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## African Americans and municipal employment: A test of two perspectives

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### Abstract

A survey of the extant literature addressing the factors that drive African American municipal employment offers two broad types of explanations: (1) Black political power and (2) institutional. A comparative assessment of the performance of each of these explanations fills a gap in the literature by illuminating the differences of these distinct perspectives when it comes to employment of Blacks in the public sector. Focusing on six Florida cities from 1960 to 2000, this study tests the predictive power of each of these explanations comparatively for four city departments. The findings indicate that the Black political power explanation performs better than the institutional explanation as a predictor of Black employment. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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The employment of Blacks in municipal service jobs in the South is a good indicator of racial equity at the local level. Public employment not only provides a valuable source of income, but it also confers a degree of status or prestige not found in low-paying, service-oriented jobs held by many Blacks in the private sector. Previous research identifies a host of factors that help to explain levels of Black municipal employment (Behr, 2000; Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 1997; Dye & Renick, 1981; Eisinger, 1982; Mladenka, 1989; Saltzstein, 1989; Zhao & Lovrich, 1998). These studies do not recognize that these factors generally fall under one of two explanations: (1) institutional and (2) Black political power. Black political power (i.e., Black population resources and Black elected officials) interpretations are typified by indicators utilized in *Social Movement* literature (Morris, 1996; Snow, Rochford,

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Worden, & Benford, 1986), while institutional explanations underlie the broader rubric of *New Institutionalism* (see Shepsle, 1989). Using measures that span four decades, this study tests the predictive power of each of these theoretical perspectives for four city departments in six Florida cities.

## 1. Institutional explanations

Institutionalism can be defined as a method of political analysis that emphasizes questions about the impact of institutions on political outcomes, fundamental changes in political structures and processes, and the consequences of institutional capacity (Robertson, 1993). This approach has been used to explain both how institutions are shaped and how they shape outcomes. Focusing on the latter, the institutionalist perspective suggests that changes in Black public employment can be explained by the variation in institutional structures such as district elections, city manager systems, and affirmative action programs. The literature suggests several institutional variables are important in minority city employment (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb 1997; Mladenka, 1989). Stein (1986) offers perhaps the most complete model of minority employment. The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between minority employment and the size of the minority population, the change in workforce demographics, region, and the presence of a minority chief executive. Institutional explanations such as residency requirements and government type were also important factors. Few studies, however, have empirically investigated the effects of an institutional affirmative action program on Black municipal workers, although there is the assumption that affirmative action, being a government-oriented policy, has had an impact on minority public employment (Reskin, 1998).

## 2. Black political power explanations

Political representation is essential in explaining the concept of Black political power. While the presence of a Black mayor and city council representation is instrumental to obtaining power, it is also important to consider the contribution of the size of the Black population. Studies have suggested both that the presence of Black elected officials greatly affects the minority share of city jobs (Behr, 2000; Dye & Renick, 1981; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Saltzstein, 1989) and that the size of the Black population has a great impact on total Black employment (Eisinger, 1982; Zhao & Lovrich, 1998). Kerr and Mladenka (1994) find no significant effects of Black mayors on minority public sector employment, contending that previous findings were a result of the limitations of cross-sectional data. They do suggest that there is a positive effect on employment resulting from interaction between Black city council members and minority administrators in key decision making positions. They also contend that Black political power is essential. Overall, the literature focuses more on Black political power explanations of African American municipal employment suggesting that they serve as a better theoretical foundation than institutionalism for understanding the increased presence of Blacks in the public sector.

