
Are At-Large Elections Responsible For The Under-Representation Of Minorities On Local Governments

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In the eyes of many Americans, racial and ethnic minority representation among our elected officials has undergone a significant change, as the number of minority officeholders has increased substantially from their numbers just a half-century ago. In fact, the 116th Congress has made history as the most diverse body to convene in Washington D.C. in our nation's history. According to Pew Research, there are 56 black members of Congress, including 3 Senators, 43 Hispanic members with 4 Senators among them, 17 Asian members with 3 of them serving in the Senate, and 4 Native American members as well (Bialik 2019). There has also been a significant increase in the number of minorities holding state and local offices, suggesting that minority candidates have been afforded favorable conditions to attain office (Shah 2014).

Despite this seemingly progressive increase in minority representation, the number of minority elected officials does not match the growth of minority populations in the United States (Shah 2014). The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) demographic data reveals the disparity between minority legislators and their respective minority populations on a national level. For example, blacks make up 13% of the U.S. population, yet only account for 9% of state legislators. The divide grows only starker for Hispanics who represent 17% of the U.S. population, yet only 5% of state legislators, while Asians make up 5% of the U.S. population, but only 1% of all state legislators (NCSL 2019). In light of this data it can be argued that the gains in minority representation over the last half-century have been inadequate, suggesting that minority populations are continuing to experience under-representation in elected offices due to glaring flaws in the political process. This paper aims to examine, at least in part, the cause of the disparity between minority populations and their representation in elected offices.

In 1982, Wiley Bolden, a black citizen of Mobile, Alabama challenged the constitutionality of the city's at-large voting system that was responsible for the election of its three city commissioners. The city of Mobile contained a population of 200,452 people in 1980, 36.2% of whom were black, yet there were no black citywide representatives to govern on the behalf of their interests (Shaw et al. 2018). Bolden claims the utilization of at-large elections was a deliberate act by the all-white city government to induce minority vote dilution, which claims that although "Blacks' votes were counted, they were considerably less likely to elect officials of their choosing, or that those elected met the standard of descriptive representation of the Black population" (Shaw et al. 2018). In other words, blacks were not able to elect candidates of the same race, who were almost entirely the candidate of choice, particularly in a racially polarized region of the country such as Mobile, Alabama. The at-large elections, which had been in place in Mobile since 1911, were challenged on the grounds that they served as a discriminatory tool in the suppression of black Americans voting power and were in violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Although both a Federal District Court and Court of Appeals sided with Mr. Bolden in declaring that the at-large elections in Mobile were a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protections Clause, the Supreme Court overturned their decisions (*Mobile v. Bolden* 446 U.S. 55). In the landmark case of *Mobile v. Bolden* (1982), the Supreme Court ruled that regardless of the effect of the electoral system on a minority population, discriminatory intent had to be proven in order to replace an at-large voting system (*Mobile v. Bolden* 446 U.S. 55). The Supreme Court's ruling signaled that minority vote dilution could exist as a just reality as long as the challengers to discriminatory voter policies could not prove that there was a discriminatory intent in their enactment.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Mobile v. Bolden* (1982) sent shockwaves through the black community and civil rights organizations, as they were not satisfied with the ruling of the court. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Leadership Council decided to voice their concerns and lobby for their positions in Congress. In an attempt to assuage the concerns held by the black community towards the recent ruling from the Supreme Court, lawmakers, led by Senator Bob Dole included a provision in Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act that prohibits the enactment of discriminatory voting laws, even if the accuser cannot prove intent. As stated by *The New York Times*, the provision "would prohibit a state or political

subdivision from imposing or applying any voting practice or procedure 'in a manner which results in a denial or abridgment' of the right to vote" (Pear 1982). While the addition of the new discriminatory effects standard was essential in overturning Mobile's biased at-large elections system and countless others of a similar nature, it has not resulted in the systematic elimination of at-large elections at the local levels of government.

Despite the far more stringent standards enacted by Congress, unfair electoral systems have been able to persist. This is especially true since the striking down of a key Voting Rights Act provision by the Supreme Court in the case of *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013). The decision essentially grants states and localities that at one time were required to seek federal preclearance the authority to enact changes in voting laws unburdened today (*Shelby County v. Holder* 570 U.S. 2). The Supreme Court also struck down the formula utilized by the Federal Government to determine which states should be monitored for potential voting rights abuses on the grounds that it was outdated. The court suggested that it is their belief that the formula is in dire need of an upgrade that would be based on contemporary data and a new set of standards that should be reviewed and adopted by Congress (*Shelby County v. Holder* 570 U.S. 2). Justice Ginsburg dissented from the ruling from the court's majority, as she held that both section 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which applied the formula to 9 states - Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia - and a number of municipalities across the country, are applicable in their existing form now (Liptak 2013). She contends that the "focus of the Voting Rights Act had properly changed from "first-generation barriers to ballot access" to "second-generation barriers" like racial gerrymandering and laws requiring at-large voting in places with a sizable black minority" (Liptak 2013). Justice Ginsburg's beliefs are somewhat prophetic, as we have seen a rash of controversial voting laws adopted by states in the years since the Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*.

