The Positive Effect of Black Density on White Crossover Voting: Reconsidering Social Interaction Theory*

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Objective. Social interaction theory has received considerable attention. One limitation of previous studies has been that they did not examine how the positive effect of racial interaction on white racial tolerance may be enhanced or reduced by other factors. This article tests five hypotheses derived from the basic assumption of social interaction theory. *Methods.* Employing EI procedure, a newly developed ecological inference method, this study uses the precinct-level data from New Orleans' 29 biracial elections to estimate white crossover voting at the neighborhood level. The hypotheses are tested by both ordinary least squares and weighted least squares models. *Results.* White crossover voting is positively related to black density. The positive effect of black density, however, is relatively weak. Other factors such as the racial composition of candidate field and election type are more important. *Conclusions.* Caution needs to be exercised in accepting social interaction theory. The level of racial competition in biracial elections may reverse white support for black candidates.

The willingness of white voters to support black candidates in biracial elections has been a research focus for several decades (see, among others, Reeves, 1997; DeLorenzo, Kohfeld, and Stein, 1997:120–33; Perry, 1996; Carsey, 1995; Sonenshein, 1990; Bullock, 1985:185–208; Murray and Vedlitz, 1978). One group of scholars has reexamined the role of racial context, which concerns "the distribution of a population characteristic" (Huckfeldt, 1986:14). In particular, black density (i.e., the relative percentage of blacks within a certain area) receives the most attention (Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000; Forbes, 1997; Voss, 1996; Llorens, Persons, and Perry, 1996; Swain, 1993; Herring and Forbes, 1994; Persons, 1993; Sonenshein, 1990; Vanderleeuw, 1990).

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SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, Volume 82, Number 3, September 2001

One of the findings that has been reported repeatedly in the literature is that there is a *negative* relationship between the relative size of the black population in an area and white racial tolerance (Giles, 1996; Longoria, 1996:885; Glaser, 1994; Giles and Hertz, 1994; Herring and Forbes, 1994; Giles and Buckner, 1993; Wright, 1977). This relationship has been explained by black threat theory, which was suggested as far back as 1949 by V. O. Key. Based on voting records, Key (1949) found that white racial tolerance toward blacks in the South was negatively related to the black density of the counties in which the whites lived. This was because, according to Key, a high level of black concentration threatened "the maintenance of control by a white minority" (Key, 1949:5).

Tested and confirmed repeatedly, V. O. Key's original hypothesis of black threat has profoundly influenced the research of white voting behavior. However, more recently another school of scholars has adopted social interaction theory to provide a competing explanation of white crossover voting. Unlike black threat theory, social interaction theory predicts a *positive* relationship between black density and white crossover voting (DeLorenzo, Kohfeld, and Stein, 1997; Sadow, 1996; Carsey, 1995). The explanation for this positive relationship is based mainly on racial interactions that whites are expected to have with blacks within a certain geographic area.

According to social interaction theory, the degree of spatial concentration of blacks may determine the amount of racial interaction that whites have with black *individuals* (Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995; Carsey, 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, 1986). The higher the level of black density within a residential area, the greater the opportunity for the whites living in that area to encounter blacks on both regular and casual bases (Langton and Rapoport, 1975). Whites who have frequent opportunities to meet blacks in their residential area are likely to become personal friends with blacks, discuss political issues with them, and develop other social relationships among them (Huckfeldt, 1986). As this type of interaction increases, "the probability that those [white] individuals will adopt political attitudes and behaviors similar to those [blacks] with whom they interact increases" (Carsey, 1995:223).

Testing Social Interaction Theory

One issue in any empirical test of social interaction theory is the geographic level at which black density should be measured. Whereas black density measured at the election unit level may be appropriate for testing black threat theory, the election unit may not be appropriate for testing social interaction theory. This is because the black density of a relatively large geographic area, such as a city or a councilmanic district, may not relate to the level of racial interaction between whites and blacks. It is possible, for example, that a white voter lives in a predominantly white neighborhood that is part of a predominantly black electoral district. The chances of such

a white voter interacting with blacks may be substantially smaller than that of a white voter who lives in the same electoral district but in a neighborhood with more black residents.