### 3. Data and methods

This study investigates Black employment in four departments (police, fire, recreation, and public works) in six Florida cities. Florida includes the range of political and social environments typical of the South (Scher, 1997). The northern part, or panhandle region, is representative of the largely rural, poor, agricultural-based and traditionally conservative Deep South or Old South. The southern, mainly coastal regions of the state are typical of the more urbanized, faster growing, more middle-class and relatively progressive Border South or New South. Thus, three cities from the Deep South region and three within the Border South were selected. As mentioned previously, the relative size of the Black population is also considered important when exploring the employment of Blacks. Therefore the six cities were selected along a continuum of Black population size ranging from relatively small (10–25%); medium-sized (30–45%); to relatively large (more than 50%). Two communities (one in the Old South and one in the New South) were chosen in each category (Button, 1989). All cities are relatively small (average population of 27,732 ranging from 10,000 to 64,000) and thus typical in size of most southern cities. While these communities are generally representative of these regional and Black population variations, they were not selected randomly and therefore we do not claim generalizability. Data were collected for each of these cities from city records, newspaper reports, the U.S. Census, oral histories and personal interviews every fifth year beginning in 1975 with department heads, mayors, city managers, and personnel managers. The data span every fifth year over a 40-year period (1960–2000).

To explore causal relationships we utilized a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models (12 models). The outcome variable is the percentage of Black employment for each department. By using a series of models we can ascertain the separate effects of each respective theory, and then estimate the combined effects as well.

Again, the literature suggests that Black political representation translates into Black political power and is often the most important predictor of Black municipal employment. We extend this argument contending that representation in the workplace is also an important factor. Simply, Black political power is also a function of the prevalence of Blacks as chief departmental administrators. As such, we built an index to represent Black political power. This index is a regression factor score that includes four components. The presence of a Black mayor, the percentage of Black city council members, the presence of a Black chief of each respective department, and the percentage of the city's population that is Black were included in this index.

As for institutional indicators, the literature suggests that mayor-council cities are more responsive to racial minorities than those with nonelected professional city managers (Lineberry & Fowler, 1967; Stein, 1986). In terms of election type, district systems tend to elect more residentially segregated Blacks to office and to better represent minority interests than at-large elections or some combination of the two systems (Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Mladenka, 1989). We created dummy variables for the presence of each of these institutions. Partisan or nonpartisan elections also may make a difference, but all of the cities in our sample have had nonpartisan elections and therefore this factor cannot be tested.

In addition, institutional affirmative action policies and informal equal opportunity actions may affect minority employment. While federal affirmative action requirements did not begin

until the mid-1970s for municipalities, not all cities actually implemented a formal plan while others sought to hire or promote more Blacks informally for political or other reasons. Thus, we developed three indicators of affirmative action: (1) presence of a formal city affirmative action plan (0, 1 dummy); (2) the chief executive (mayor or city manager) officer's degree of expressed support for affirmative action (0 = none, 1 = some, 2 = a lot); and (3) department head's degree of emphasis on hiring Blacks (same scale as for chief executive). These affirmative action indicators all loaded on one factor and reliably grouped together (Cronbach's standardized  $\alpha = .788$  for the police department,  $\alpha = .626$  for the recreation department,  $\alpha = .807$  for the fire department,  $\alpha = .629$  for the public works department) for the development of affirmative action factor scores for each department.

Other factors, besides those related to Black political power and institutional explanations, may also influence African American city employment. Since White females and Hispanics have been entering the labor force in large numbers in the last decade or two, it is expected that intergroup competition would increase. Further, given that Blacks, Hispanics, and women all disproportionately occupy the lower rungs of employment, it is reasonable that competition might exist among these groups since they are competing for the same jobs (Alozie & Ramirez, 1999; McClain, 1993; McClain & Karnig, 1990). To ascertain levels of competition with Blacks, the total number of White females and Hispanic city employees are summed. By summing these indicators instead of converting them to percentages, we remove them from the same scale as the outcome variable, which permits us to estimate their effects more accurately.

We also include two contextual factors that may affect African American job-holding. One variable is the degree of political conservatism in the community. This is measured as the percentage of city votes cast for Republican candidates in presidential elections (Colby, 1985). Without specific public opinion data for these communities, voting results provide the best available evidence of local political ideology. Research also suggests that city size is a contextual factor of importance, with larger cities providing a more diverse and tolerant environment that is amenable to employment opportunities for minorities (Mladenka, 1989; Wilson, 1995).