In order to attain a proper understanding of the practical significance of rulings such as *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), it is crucial to have an awareness of the history and purpose of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted to eradicate the legal disenfranchisement of minority voters by state and local governments, a system that was particularly utilized in southern states, as black citizens were barred from participation in the electoral process. In the years since its enactment, the use of overt voting rights infringements, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence committed at polling places has disappeared, while the presence of minority participation in our electoral processes has increased significantly (Shaw et al. 2018). The success of the Voting Rights Act has led some people to the conclusion that it has served its purpose, thus making the VRA and its strict regulation and monitoring of voting policies enacted by states and localities as irrelevant as the discriminatory voting policies in which it has successfully eliminated. However, not everyone adheres to this view, as many believe that the VRA still maintains a critical role in the defense of voting rights for all. Congressman, and civil rights icon, John Lewis is a proponent of the latter view, and he discusses the history and significance of the Voting Rights Act in an article published by the American Bar Association.

John Lewis describes the treatment of black Americans through his own experiences. He details the oppressive nature of discriminatory policies that were prevalent throughout the South during the era of Jim Crow. He states, "When I was growing up in rural Alabama, I experienced the systematic dehumanization of African Americans in the South... In Lowndes County, Alabama, 80 percent of the residents were African American, but none were registered to vote. All across the Deep South, people who tried to register to vote or who encouraged black citizens to register were arrested, jailed, beaten, and killed. Some were fired from their jobs, separated from their families, evicted from their homes, and threatened with the loss of everything they had" (2012). Lewis experienced the abusive hatred that served as the justification for the many acts of violence against blacks in the south firsthand on a number of occasions, but the most infamous example occurred on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The events that took place on that fateful day sparked a national push for change regarding the circumstances for black Americans in the South (Lewis 2012).

The Voting Rights Act is made up of multiple provisions, some of which are permanent and others that have been attached by Congress and require renewal at intervals of time set by the Congress that votes upon it (Lewis 2012). Among the permanent provisions of important note, lies Section 2. It establishes that any law or voting practice that could result in the denial of the right to vote on the account of race or color is illegal (Lewis 2012). Section 4 specifically forbids the utilization of any "test or device" for registering or voting in an election, adding teeth to the proclamation in Section 2. It also establishes "that any jurisdiction in which a "test or device" was used for voting and in which less than half of voting age residents were registered or voted in the 1964, 1968, or 1972 presidential elections is covered by the enforcement provisions of Section 5" (Lewis 2012). The enforcement provisions mandate that any state or locality that does not meet the criteria defined in Section 4 seek "pre-clearance" from the Justice Department before enacting any voting laws. Section 5 has also allowed the Justice Department to send federal examiners to monitor elections throughout the country (Lewis 2012). The Voting Rights Act has served as the preeminent document in defending the rights for all citizens to participate in the electoral process, and it remains a critical barrier in the protection against continued attacks on the voting rights of all.

For the purpose of this paper, it is also necessary to define at-large election systems and discuss how they compare to single-member district election systems. The National League of Cities (NLC) defines at-large election systems as elected bodies that serve a broader constituency, such as the entire population of a city or county (NLC 2018). This is in contrast to a district election system, in which elected officials only serve a segment of a given population (NLC 2018). Proponents of at-large election systems believe that elected officials will be more likely to be impartial, as they will be more likely to address the problems of a community as a whole, rather than just a segment (NLC 2018). They also believe that better qualified officials are elected, as the applicant pool is much larger. Opponents of at-large elections claim that they oftentimes dilute the voices of minority citizens, particularly when certain members of an ethnic or racial minority are concentrated in a small segment of the municipality (NLC 2018). At-large elections are still utilized by a majority of cities and counties across the United States (NLC 2018).

