Summary of Racially Polarized Voting in Santa Barbara, California

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Executive Summary

Blockwell Consulting, LLC was retained to conduct an analysis of racially polarized voting (RPV) in the Santa Barbara County, California Board of Supervisors elections. Dr. Megan Gall has conducted similar analyses on behalf of the California Citizens Redistricting Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice, and national civil rights organizations.

We analyzed nearly fifty electoral contests in Santa Barbara. Findings suggest RPV is present in the northern part of the county including areas around Santa Maria, Guadalupe, Lompoc, and the less populated areas in and around the Los Padres National Forest. These areas likely require Voting Rights Act (VRA) considerations.

Overview of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Voting Rights Act was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson during a critical time in the history of civil rights in the United States. The law is designed to prohibit racial discrimination in voting. Since inception, Section 2 of the VRA specifically "prohibits voting practices or procedures that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership in one of the language minority groups identified" elsewhere (U.S. Department of Justice 2015).

In 1982, the U.S. Congress reviewed litigation under the law and consequently amended it to create a "results" test. The "results" test provides a framework for demonstrating that the "standard, practice, or procedure being challenged had the result of denying a racial or language minority an equal opportunity to participate in the political process" (U.S. Department of Justice 2015).

Thornburg v. Gingles was the first Section 2 VRA case to go to the U.S. Supreme Court after the 1982 provisions. The Court specified the "essence of a Section 2 claim" was the ability of the minority group to elect representatives of their choice (Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 U.S. 30 1986). It developed what is more commonly referred to as the 'Gingles Preconditions'. The preconditions hold that:
1. "(T)he minority group must be able to demonstrate that it is sufficiently large and geographically compact to constitute a majority in a single-member district."
2. "(T)he minority group must be able to show that it is politically cohesive."
3. "(T)he minority must be able to demonstrate that the white majority votes sufficiently as a block to enable it… usually to defeat the minority's preferred candidate." (Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 U.S. 30 1986)

In other words, the minority group must be able to show that they are geographically compact enough to comprise a majority in a district, that they typically vote together for a shared candidate of choice, and that the white voters also vote as a bloc in a way that "usually" prevails over the minority candidate of choice. All three preconditions must be met for a viable VRA claim.

The first Gingles Precondition is typically determined by demographers and map experts trained to determine whether a majority minority district is possible. The second and third Gingles Preconditions were defined by the Court as the evidentiary "linchpin" of a vote dilution case (Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 U.S. 30 1986). They are determined by RPV analyses, also known as racial bloc voting.

Racially Polarized Voting

RPV is said to exist when minority and majority voters systematically vote for different candidates. Both groups therefore express different candidates of choice (COC). The second Gingles Precondition is designed to examine minority voting patterns and the existence of cohesion around preferred candidates. The third Gingles Precondition is designed to evaluate majority voting patterns, especially as they relate to minority voting patterns.

Ecological analyses use aggregate data to make inferences at the individual level. More specifically here, we use vote and demographic data aggregated into precincts to infer how voters behave. There are several statistical methods available to evaluate for the presence of RPV in a jurisdiction. The most predominant technique is called Ecological Inference (EI) by Gary King (King 1997, 2004). EI was directly recommended by the Court and remains the staple method. EI combines a method of bounds developed in 1953 (Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly David 1953) and ecological regression in order to create a method that keeps results inside of real-world logical boundaries. Ecological Inference Rows by Columns (EI RxC) is the most recent methodological advance, and allows modeling of two or more candidates and two or more demographic groups (Ori Rosen et al. 2001). EI and EI RxC were the primary methods I used to evaluate RPV in Santa Barbara.

Findings

The findings incorporate primary and general elections, endogenous and exogenous elections, and account for outliers while focusing on the larger patterns throughout the geography and throughout the last ten years. Endogenous elections refer to elections in the jurisdiction under consideration. Exogenous elections refer to elections with jurisdictional boundaries that extend outside of, or overlap with, the endogenous jurisdiction under consideration (e.g., when examining county Board of Supervisors districts, Assembly and Senate Congressional districts in the same area are considered exogenous elections).

We analyzed Board of Supervisors elections in Santa Barbara over the last ten years. Data for endogenous elections were gathered and prepared by Blockwell Consulting. We used data publicly available on the [official site](#) of the Santa Barbara County's Clerk-Recorder, Assessor and Elections Department and precinct shapefiles purchased directly from the same body. Each board member is elected to a four-year term. Contests occur every four years, with terms staggered such that part of the board membership is elected every two years.