#### 4. A test of two theories

Fig. 1 demonstrates the general rising pattern of Black municipal employment in these departments, but also indicates some disparity across departments. The total number of employees ranges across departments with public works being the largest, followed by the police department, then the fire department, and finally parks and recreation. Nonetheless, comparisons can be drawn by looking at percentages. The total percentage of Black city workers increased in all departments. On average, there is an increase in Black employment from almost 20% in 1960 to approximately 40% by 2000 in the recreation department, and from just less than 40% to nearly 50% by 1980 in the public works department. Recreation and public works have less education and skill requirements and thus are much more pluralistic in their racial makeup than most city departments.

Blacks have had a much smaller presence in the protective services of police and fire departments, with relatively slow average growth between 1960 and 2000 (from under 10% to 20% in the police department, and from 0% to 14% in the fire department). Historically southern

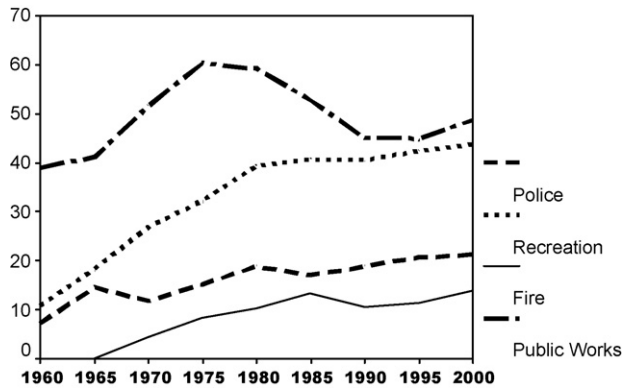


Fig. 1. Mean percent Black employment in municipal departments. Source: In-depth interviews with public employees in six Florida cities.

police departments, a powerful symbol of White authority, were more likely to harass or brutalize Blacks than to hire them. Fire departments were also a traditional bastion of White male supremacy that often refused employment to Blacks (Button, 1989).

Overall, the regression models indicate that Black political power explanations of Black municipal employment perform better than do institutional explanations. Black political power is significant across all of the models and the magnitude of the effect is larger than any of the other variables. As for the institutional models, very few institutional variables are significant. In addition, the Black political power models explain more of the variance than the institutional models. More controls are significant in the institutional models but this correlation dissipates when controlling for Black political power. It also appears that Black political power explains more of the variance than the controls such as racial competition, city ideology, and population.

The results for the police department and recreation department are contained in Table 1. Our results do not contradict previous findings that Black political power explanations were important factors in determining Black employment (Button, 1989; Dye & Renick, 1981; Eisinger, 1982; Stein, 1986). As expected, there are more significant positive effects, a better model fit, and more of the variance of percent Black employment is explained by Black political power in both the police and recreation models. The only significant institutional indicator is affirmative action in the parks and recreation model, estimating a positive relationship with percent Black employment. This relationship, however, becomes nonsignificant when controlling for Black political power and its effect is not diminished by the introduction of institutional controls. Neither district elections nor city management appears to be influential in Black employment in the police or recreation department.

The Black political power models fit the data more effectively than the institutional models for the police and recreation departments. The *F*-statistic is significant and considerably higher across the models for both departments. The *F*-statistic for the police department is 32.267, while only 4.212 for the institutional model. The *F*-statistic for the Black political power recreation model is 26.742 and only 6.492 for the institutional parks and recreation model. Further, a significantly higher percentage of the variance is explained in the Black political