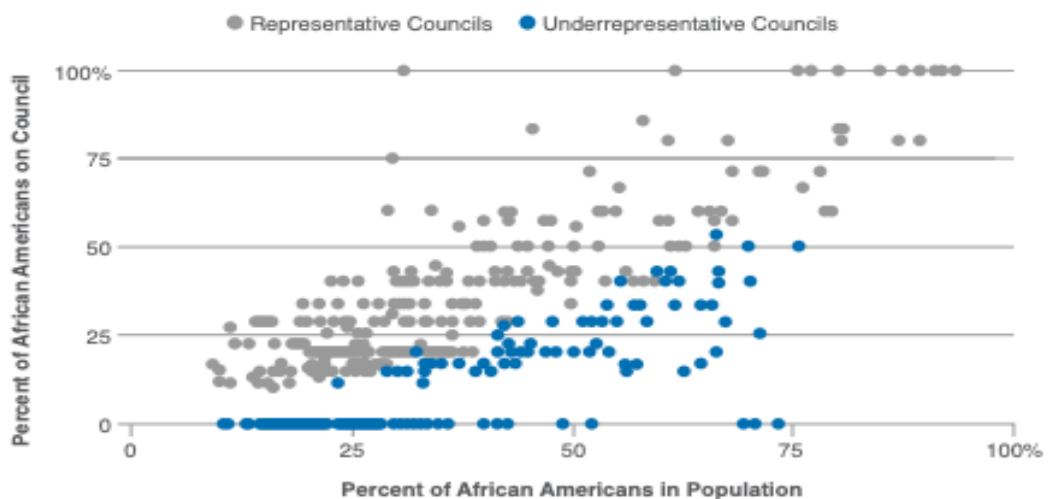
Professors Trounstine and Valdini, in their intricate study, analyze the varying effects of single-member district elections and at-large elections on minority representation and gender diversity at the local government level (2008). Through their analysis of 7,000 city governments, Trounstine and Valdini seek to challenge the notion when they state, “At the city level scholars have found mixed results for the effect of single-member district elections in increasing descriptive representation. Particularly in places where citywide elections were implemented to dilute the vote strength of racial groups, districts have been seen as a key factor in increasing racial and ethnic diversity” (2008). They test the notion of minority underrepresentation in localities that utilize at-large elections through a statistical comparison of minority representation on between the two election systems. They also analyze outside factors such as the density and overall size of minority populations in a given area to better understand the potential influence that single-member districts have in the election of minority candidates. They also interview councilmen and women in order to foster an understanding of their experiences with minority representation and gender diversity on a human level, while also attempting to understand the reasoning for adopting a given election system in a particular city (2008).

Professors Trounstine and Valdini found in their extensive research that single-member district elections were more effective in increasing the representation of minority citizens serving as city and countywide elected officials. While they suggest that single-member districts are better at promoting diversity among county officials than at-large election systems, there is a caveat. Single-member districts are often times only effective when minority groups are concentrated in certain districts within a city or county, otherwise their voice is diluted in a manner similar to that of an at-large election (2008). In their findings they also state that minority groups that represent a sizable portion of the population are likely to experience the most benefits from single-member districts elections, as smaller minorities are just as unlikely to attain

elected office as they would fare in an at-large election. However, it is fair to note that at-large elections have a more pronounced effect on minority representation, as they suggest that “subtle racism” or a distrust in blacks can serve as a severe impediment in their attempts at attaining elected office in at-large elections (2008).

In 2014, Demos, a public policy think tank, released a report detailing the extent of African-American underrepresentation in elected local government offices. The report seeks to identify reasons for the dramatic under-

Figure 1. African American Representation on Local Councils, 2011.
Representative and underrepresentative councils in municipalities in which a descriptively representative council would have at least one African American member

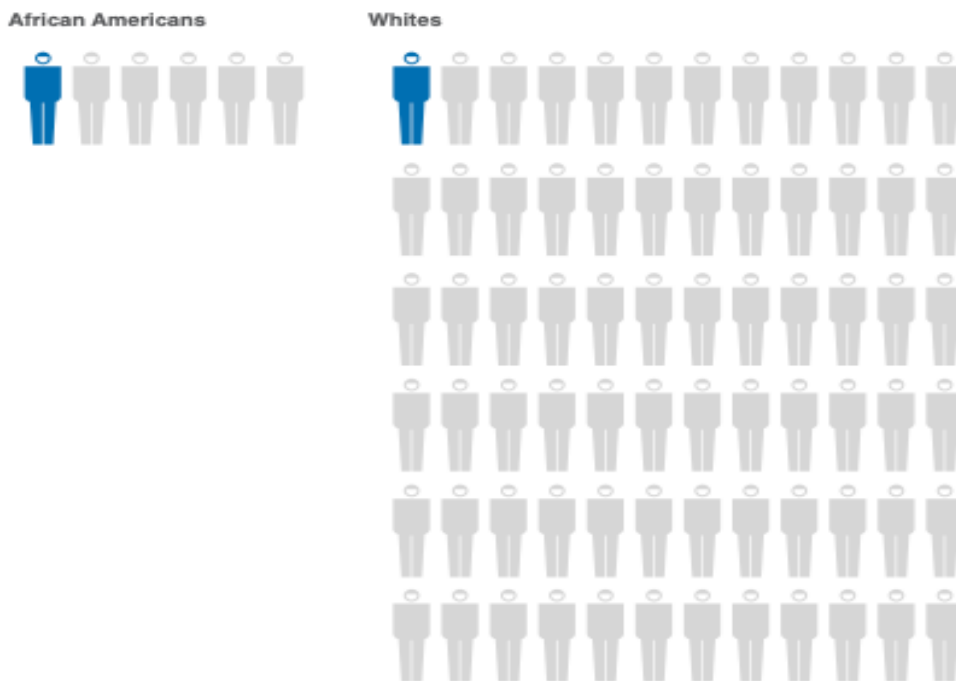


Source: Author's calculations from data provided by Jessica Trounstine

representation of blacks in cities where they represent a majority of the population. The statistics they provide are staggering in their scale, as the report determines that “more than 1.2 million African Americans in 175 communities across the country have councils that do not descriptively represent them. A council is descriptively representative if its members reflect the demographics of the community they’re supposed to represent. African Americans’ share of the council in these 175 communities does not reflect their share of the population” (Shanton 2014). After an examination of 438 city councils, it was determined that 175 of them did not descriptively represent the black population in their communities (Shanton 2014).