The smaller the geographic context, the more likely black density will reflect interaction between blacks and whites. Residential neighborhoods are often the geographic referent for studies concerned with social interaction theory. As Huckfeldt indicates, "any neighborhood presents a distinctive set of possibilities for social interaction at both intimate and impersonal levels" (Huckfeldt, 1986:10). Although racial interactions also happen outside of residential areas, for example, in workplaces, "a substantial amount of such [racial] interaction takes place within the neighborhood" (Carsey, 1995:223).

Some early studies of social interaction employed Census tracts as an approximation for neighborhoods (e.g., Huckfeldt, 1986). A Census tract, however, tends to be larger than what is normally viewed as a "neighborhood." For instance, Huckfeldt's (1986) study of the Buffalo urban area employed Census tract data, in which the mean population of tracts was 11,000. Huckfeldt himself acknowledged that a Census tract of this size can only be regarded as a "macro-neighborhood" (Huckfeldt, 1986:10).

Precinct boundaries have also been used as a proxy for neighborhoods (e.g., Delorenzo, Kohfeld, and Stein, 1997; Carsey, 1995). Precinct level data can match voters' residential areas better than larger contexts such as Census tracts. Moreover, a precinct "does provide a direct geographic measure of an electoral environment which is particularly meaningful to many of the participants in urban elections" (Carsey, 1995:223). The precinct is also the smallest geographical unit for which the votes cast in elections are recorded.

The precinct level data, however, are usually not available. Survey data very often do not have necessary variation in the contextual variable, and sometimes there is not an adequate number of individuals sampled at the various levels of the contextual variables (Giles, 1996). The problem of traditional methods using aggregate-level data (e.g., Goodman regression and double regression) is that they do not provide estimates of crossover voting at the precinct level.

Gary King (1997) has recently proposed a new method for estimating precinct level behavior such as racial crossover voting through aggregate data. To estimate precinct level white crossover voting, King's ecological inference (EI) procedure requires four types of variables at the precinct level: the total number of population (or registered voters) in each precinct, the proportion of population (registered voters) that is black in each precinct, the proportion of population (registered voters) who signed in (turnout) to vote in each precinct, and the proportion of votes received by black candidate(s) in each precinct.

Incorporating the deterministic method of bounds with maximum likelihood probabilities, King devised an estimation procedure that not only pro-

vides accurate estimates, according to his own verification studies and other scholars' research, but also provides standard errors for those estimates (Voss and Lublin, 2001; Palmquist, 1999; Burden and Kimball, 1998; Voss and Lublin, 1998). In addition, King's EI approach provides important features to analyze aggregate data for possible violation of his basic assumptions, especially the existence of aggregation bias (i.e., the parameters are correlated with the regressors). The proper extended models to deal with these data problems are also provided (King, 1997:esp. 199–234).

To test social interaction theory, this paper will take advantage of King's new EI method. It will examine New Orleans' 29 biracial elections between 1977 and 1998 using precincts as the object of analysis.

Hypotheses

One limitation of previous studies of racial tolerance is that they did not examine how the positive effect of racial interaction may be enhanced or reduced by other factors. We derive five hypotheses from the general assumption of social interaction theory and some findings of previous research of white voting behavior. The first hypothesis concerns the basic relationship between white crossover voting and black density. The larger the black population in an area, according to social interaction theory, the more racial interaction there is between blacks and the whites in the area and the higher the level of white crossover voting. Thus, the general relationship between racial contexts and white crossover voting at the precinct level is linear and positive: *At the precinct level, as the percentage of registered voters that is black increases, white crossover voting increases (Hypothesis 1).*

This general relationship may be enhanced or reversed by other factors. The racial composition of candidates may be one of these factors, because it reflects the relative involvement of both racial groups. The higher the percentage of black candidates, the higher the level of black involvement in an election (Vanderleeuw, 1990). Arguably, with more black candidates to choose from, those whites who have been positively influenced by racial interaction in the precinct may be more likely to vote for black candidates. It is logical, therefore, to form the following hypothesis: *As the percentage of candidates that are black increases, the positive impact of the black percentage of registered voters on white crossover voting also increases (Hypothesis 2).*[1]

[1] Hypothesis 2 and the subsequent hypotheses concern how the positive impact of black density at the neighborhood level is conditioned by other factors. These hypotheses will be tested by including black density and the relevant factor as an interactive term in the regression equations. Hypothesis 2 can be summarized as

$$Y = a + b(\text{percentage black registered voters}) + b(\text{percentage candidates that are black}) + b\ (\text{percentage black registered voters} \times \text{percentage candidates that are black}).$$