Table 1  
Predictors of Black employment police/parks and recreation

	Police department			Parks and recreation department		
	Power	Institute	Full	Power	Institute	Full
Black power	.100** (.012)	–	.103** (.013)	.172** (.021)	–	.161** (.022)
City manager	–	.018 (.053)	.027 (.034)	–	.115 (.080)	.101 (.054)
District elections	–	–.041 (.053)	–.000 (.035)	–	.030 (.068)	.050 (.046)
Affirmative action	–	–.032 (.020)	–.009 (.014)	–	.123** (.039)	.014 (.030)
Controls						
Racial competition	.001 (.001)	.004 (.003)	.001 (.002)	.005 (.005)	–.021* (.008)	–.001 (.006)
City ideology	–.001 (.001)	–.006** (.001)	–.000 (.001)	–.002 (.002)	–.006* (.002)	–.000 (.002)
Population	–.000 (.000)	–.000** (.000)	–.000 (.000)	–.000 (.000)	–.000* (.000)	–.000 (.000)
Constant	.222** (.049)	.521** (.092)	.176* (.070)	.422** (.083)	.659** (.140)	.288** (.108)
R <sup>2</sup>	.725	.350	.731	.695	.464	.757
F	32.267	4.212	17.815	26.742	6.492	19.633
d.f.	4	6	7	4	6	7
N	54	54	54	52	52	52

Notes. Coefficients are derived using ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors are in parentheses, \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ . The affirmative action indicator is a regression factor score of three items. Black power is a factor score of percent Black population, Black department head, Black mayor and percent Black council. Racial competition is measured as a function of the sum of White female and Hispanic employees. Recreation has two fewer cases than the police model because the department was not instituted in Lake City until 1970.

power models. The  $R^2$  for the Black political power models is .725 and .695, respectively, and only .350, and .464 for the institutional models. Not one of the institutional indicators is significant in either the police department full model or the recreation department full model.

As for the control variables in the police and recreation models, there are mixed results with the controls performing well in the institutional models and not performing well in the Black political power models or full models. The ideology of the district and population is negative and significant across both institutional models. The magnitude of the effect is very small but nevertheless as the conservatism of a city increases, Black municipal employment decreases. Population is negatively correlated in both models, which contradicts previous findings (see [Mladenka, 1989](#); also see [Wilson, 1995](#)), but again the effects are small in magnitude. There appears to be a moderate degree of competition between White females and Hispanics with Blacks for employment in the parks and recreation department. As the number of White females and Hispanics rise, the percentage of Black employment decreases in this department. This competition does not appear to exist in other departments and is not significant generally. The controls add to the contention that Black political power is the best explanation of Black municipal employment because their effects dissipate when controlling for Black political power, indicating that it explains most of the variance.

Much of the same can be said for the fire department and public works department models. As can be seen in [Table 2](#), the Black political power indicator is significant across all the models and both departments. The Black political power models explain more of the variance than the institutional models (fire department Black power model  $R^2 = .453$ , institutional = .338; public works Black power model  $R^2 = .409$ , institutional = .306). Affirmative action is significant and positive for the fire department, but interestingly there is a significantly negative relationship in the public works department full model. This may be a result of the drop in Black employment in the public works department in the 1980s (refer to [Fig. 1](#)). The  $F$ -statistic is significantly higher in the Black political power models for the fire and public works departments. Overall, these models do not perform as well as the police and recreation department models, but the pattern is consistent. Black political power explains most of the variance.

As for the controls, there is a negative effect of city ideology in the institutional models but this effect drops out when controlling for Black political power. Again, population is negative and significant in the fire department institutional model, which contradicts previous findings (see [Mladenka, 1989](#); also see [Wilson, 1995](#)). Perhaps most interesting is the inconsistency of racial competition as a reliable control for these models. The only modest effects were in the parks and recreation department. The insignificance of the controls in the Black political power models and the full models lends support to the contention that Black political power serves as the best predictor of Black municipal employment because when included in the model any variance previously explained is either spurious or conditional.