The graph above identifies the under-representative councils by measuring the percentage of African-Americans on the 438 councils with the percentage of African-Americans in the general population. The statistics regarding black under-representation on city councils stand out even more when compared to the number of white Americans that are not descriptively represented on their local councils. While whites encompass a substantially larger share of the American population than blacks, only 500,000 whites live in an area where their council representation does not match the demographics of the community (Shanton 2014). The gap in overall representation is enormous, yet the divide continues to expand with the addition of more contexts. The report goes on to determine that “whites outnumber African Americans 5-to-1 in the communities examined for this report so their smaller absolute numbers are also a smaller share of a larger total population. Just 1.5 percent of whites in the municipalities in the International City/County Management Association’s (ICMA) sample have local councils that don’t represent them. By contrast, 16.5 percent of African Americans in these municipalities are underrepresented. So, approximately one in every six African Americans lacks full representation on his or her local council, compared to just one in 66 whites” (Shanton 2014). The graph below illustrates the divide in representation between black and white citizens on city councils across the country.

Figure 2. Underrepresentation on Local Councils by Race, 2011
Proportions of African American and white residents underrepresented on local councils



Source: Author's calculations from data provided by Jessica Trounsine

Freeport, Texas that sought to replace its single-member district election system with at-large elections for its city council. In a 2002 ruling, the DOJ cited minority vote dilution in its reasoning for denying the city’s proposal (Sturgis 2017). In another instance, the DOJ opposed a change in Fayetteville, North Carolina’s City Council elections citing concerns that the proposed at-large elections would dilute the voice of black voters (Sturgis 2017). At-large elections serve as an

While at-large elections cannot be blamed for the disparity between white and black representation on local government bodies in its entirety, its discriminatory history is well documented. Prior to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the federal courts blocked and overturned at-large election systems in localities all across the South. The courts and the DOJ believe that at-large elections have a discriminatory effect on minority voters. For example, “in 2000, the DOJ announced that the at-large method of electing city council members in Morgan City, Louisiana, violated Section 2 of the VRA by diluting the strength of black voters. Under a consent decree, the city’s elections were changed from at-large to five single-member districts” (Sturgis 2017). The DOJ blocked a proposal in

impediment to fair representation, as they effectively suppress the voice of minority voters in a manner similar to poll taxes, literacy tests, violence, and other weapons utilized in the Jim Crow South. The DOJ, under the leadership of both Democratic and Republican administrations, has recognized partisan gerrymandering and at-large elections as threats to our democratic electoral processes through its efforts to thwart the adoption of these policies in various localities across the country.

Before the issue discussed above can be properly addressed one must first employ the analytical method and the first step of that process is to develop a theory or “a set of empirical generalizations about a topic.” (Monroe 2000). A theory can also be described as a connection between variables. For example, my theory reads as follows: cities and counties that use an at-large election model suppress the votes of minorities. The next step involves discerning the variables, which are defined as “an empirical property that can take on two or more different values.” (Monroe 2000) For the theory above the independent variable would be elections system that is being employed by the city or county, while the dependent variable would be the evidence of the voting power of minorities being hindered due to the election system, but due to the vagueness of that theory there are no feasible means for testing the accuracy of that statement.

In order to make the theory testable, a hypothesis, defined by Monroe, as “an empirical statement derived from a theory” (2000) must be formulated. A hypothesis is simply a statement that can be verified, a testable version of a theory. For example, my hypothesis states: cities and counties that employ at-large elections are significantly more likely to underrepresent minority populations within their area. This is a testable statement derived from the initial theory, and it is one that can be tested through analyzing studies and journals in order to determine the legitimacy of the hypothesis. Monroe also states that a hypothesis must have a relationship that is either positive or negative. He defines and gives an example of a positive relationship when he states “in a positive or direct relationship between two variables, as one variable rises, the other tends to rise; for example, ‘the more education one has, the greater ones income.’” (2000) The opposite occurs in a negative relationship, as Monroe states “in negative or inverse relationships, the opposite occurs, that is, as one variable rises, the other tends to fall; for example, ‘the wealthier a nation, the lower its level of literacy.’” (2000)

There are a wide variety of studies and journals that have documented connections between at-large elections and their impact on minority voters’ opportunities to hold an elected office in areas that utilize the system. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* study conducted by Ariel Hart, Jeff Ernsthansen, and David Wickert analyzes the impact that at-large elections have on the under-representation of blacks on county commissions across Georgia. In a synopsis of the researcher’s findings they state, “in many areas of Georgia, African-Americans are under-represented on county commissions -- the governing boards that set property tax rates and decide how basic public services are distributed throughout the county. An exclusive analysis by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reveals such under-representation is

more pronounced in counties that elect commissioners in countywide (“at large”) contests rather than from individual districts” (2013). Their analysis compared the racial makeup of each county commission to the racial makeup of the respective counties they represent (2013). They found that blacks are underrepresented in a significant number of Georgia counties. The issue of under-representation is especially high in counties that feature an at-large election system and a black population that is close to, but not