The positive effect of black density on white crossover voting may also be modified by the level of racial competition. Bullock (1985) found that white crossover voting in Atlanta was lower in runoffs than in primaries. In order to get into a runoff, a white candidate needs to defeat all opponents but one in the primary. The white candidate in a runoff therefore is likely to be viewed as a serious candidate, and this may reduce the positive impact of racial interactions on white crossover voting. Hypothesis 3, then, states as follows: *The positive impact of the black percentage of registered voters on white crossover voting is lower when a white candidate is in a runoff election than when a white candidate is in a primary election (Hypothesis 3).*

In biracial contests, white candidates may try to maximize their support from white voters. The third factor that may modify the positive impact of racial interactions on white crossover voting is the strength of white candidates. Arguably, a strong white candidate is more likely than a weak white candidate to limit the willingness of whites to vote for a black candidate in biracial contests. In this vein, a white incumbent may have more resources than a weak candidate to compete with black candidates. Thus, measured by incumbency, the strength of a white candidate can influence white crossover voting at the precinct level as follows: *The positive impact of the black percentage of registered voters on white crossover voting is lower when a white candidate is an incumbent than when a white candidate is a nonincumbent (Hypothesis 4).*

On the other hand, the positive impact of racial interaction at the neighborhood level may also be shaped by the ability of black candidates to influence white voters (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997; Llorens, Parsons, and Perry, 1996). A black incumbent may have more resources and free publicity to influence white voters than a black candidate that is a nonincumbent (Vanderleeuw, 1991; Bullock, 1985). Black incumbency may reinforce the positive impact of racial interactions on whites' willingness to vote for black candidates. Therefore, the strength of black candidates may influence white crossover voting in the following manner: *The positive impact of the black percentage of registered voters on white crossover voting is greater when a black candidate is an incumbent than when a black candidate is a nonincumbent (Hypotheis 5).*

Research Setting

This study examines white crossover voting in New Orleans municipal elections between 1977 and 1998. Since V. O. Key's classic (1949) study of Southern politics, analysts have used New Orleans to study racial relations (e.g., Perry, 1997, 1996; Hirsch, 1997; Engstrom and Caridas, 1991; Vanderleeuw, 1991, 1990). New Orleans also provides an excellent setting in which to test social interaction theory. Most precincts in the city have less than 1,000 total registered voters. It is reasonable to expect that the voters who live in these precincts have a good chance of interacting with each

TABLE 1

White Crossover Voting and the Black Percentage of Registered Voters

	Equation 1	Equation 2	Equation 3
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* β (*SE*)
Black Density[a]	.15*** (.01)	.44*** (.01)	14 .22*** (.08)
Black Density × Black Density		–.006** (.002)	
Black Density × Black Density × Black Density		.00003* (.000)	
Time			1.28 .13** (.14)
Intercept	18.77	16.84	13.38
R^2	.059	.062	.074
Adj. R^2	.059	.062	.074

NOTE: $N = 5{,}683$.

[a]Percentage of registered voters at the precinct level who are black.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

other on both regular and casual bases. The level of *racial* interactions in these precincts is probably related to the racial composition of the precincts.

There has been an important change in the racial composition of New Orleans in the past decades. The relative size of the black population of New Orleans grew from 45 percent in 1970 to 55.3 percent in 1980 and 62.1 percent in 1990. In the meantime, the black percentage of registered voters in New Orleans also grew from 30.8 in 1970 to 44.7 in 1980 and 56 in 1990.

This wide range in the racial composition of the city and the variation in the racial composition of electoral districts within the city allow us to analyze various contextual effects on white voting behavior. Furthermore, New Orleans has also accumulated valuable data reflecting voter registration by race and by precinct over a long period of time.

Between 1977 and 1998, New Orleans experienced important political changes. The city elected Ernest "Dutch" Morial as its first black mayor in 1977, and black candidates have won all of the mayoral elections since that year. The increasing political power of blacks in the city has been reflected in a black majority on the city council since 1986 and on the school board since 1988 (Engstrom and Caridas, 1991). Choosing the time period between 1977 and 1998 for this study is also based on our research question, which concerns white willingness to vote for black candidates in *biracial* elections. During 1997 and 1998, a total of 58 elections for mayor and city council were contested in New Orleans. Thirty-six of these elections (62

percent) provided voters with a choice between or among black and white candidates (i.e., biracial elections). Among the 36 biracial elections, 29 were mayoral and city council district elections. This paper will focus on these 29 elections. The other seven biracial elections were council at-large elections. They will not be included in the following empirical analyses because they provided voters with two votes, and it is impossible to accurately estimate white crossover voting in these at-large elections through King's EI procedure.