We also analyzed exogenous elections in Santa Barbara County. We used data from the Statewide Database which houses "Census, voting, registration, and geographic data sets for

statewide elections beginning in 1992" (California Statewide Database n.d.). Assembly and Congressional contests occur every two years. Senate contests occur every four years, with terms staggered.

Consistent with all RPV methodologies, our analyses are based on precinct level data. Demographic data reflect the citizen voting age population.

We relied on the line drawing experts to isolate areas in Santa Barbara where Gingles 1 is likely met. They identified the Board of Supervisors Districts 3, 4, and 5.

The number of endogenous elections for analysis is limited. See Table 1 below. Districts 3 and 4 elected board members in 2016 and 2020. District 5 elected board members in 2014 and 2018. Out of the seven contests available for analyses, three were uncontested and therefore not included in RPV analyses. Another two elections did not advance to the general: the 2016 District 4 primary and the 2020 District 3 primary.

District	Election	Year	Status
District 3	primary	2016	analyzed
	general	2016	analyzed
	primary	2020	analyzed
District 4	primary	2016	analyzed
	primary	2020	uncontested
District 5	primary	2014	uncontested
	primary	2018	uncontested

Table 1: Endogenous Elections

In all three elections in District 3, white and Latino voters preferred the same candidate. Latino voters exhibited moderate RPV. Gingles 2 is likely met. Gingles 3 is likely not met.

In the 2016 primary for District 4, white and Latino voters were polarized with white voters demonstrating more polarization than Latino voters. Exogenous elections, discussed below, help confirm patterns in this single endogenous election since we do not have additional Board of Supervisors elections in District 4 to analyze. However, based on this single election, Gingles 2 and 3 may be met.

We could not run RPV on Board of Supervisors contests in District 5 because they were uncontested. Exogenous elections clarify voting patterns in this area given the lack of endogenous elections available for analysis.

The universe of exogenous elections is larger. The relevant jurisdictions include State Assembly districts 35 and 37, State Senate district 19, and Congressional district 24. We examined ten years of elections for each jurisdiction for a total of 41 electoral contests. Santa Barbara is split between the two assembly districts, both of which also include parts of other counties. The senate and congressional districts include all of Santa Barbara and parts of other counties. Our analysis of exogenous elections includes only portions of the districts within Santa Barbara.

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Assembly district 35 occupies the northern part of the county including the areas around Board of Supervisors districts 3, 4, and 5. Patterns in this area were strong and consistent. Every election analyzed in this area exhibited strong RPV with white and Latino voters expressing distinct candidates of choice. White voters typically exhibited stronger polarization than Latino voters. In this respect, patterns in Assembly district 35 appear to mimic and buttress patterns observed in the Board of Supervisors 2016 primary for District 4. They also help clarify voting patterns in District 5 where we must rely on exogenous elections for understanding. Gingles 2 and 3 are likely met in this area of Assembly district 35.

The remaining exogenous elections reveal consistent white crossover voting and sometimes white and Latino voters share candidate preferences. However, Assembly district 37 occupies the southern portion of Santa Barbara and does not overlap substantially with the Board of Supervisors districts 3, 4, and 5. Senate district 19 and Congressional district 24 analyses were conducted at the county level which may obscure district by district RPV. For these reasons, these exogenous elections are not as probative as other analyses presented here.

Finally, to further examine District 5 of the Board of Supervisors, we analyzed five statewide exogenous contests in that area only. Four of the five contests examined exhibited RPV. The Lt. Governor contest exhibited moderate RPV and opposing candidate preferences. The contests for Secretary of State, Attorney General, and Insurance Commissioner all exhibited strong white and Latino RPV. The US Senate contest broke this trend which exhibited moderate polarization for white voters and a Latino split vote. Again, exogenous findings help clarify voting patterns for Board of Supervisors District 5 and suggest that Gingles 2 and 3 are likely met.

Closing

RPV appears to be present in parts of Santa Barbara County and likely impacts the Board of Supervisors elections. We were required to rely on exogenous elections to help clarify voting patterns due to a lack of endogenous elections. With this more fulsome picture, patterns suggest that Gingles Preconditions 1, 2, and 3 are likely met in the northern part of the county. VRA considerations are necessary for these areas, and findings presented here may help guide 2021 redistricting and VRA compliance efforts.

Citations

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