

Why Representation Matters

Examining the Role of Congressional Racial Diversity on Political Engagement

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Abstract

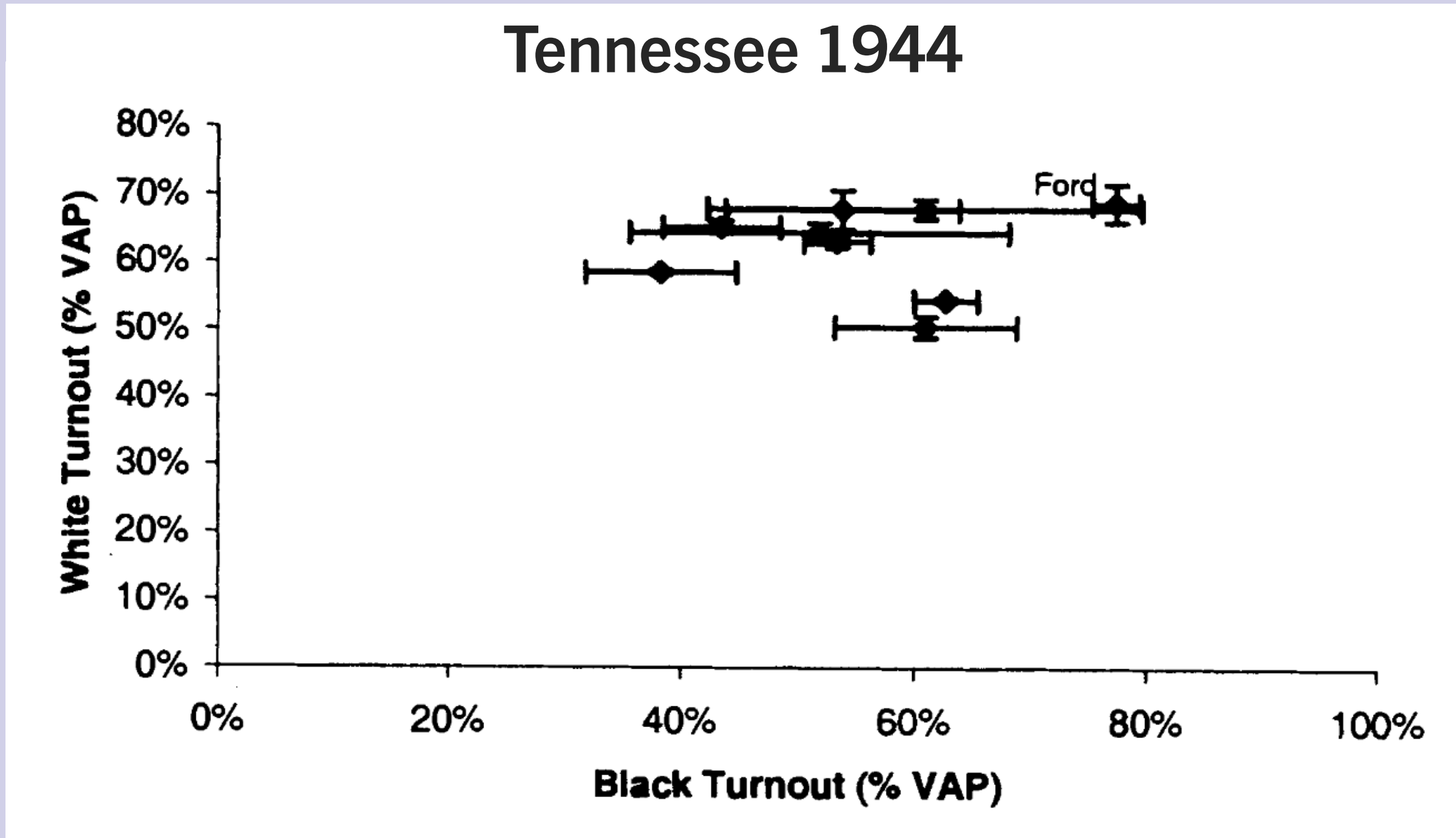
The current United States Congress is historically the most racially diverse, but the voter turnout gap between white and Black voters continues to grow exponentially. This research aims to form connections between Black congressional representation and the political participation of Black voters in elections, which proves to be significant. I examined factors such as the importance of descriptive representation, implications of intersectional identities, and the concept of identity politics as related to race. Furthermore, I offer potential solutions to increase political participation among Black voters such as expanding and codifying voting rights for racial minority groups.

Historical Context

- Currently, there are 61 African Americans holding office in the House of Representatives, and 4 in the Senate, making up roughly 12% of total membership.
- Even though the 118th Congress is the most racially diverse in history, Black people have been historically underrepresented in Congress.
- In the twentieth century, the migration of Black people to Northern urban centers led to the creation of majority-Black voting districts which subsequently led to more African Americans being elected to Congress (Tate 54).
- Black Americans are becoming more politically and electorally involved and represented. How does descriptive representation impact this?

Black Voters and Descriptive Representation

- Descriptive representation explains how elected officials often mirror the characteristics of a specific group. Legislators often share similar lived experiences to their constituents (Mansbridge 629).
- Black people represented by a Black legislator were about 10% more likely to have reported voting than Black people represented by a white legislator during the 1996 elections (Tate 137).
- African American constituents in districts represented by a Black legislator were more likely to contact their representative (Gay 731).
- Black voter turnout increases by about 2.3% for every Black Democrat on the ballot (Washington 996).
- This graph measures voter turnout during the Tennessee 1994 midterm elections. The horizontal bars measure uncertainty in Black voter turnout while the vertical bars measure uncertainty in White voter turnout, with the median being represented by a plotted point. Tennessee’s ninth district, represented by Harold Ford (a long-term Black Democrat) at the time, reported 77% turnout for African Americans in that district (Gay 594).



Claudine Gay (2001)

The Impact of Intersectionality

- Intersectionality refers to the various forms of oppression that are interconnected by group identities and therefore result in unique forms of discrimination.
- The United States has 1 Black female Senator and 28 Black female Representatives (Center for American Women in Politics). This is a fraction of the 12% of Congressional members who are Black.
- Fewer women run for office, and fewer women win. How does this intersect with being Black?
- More research needs to be done on the descriptive representation of Black women and how it impacts political participation, but it cannot be denied that overlapping identities are particularly important factors in participation.

Race and Identity Politics

- The theory of identity politics examines how social identities such as race or gender can drive political behavior within that group (Mason 18).
- Identities become political when a group expresses political demands. Stronger connections to an identity can result in an increased interest in salient issues connected to that group (Mason 19).
- More group homogeneity in terms of race and party could explain why Black voter turnout is higher when Black Democrats run. Black Democrats tend to emphasize their race more than Black Republicans, which could explain more ingroup support for that candidate.

Potential Solutions

- Programs aimed at reducing barriers to political representation and candidacy could lead to more participation and increased voter turnout for Black Americans (653 Mansbridge).
- Issues surrounding majority-minority districts and gerrymandering have become especially prevalent. Having multiple districts within a state that are composed of constituents that represent racial minorities encourages more descriptive representation in Congress, and therefore more political participation.
- Encouraging Black Americans to run for elected office and become more politically involved can increase representation.

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