The mayor and city council elections are held once every four years in New Orleans.[2] The city council is composed of seven members, two elected at large and five from single-member districts.[3] A total of 5,683 observations (precincts) across the 29 elections between 1977 and 1998 will be employed in the following hypothesis tests. The mean of the black percentage of registered voters, the measure of black density employed in this analysis, for these precincts is 48.3, the standard deviation, 37.9 (the range is between 0 and 100).

The mean of white crossover voting at the precinct level is 25.6 and the standard deviation, 22.9. The lowest level of white crossover voting was 0, and the highest, 100.[4] This large variation in white crossover voting in precincts offers the necessary variance in the dependent variable to identify conditions under which whites are willing to vote for a black candidate. Five hypotheses will be tested in the following section.

Findings

A simple bivariate regression is used to test Hypothesis 1, about the general relationship between black density and white crossover voting at the neighborhood level (Equation 1, Table 1). The regression coefficient is positive and statistically significant. However, the magnitude of this coefficient is very small (.15). Based on this coefficient, for every one-percentage-point increase in black density, there tends to be only a .15 percentage point increase in white crossover voting. The adjusted R^2 is .059, which indicates that black density alone can account for less than 6 percent of the variance in white crossover voting.

A nonlinear analysis of this relationship provides little improvement. The best-fitting nonlinear model for the relationship between black density and

[2] Because of a redistricting dispute and another special election to fill a vacancy, council elections were held in Districts A and D in 1980 and 1981, respectively.

[3] The party affiliations of candidates are listed on the ballot in New Orleans, but all candidates compete together in a single primary election. A runoff election must be conducted if no candidate receives the majority of the votes cast. In the case of the two at-large city council seats, candidates need to receive at least 25 percent of the votes in the primary.

[4] Using King's recommended method (1997:chaps. 7, 16), all of the 29 elections under investigation were examined for potential violation of the assumptions of King's basic model. The extended model was used for 18 elections (the data files are available from the author).

TABLE 2

Multiple OLS Regression for White Crossover Voting

	Equation 1			Equation 2			Equation 3		
	b	(*SE*)	β	*b*	(*SE*)	β	*b*	(*SE*)	β
Black density	.11	(.01)	.18***	.09	(.02)	.14***	.21	(.01)	.38***
Black percentage candidates	.82	(.02)	.53***	.77	(.03)	.49***			
Election type[a]	–16.48	(.53)	–.33***	–10.12	(.83)	–.20***	–.52	(1.01)	–.10***
White incumbency[b]	–10.43	(1.0)	–.11***	–12.12	(1.46)	–.13***			
Black incumbency	3.81	(.52)	.08***	2.08	(.87)	.04*			
Density × Black Percentage Candidates				.001	(.00)	.08*			
Density × Election Type				–.14	(.01)	–.17***	–.20	(.02)	–.25***
Density × White Incumbency				.05	(.03)	.03			
Density × Black Incumbency				.04	(.01)	.05**			
Intercept	–14.79			–13.75			20.28		
R^2	.462			.475			.161		
Adj. R^2	.462			.474			.161		

NOTE: $N = 5{,}683$.

[a]Runoff=1; primary=0.

[b]Coded as 1 if there is a white incumbent in the election, 0 otherwise. For the variable of black incumbency, coded as 1 if there is a black incumbent in the election, 0 otherwise.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

white crossover voting, based on R^2, is the cubic model (Equation 2, Table 1). The regression coefficients for the three independent variables are statistically significant. The overall model, however, accounts for only 6.2 percent of the variance in white crossover voting, which is almost indistinguishable from the R^2 for the linear model (see Equation 1).

As stated above, during the time period under study, New Orleans experienced a racial transition (which was also popularly described as "white flight"). According to the Census data, the white population in New Orleans was about 321,000 in 1970, 236,000 in 1980, and 173,000 in 1990. One might argue that the whites who stayed in the city into the 1990s might be more tolerant than those who left in the late 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, we would expect to see an increase in white crossover voting over

time, and the relationship between black density and white crossover voting would be spurious.