District Category	Counties electing all officials at large	Counties electing some officials at large	Counties electing no officials at large	Statewide
Counties in category	34	73	52	159
Total voters	673,841	3,538,842	1,216,226	5,428,909
White voters	78%	57%	53%	59%
White officials	94%	76%	70%	77%
Black voters	13%	31%	38%	30%
Black officials	6%	24%	31%	23%
White officials elected at large	94%	89%	N/A	92%
Black officials elected at large	6%	11%	N/A	8%
Ratio of white officials to white voters	6:5	4:3	4:3	4:3
Ratio of black officials to black voters	1:2	3:4	4:5	3:4

at 50% (2013). The analysis stands as a critical study of local electoral systems and their effects on the voting power of blacks in the state of Georgia.

In 34 of Georgia's 159 counties countywide officials are elected entirely through at-large voting systems (Hart et al. 2013). The number of counties that utilize an at-large election system to elect at least one county official exceeds 100 (Hart et al. 2013). In the eyes of many, this is a pervasive issue, as "at-large voting and black under-representation still go hand-in-hand, leaving some local governments, which decide matters of great importance for day-to-day living, without any black representation" (Hart et al. 2013) Despite the low number of minority citizens elected to countywide positions in counties that utilize at-large election systems, proponents, including the respected Dr. Charles Bullock of the University of Georgia, argue that at-large election systems are often mischaracterized. For instance, Dr. Bullock has argued that at-large election systems oftentimes elect officials that are concerned with issues that carry significance beyond the district in which they reside, meaning a wider spectrum of concerns are addressed (Hart et al. 2013).

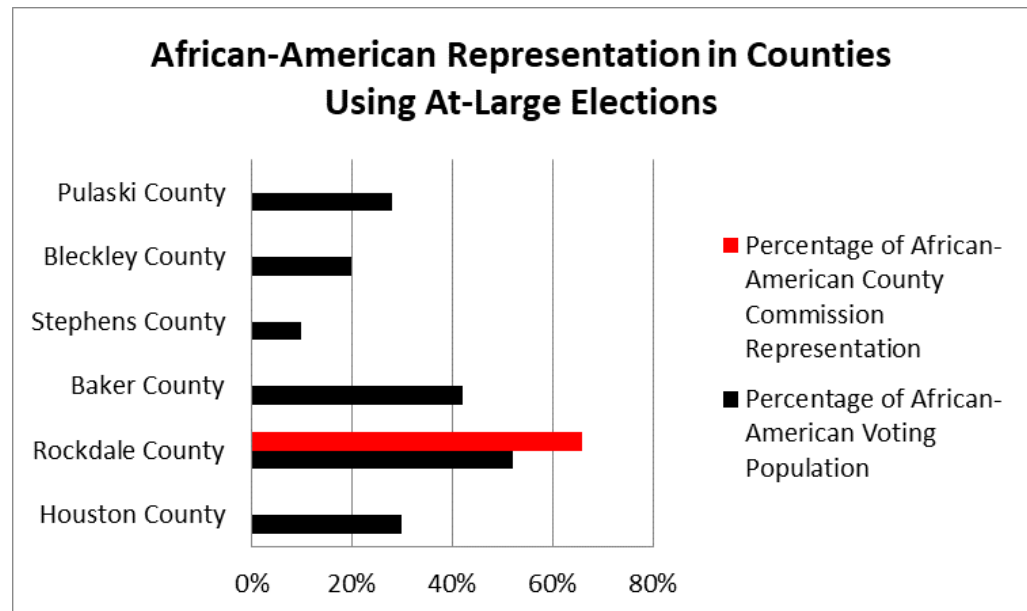
However, the benefits of at-large election systems can do little in sheltering the voting public from its glaring flaw, its penchant for solidifying the political authority of racial majorities. From the chart above, it is quite easy to tell that whites are overrepresented in counties that utilize at-large elections exclusively, as whites represent 78% of the population, yet 94% of the elected officials are white in those 34 counties. By comparison, blacks represent 13% of the population, yet just 6% of the elected officials are black. It is much of the same in counties that elect some officials at-large, as whites represent only 56% of the population, yet 89% of officials elected at-large are white in those counties. Once again, the difference in representation between whites and blacks elected through at-large elections is stark, as only 11% of the officials elected at-large are black, despite blacks making up 31% of the population in those counties. In the 52 counties that do not use at-large elections there remains a divide between the number of white and black officials when compared to the size of their respective populations in those counties collectively. Despite this divide, the election systems being utilized by those counties allow blacks a far better opportunity to reach elected office, as the counties are portioned into districts that oftentimes elect officials that are more representative of the racial makeup of their district.