We can conclude that Black political power explanations perform better than institutional explanations. There are more significant variables, there is better model fit, and more variance is explained. Since it is reasonable to expect that institutions may matter but only as mediators of Black political power, we tested for interactive effects. The results of this test are negligible, and therefore we do not include a table of the results. There are some significant positive interactive effects between Black political power and the presence of a city manager in the police and public works department models, but no other interactions are significant. In other

Table 2  
Predictors of Black employment fire/public works

	Fire department			Public works		
	Power	Institute	Full	Power	Institute	Full
Black power	.061** (.012)	–	.059** (.011)	.149** (.042)	–	.204** (.043)
City manager	–	.023 (.033)	.024 (.026)	–	.177 (.116)	.193* (.096)
District elections	–	.018 (.030)	.040 (.024)	–	.008 (.104)	.029 (.086)
Affirmative action	–	.043** (.014)	.030* (.012)	–	–.016 (.054)	–.130* (.051)
Controls						
Racial competition	.002 (.005)	.004 (.005)	–.005 (.004)	–.009 (.013)	–.011 (.016)	–.002 (.013)
City ideology	.001 (.001)	–.002* (.001)	.001 (.001)	–.004 (.003)	–.080* (.004)	.003 (.004)
Population	–.000 (.000)	–.000* (.000)	–.000 (.000)	–.000 (.000)	–.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Constant	.060 (.046)	.208** (.058)	.032 (.057)	.721** (.171)	.831** (.209)	.194 (.220)
R <sup>2</sup>	.453	.338	.590	.409	.306	.531
F	1.163	4.001	9.462	8.493	3.461	7.452
d.f.	4	6	7	4	6	7
N	54	54	54	54	54	54

Notes. Coefficients are derived using ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors are in parentheses, \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ . The affirmative action indicator is a regression factor score of three items. Black power is a factor score of percent Black population, Black department head, Black mayor and percent Black council. Racial competition is measured as a function of the sum of White female and Hispanic employees.

words, it does appear that the effect of a city manager in these departments is dependent on the level of Black political power. So there are moderate institutional effects here, but only in the presence of formidable Black political power.

## 5. Conclusion

It is not surprising that Black political power is the strongest predictor of African American municipal employment. Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, city employment, especially in police departments, has been one of the primary goals of Black politics. Moreover the civil rights movement served to mobilize Blacks politically, a force that in turn pressured local governments to hire and promote African Americans (Button, 1989; Wirt, 1997). Evidence that the political process works for Blacks in the South, the region where resistance to Black demands has been the most implacable, is a noteworthy finding.

As for institutional factors, the interesting finding is the lack of effects. It appears that the professionalism associated with city management does serve to filter some of the effects of Black political power, but these findings are limited. In these relatively small southern cities, municipal employment has often been carried out through informal, White male dominant networks in city hall, particularly in departments such as recreation that have few formal education and job certification requirements. A professional city manager is likely to institute more formal hiring (and promotion) procedures, as well as affirmative action plans and requirements, thus reducing racial bias and boosting the employment of Blacks.

Perhaps the most surprising finding concerning institutions is the ineffectiveness of affirmative action in these departments in both the interactive models and the full models, with the exception of the fire and public works departments. However, in public works, affirmative action had a negative impact, the opposite of what was anticipated. We expected that affirmative action, either as a formal plan or informally implemented by city executives, would have an interactive effect with Black political power on Black public employment. Our findings, however, indicated no such impact. While studies suggest that affirmative action assisted Blacks in gaining public jobs initially in the 1970s and early 1980s, the reduced emphasis on and lessened enforcement of this program by the Reagan Administration decreased its effectiveness locally (Reskin, 1998). Most White males in these departments strongly resisted affirmative action as well. Thus, over this 40-year time period, the impact of affirmative action has been small and largely pre-empted by Black resources and political power. These findings certainly suggest that affirmative action does not seem to be an effective route to increase Black employment in the public sector. Interestingly, many Black elected officials support such programs and it is their very presence that seems to be more effective at increasing Black employment as opposed to their support for affirmative action.

In conclusion, two different predictors of Black municipal employment have been tested, and one is clearly superior. Black political power is a much better explanation of Black municipal employment than is institutionalism. While our findings represent only the patterns in four departments in six Florida cities, the results of this analysis are meaningful. We hope that this test will lead researchers to recognize the different paradigmatic properties of these theories, and build more accurate models of minority employment. This study is a starting point for

further exploration into these differing effects. Perhaps, a larger national dataset will further flesh out the findings and add to the generalizability of the results.

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