To test the effect of time, a time variable is included in Equation 3 of Table 1. There were eight different years in which one or more biracial elections were held between 1977 and 1998. Thus, the value of the time variable ranges from 1 to 8. As shown in Equation 3 of Table 1, the regression coefficient for the time variable is positive and statistically significant (1.28). However, the adjusted R^2 for Equation 3 of Table 1 is .074, only .015 more than that for the bivariate equation containing only black density (see Equation 1). This suggests that Equation 3 explains only about 1.5 percent more of the variance in white crossover voting than Equation 1. Moreover, the value of the standardized regression coefficient for the time variable (.13) is even smaller than that for black density (.22).[5] Therefore, the time effect, if any, is fairly weak.

Equation 1 of Table 2 tests for the positive effect of black density while controlling for other four independent variables. The adjusted R^2 is increased to .46, suggesting that overall the model can explain 46 percent of the variance in white crossover voting. All of the independent variables are statistically significant and in the expected directions, that is, white crossover voting is positively affected by the percentage of candidates that are black and black incumbency. Moreover, white crossover may be reduced by white incumbency and runoff election.

Although Equation 1 of Table 2 shows that black density still has some positive effect on white crossover voting, the relationship between white crossover voting and black density appears to be relatively weak. The unstandardized regression coefficient for black density becomes .11, smaller than in the bivariate model (.15; see Equation 1 of Table 1). Furthermore, based on the values of standardized regression coefficients, black density appears to be a weaker predictor of white crossover voting than candidate field and election type.

The independent effect of candidate field, measured by the percentage of candidates that are black, is especially impressive. This is shown not only by Equation 1 of Table 2, but by the following analyses as well. The correlation coefficient between white crossover voting and the percentage of candidates that are black is .56 ($p < .001$). When white crossover voting is regressed onto the candidate field variable, the following relationship results:

$$Y = -15.79 + .85(\text{black percentage of candidates})$$
(standard error of $b = .02$; $p < .001$; $R^2 = .307$; adj. $R^2 = .307$)

[5] Political scientists have indicated that the values of betas are not a perfect way to test the importance of a variable (Achen, 1982). However, "they are convenient for making comparisons across variables" (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995:292).

The regression coefficient is positive and statistically significant. For every one-percentage-point increase in black percentage of candidates, there is a .85-percentage-point increase in white crossover voting. The magnitude of this coefficient is much larger than that in the equation regarding the positive impact of black density on white crossover voting ($b = .15$; see Equation 1 of Table 1). Furthermore, the adjusted R^2, .307, is also much larger than that for Equation 1 of Table 1, which was only .059. Therefore, candidate field is a better predictor of white crossover voting than black density.

Hypotheses 2 through 5 are tested by including black density and the other independent variables as interactive terms in the regression equation (Equation 2 of Table 2). Among the four interactive terms, three are statistically significant and in the hypothesized directions. The positive effect of black density on white crossover voting can be enhanced by black involvement in the election (i.e., the percentage of candidates that are black) and black incumbency and reduced by the runoff election type. The interactive term between black density and white incumbency, however, is statistically insignificant. Therefore, we do not have empirical evidence to support our Hypothesis 4, which suggests that the positive effect of black density can be reduced by white incumbency. The importance of white incumbency in explaining white crossover voting is mainly that it independently influences white crossover voting (see Equation 1, Table 2).

It is also important to note that the adjusted R^2 for Equation 2 of Table 2 is .474, which is only about one percentage point larger than that for the equation without the interactive terms (.462; see Equation 1, Table 2). Although the interactive terms between black density and candidate field and black incumbency are statistically significant, the magnitudes of the unstandardized regression coefficients are very small (.001 and .04, respectively). These findings suggest that the black percentage of candidates and black incumbency do enhance the positive effect of black density on white crossover voting, as Hypotheses 2 and 5 suggest; the conditional effects of the black percentage of candidates and black incumbency, however, are very small.

Compared to the interactive terms between black density and black percentage of candidates and black incumbency, the conditional effect of election type is relatively larger (the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients for election type are −.14 and −.17, respectively; see Equation 2, Table 2). We use Equation 3, Table 2, to get a sense of how the positive effect of black density on white crossover voting in the runoff elections may differ from that in the primary elections. The regression coefficient for the interactive term is negative (−.20) and statistically significant.