It should be noted that blacks are not the only race to experience suppressing effects of at-large election systems. When reviewing the percentage of minority officials on a county-by-county basis, it stands out that blacks are over-represented in counties that utilize at-large election systems in which they make up the majority of the population. For example, in Rockdale County blacks represent 43% of the population; yet hold 67% of the countywide elected offices (Merwin 2013). Statistics such as that suggest that blacks aren't necessarily persecuted by at-large systems exclusively, as any group that represents a minority within a given population will likely find it difficult to achieve elected office. However, this statistic does little to mitigate the sinister reasoning for originally implementing at-large elections in some Georgia counties. As in the case of Wiley Bolden of Mobile, Alabama, many Georgia counties transitioned to an at-large system in response to the Civil Rights movement and the efforts of the federal government to raise voter registration levels for blacks across the country (Hart et al. 2013). The implementation of an at-large election system in counties where whites were the majority all but ensured that blacks would not hold office, regardless of the number that were registered to vote (Hart et al. 2013).

The *Atlanta Journal Constitution's* (AJC) study is informative and comprehensive, but it is also 6 years old. In my research, I provide an updated view of the current election systems used to elect county commissioners, while measuring the impact of those election systems on racial representation on the county commissions in a handful of Georgia counties. Unlike the AJC study, I will not look at all 159 Georgia counties, as I do not have the means to do so in this class time frame. However, I have carefully selected 27 counties while considering factors such as election system utilized, geographic location (north, south, east, west), population size and density (urban, suburban, rural), and an African-American population encompassing at least 10% of the registered voting population. The last factor explains why I was unable to include many north Georgia counties in my research, as the overwhelming majority of those counties do not have significant African-American voting populations. It also explains the heavy presence of counties surrounding Atlanta and in central and southwest Georgia, as these areas contain higher percentages of black citizens.

In 2013, the AJC reported that 34 Georgia counties use at-large elections to determine who will serve on their respective county commissions. Using the criteria I defined above, I selected 6 counties that currently employ at-large election systems to choose their county commissioners. For the counties that were selected, I compared the percentage of African-Americans serving on a specific county commission with the percentage of African-Americans reflected in the total voting population of that county. Of the counties that were chosen, all six feature an under-represented minority population. The graph below presents clear evidence of under-represented black populations in counties where they are the minority. However, the graph also provides evidence of African-American over-representation in a county where they are the majority. Rockdale County is home to an African-American population that represents a clear majority (52%), yet they make up 67% of the county commission seats, leaving the white minority population under-represented on the county commission. It should be noted that Rockdale County is an outlier, as it is usually African-American minority populations that must overcome the barriers to equal representation erected by at-large election systems.

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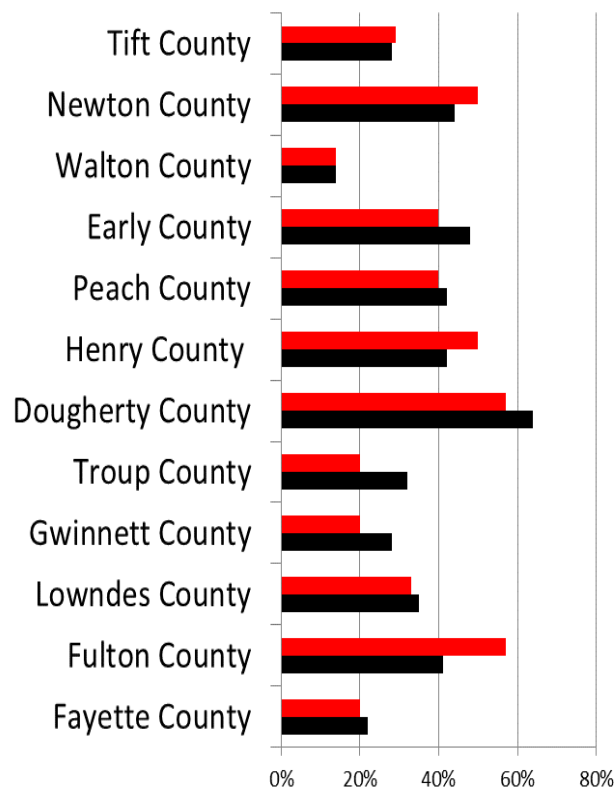
The chart above compares the percentage of African-Americans serving on a specific county commission with the percentage of African-Americans reflected in the total voting population of that county. Rockdale County

Houston County is included in the Warner-Robins metropolitan area and it has a population of 153,479 as of 2017. The county is also home to a substantial African-American population, as they represent 30% of the registered voter population. Despite the significant African-American presence in Houston County, they are not represented on the board of county commissioners, as all of the current members are white. As depicted on the chart above, Houston County utilizes an at-large election system in selecting their county commissioners, and it is this system that prevents African-Americans from electing the candidates of their choice. As it stands now, the voices of black voters are going unheard, as the power of their votes is diluted by an electoral system with a track record of disenfranchisement. Leah Aden, an assistant counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund believes more at-large election systems will be struck down for violating Section 2 of the VRA, as she states, "the reality is, at-large election methods in Georgia have repeatedly been struck down by federal courts. Between 1982 and 2005, voters of color were successful in nearly 70 such challenges." The at-large election methods used in the 6 counties above are unlikely to withstand constitutional scrutiny, as the evidence of African-American under-representation resulting from their current use of at-large elections is clear.

