphis in 2007 (when local business leaders attempted to broker the entry of county mayor A.C. Wharton into the city mayoral contest against W.W. Herenton), white voters may ally as a bloc with a minority of non-whites to secure change.⁵

Nonetheless, these results also suggest that both whites and blacks continue to cross racial lines in contests in New Orleans, even in the absence of other voting shortcuts (such as partisan labels) which might be employed by low-information voters and in circumstances where a clear racialized choice is available. Nearly 25% of the city's black voters opted for Caucasian judicial candidate Laurie White in November 2007, and approximately 44% of New Orleans' white Democrats supported Barack Obama.

Finally, as noted above, there are some minor methodological issues with the state-of-the-art for ecological inference, as the most advanced techniques are designed for use with 2×2 tables. If the assumption that "other" voters are mostly comprised of whites and blacks who were improperly coded by the registrar of voters is valid, this should not be problematic, but it would be helpful if the authorities made a clear distinction between voters of an *unknown* race and voters who identify as neither white nor black. Given the post-Katrina influx of Hispanics into the greater New Orleans area, this issue may be of some urgency for scholars studying voting in the area in the future and for redistricting considerations in 2010 and beyond.

⁵Allegiances between a contextual minority and a subset of the majority group, of course, are not unique to modern Southern politics; Key (1949) identified numerous instances of black voters supporting moderate white candidates for office in the pre-Voting Rights Act era, and black voters were an important part of the Crump political machine in Memphis. Pohlmann and Kirby (1996)

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