According to Equation 3 of Table 2, the effect of black density is different in the two types of elections. The regression coefficient for black density in the runoff context is .01. This is derived by adding the regression coefficient for black density (.21) and the regression coefficient for the interactive term (−.20). This magnitude is smaller than, and statistically different from, that

for the primary context (.21, the coefficient for black density itself). In short, the above findings reveal that the positive impact of black density on white crossover voting is about .20 percentage points smaller in the runoff elections than in the primary elections, but in neither case is the impact very large.

It is also worthwhile to note that all of the results reported in Tables 1 and 2 were based on an ordinary least squares (OLS) model. In order to take the standard errors of King's point estimates into account, the same equations in these tables were also tested by the additional weighted least squares (WLS) analyses, in which the inverse of the standard error of white crossover estimate is used as a weighting variable (Burden and Kimball, 1998). In addition, to take into account the fact that the precincts examined in this paper had different numbers of white voters, the numbers of white candidate in the precincts were also used as a weighting variable. The results based on these WLS analyses are substantially similar to those reported in the tables, which further confirms the findings presented in this paper.[6]

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has used social interaction theory to deduce five hypotheses concerning white crossover voting at the neighborhood level. As the empirical evidence reported above shows, black density at the neighborhood level does positively influence white crossover voting. This finding is contrary to the black threat hypothesis and consistent with social interaction theory, which emphasizes the positive effect of racial interaction on racial tolerance. But the statistical analyses also indicate that racial interaction is not the complete story. The simple bivariate regression between white crossover voting and black density alone explains less than 6 percent of the variance in white crossover voting. This research has demonstrated that the positive relationship between black density and white crossover voting at the precinct level is relatively weak and that other factors are probably more important.

First, the racial composition of the field of candidates is an important factor. A higher level of black candidate presence in a biracial election produces a higher level of white crossover voting. Furthermore, the racial composition of the field of candidates can enhance the positive impact of black density on white crossover voting. However, based on our findings, this conditional effect is fairly weak, and the relative presence of black candidates in biracial elections is important in explaining white crossover voting mainly because of its independent effect.

[6] To save space, the results of WLS analyses are not presented in the paper, and they are available from the author.

Second, whites' support for black candidates is also related to the strength of black candidates. Whites gave a higher level of support to black incumbents than black nonincumbents. Our findings also show that a black incumbent can enhance the positive impact of black density on white crossover voting. But this conditional effect is also weak.

Finally, the level of white crossover voting is also related to the characteristics of white candidates. Whites provided a lower level of support for black candidates when a white incumbent was in the contest than when there was not a white incumbent. More importantly, whites also showed a lower level of support for black candidates in a runoff than in a primary. It is also found that the positive impact of black density on white crossover voting becomes smaller in runoff elections than in primary elections.

These findings are intriguing. On the surface, the existence of the positive relationship between black density and white crossover voting at the neighborhood level could be said to support social interaction theory, which suggests that a higher level of spatial concentration of blacks may increase the amount of racial interaction whites have with blacks and therefore enhance white racial tolerance. Indeed, the success of social interaction theory, compared to the traditional black threat thesis, is that it correctly predicts the *direction* of the basic relationship between black density and white crossover voting. Further examinations of the theory itself and findings, however, strongly suggest that caution needs to be exercised in supporting social interaction theory.

A major limitation of social interaction theory, first of all, is reflected by the finding that the positive effect of black density at the precinct level on white crossover voting is in fact very weak. Moreover, if racial interaction enhances white racial tolerance and therefore the willingness of whites to support black candidates, it is reasonable to expect that whites who have been positively influenced by racial interaction will be more willing to support black candidates when they have proportionally more black candidates to choose from or have an opportunity to vote for a strong black candidate. However, the empirical analyses show that the impacts that the relative presence of black candidates and black candidate strength have on white crossover are mainly through their direct and independent, rather than conditional, effects. These findings clearly indicate that social interaction theory has limited utility in explaining the white crossover in New Orleans' biracial elections. In addition, the relatively strong effects of the racial composition of candidate field and election type on white crossover voting further suggest that the specific election context is more important than racial interaction.

As Kinder and Mendelberg (1995) correctly suggested, "[although] proximity generally reduces the impact of prejudice . . . movement toward an integrated society has been maddeningly slow and not without reversals" (p. 421). Interacting with blacks may help white voters develop a positive attitude toward black electoral ambitions. But racial competition in biracial

elections, reflected by the racial composition of candidate field, the strength of white/black candidates, and the election type (primary vs. runoff), may reverse white support for black candidates.

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