The majority of Georgia counties utilize mixed election systems when choosing county commissioners. A mixed election system employs a combination of at-large seats and single-member district seats. The most common combination consists of a commission chairman that is elected at-large and a series of commissioners that are elected by the residents in a particular district within the county. There are other combinations being utilized, as the number of seats elected at-large depends on the current policy of the county. While African-American candidates typically do not fare well in the at-large races, they are able to attain office far more regularly through single-member district elections.

African-American Representation in Counties Using Mixed Elections

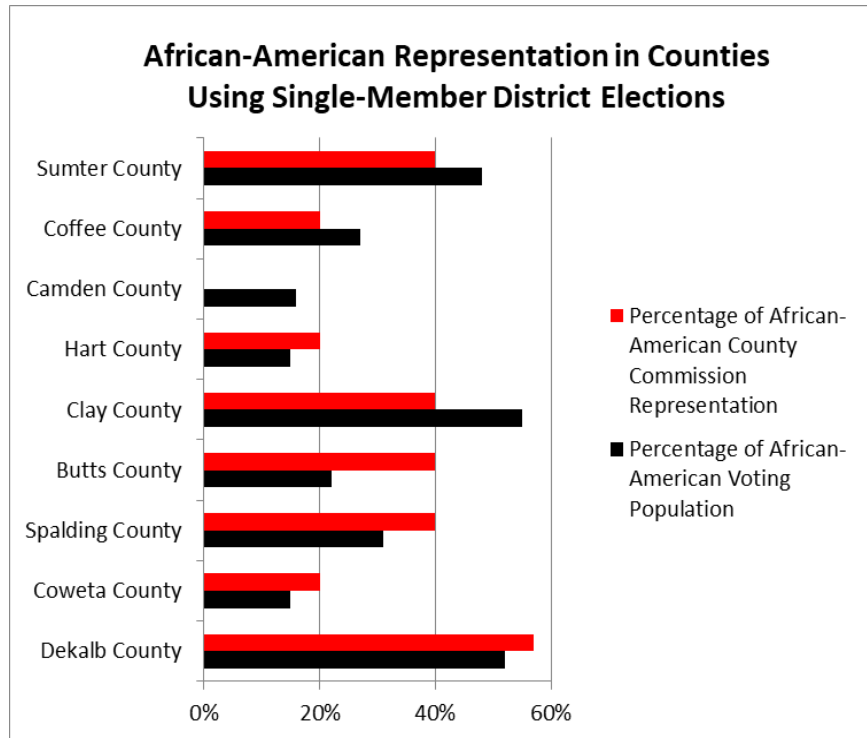
■ Percentage of African-American County Commission Representation
 ■ Percentage of African-American Voting Population



Using the same criteria as I did to select the counties employing at-large elections, I selected 12 counties that are using mixed election systems to elect their county commissions. Once again, for the chart above I compared the percentage of African-Americans serving on a specific county commission with the percentage of African-Americans reflected in the total voting population of that county. The chart demonstrates that mixed election systems are more adept at achieving equal representation than at-large election systems. For example, Walton County has an African-American population of 14% and a county commission that is exactly 14% African-American. If Walton County were to begin employing at-large elections for their county commission seats, it would be unlikely that an African-American would win a seat because of their small numbers and limited voting power. Another factor to consider is racially polarized voting, particularly among white voters. In 2013, the AJC studied the impact of racially polarized voting on the election of county commissioners in Georgia counties. They discovered that “across Georgia, in county commission elections where one race has a solid majority (at least 55 percent of active registered voters), white candidates hold 98 percent of seats in white-majority areas; blacks hold 84 percent of seats in black-majority areas. More than half of majority-black counties have majority-white commissions. But no majority-white county has a majority-black commission” (Hart et al. 2013). In determining whether race impacts voting, the results are unambiguous.

Until a recent federal court decision mandating the adoption of single-member district elections, Fayette County had never elected an African-American to its board of county commissioners, despite having an African-American population around 20% for much of its history (Aden 2015). In 2013, a federal district court “found Fayette’s at-large method of election, in combination with racially polarized voting, violates the Voting Rights Act because it essentially guarantees black voters cannot elect their candidates of choice” (Aden 2015). As a result of the court’s decision, Fayette County established single-member districts and elected its first African-American county commissioner in 2014. The signing of House Bill 955 by Governor Nathan Deal in 2016 further established a solution to the issue of African-American under-representation on the county’s board of commissioners. Under the new law, Fayette County would establish four single-member district seats and one at-large seat. African-Americans represent the majority of the voting population in one of the districts established by the bill. The legislation capped an end to the lengthy legal battle between the NAACP and Fayette County regarding election systems, as it appeased both parties. Fayette County’s transition away from at-large election methods afforded African-Americans the opportunity to elect their candidate of choice, while also standing in defense of equal representation for all residents of the county.

A substantial number of Georgia counties exclusively use single-member districts to elect their board of county commissioners. As stated above, single-member districts are far more effective at including minorities in the electoral process. Unlike at-large election systems, districts divide the voting population, potentially strengthening the voting power of minority communities, especially if they represent a majority of the voting population in a particular district. Using the same criteria as I did to select the counties employing at-large elections, I selected 9 counties that are using single-member district election systems to elect their county commissions. Once again, for the chart below I compared the percentage of African-Americans serving on a specific county commission with the percentage of African-Americans reflected in the total voting population of that county. In my research I found that single-member district systems, much like mixed election systems, are more proficient at achieving equal representation than at-large election methods. The chart demonstrates, with the exception of Camden County, that African-American minority (and majority) population percentages are similar to the percentage of African-American representatives serving on the various boards of county commissioners. DeKalb County has an African-American population of 52% and that population represents 57% of the county commission seats. Coweta County only has an African-American population of 15%, yet African-Americans encompass 20% of the commission seats. Single-member district methods of election provide a far better opportunity for minorities to hold office, as they combat racial polarized voting by separating counties into districts that are comprised of a unique demographic. In many cases districts will elect officials that reflect the racial makeup of the districts population.



In the charts and data on display above, I provide updated information on the impact of election systems on the state of African-American representation on county commission posts. I have also decided to take this research a step further by conducting a t test or, in other words, a test “used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two groups” (2019). The two groups I will be comparing the difference between are the African-American voting population percentage by county and African-American representation on county commissions by county. The results of the test are astounding, as I was able to find a significant difference between the two groups

Data Summary			
	A	B	Total
n	6	6	12
$\sum X$	182	66	248
$\sum X^2$	6652	4356	11008
SS	1131.3333	3630	5882.6667
mean	30.3333	11	20.6667

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.078507
19.3333	+1.53	10		two-tailed	0.157014

for counties using at-large election systems. In my research I am able to say with 90% confidence (.078507) that I found a significant difference between African-American voting population percentage (30.3333%) and African-American representation on county commissions (11%) in counties that use at-large elections. This suggests that counties that utilize at-large elections tend to demonstrate bias against minority voters.

Although I was able to find a significant difference between African-American voting population percentage and African-American representation on county commissions for counties that are exclusively utilizing at-large election methods, my findings for mixed and single-member district election systems are not statistically significant, yet they are still meaningful.

The data above reveals that there is no statistical significance between the two groups because the African-American voting population percentage (36.6667%) is roughly equal to the African-American representation on county commissions (35.8333%) in counties that use mixed election systems. This means that African-Americans are able to achieve equal representation in counties that use mixed elections. This outcome is a far cry from my findings regarding at-large election systems and its impact on achieving equal representation for African-Americans on county commission seats.

As discussed above, my findings for counties using single-member district election systems are not significant, but they are crucial. Similar to the data on mixed election systems, the information above reveals that there is no statistical significance between the two groups because the African-American voting population percentage (31.2222%) is roughly equal to the African-American representation on county commissions (30.7778%) in counties that use single-member district election systems. This suggests that single-member district elections are far more effective at achieving equal representation for African-American communities than at-large election systems.

My research and data along with the findings of the AJC and the countless examples of African-American under-

<i>Data Summary</i>			
	A	B	Total
n	9	9	18
$\sum X$	281	277	558
$\sum X^2$	10913	10849	21762
SS	2139.5556	2323.5556	4464
mean	31.2222	30.7778	31

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.4764495
0.4444	+0.06	16		two-tailed	0.952899

<i>Data Summary</i>			
	A	B	Total
n	12	12	24
$\sum X$	440	430	870
$\sum X^2$	18042	18024	36066
SS	1908.6667	2615.6667	4528.5
mean	36.6667	35.8333	36.25

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.444967
0.8333	+0.14	22		two-tailed	0.889934

representation in localities that utilize at-large election systems have unveiled an institution of bias against minority voters. Statewide, over 100 Georgia counties select at least one county commissioner using an at-large voting method, despite the documented impact of at-large elections on minority representation (Hart et al. 2013). At-large election systems effectively silence African-American votes in the Georgia counties where they are the minority. This is the unfortunate reality for many African-American communities across the state as, “a system that includes at-large voting normally solidifies the strength of the racial majority. That’s certainly true in Georgia: In 203 at-large commissioner elections, the victorious candidate was of the same race as the plurality of active registered voters in 186 cases” (Hart et al. 2013). The combination of at-large election systems and racially polarized voting undermines a core pillar of our democratic governance, the right to vote. A federal court likened

Fayette County's at-large elections to an impenetrable barrier that effectively excludes African-Americans from the electoral process. Just as Fayette County was, Houston County and the other counties currently employing at-large election systems are violating that principle by diminishing the voice of their African-American residents.

At-large election systems have not shown that they can provide equal opportunities to achieve representation for all members of a community. They have also demonstrated that the majority can utilize them as a weapon for suppressing the voice of a minority group, regardless of their race. History lays before us the sinister utilization of at-large elections to suppress black voters in areas that feature a white majority. It is through this lens, that at-large elections should be understood. At-large election systems have shown that they are ineffective in promoting a diverse body of elected officials when minority groups are overwhelmed by the voting power of the majority.

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