



The Impact of Endorsements in Racially Mixed Elections

Andrea Benjamin, University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus

When Houston held its mayoral election in 1997, Lee Brown, a Black candidate faced a White candidate, Robert Mosbacher, in a run-off. During the contest, Mosbacher amassed several key endorsements from Latino leaders, while Brown only received a few Latino endorsements. Nevertheless, a majority of Latinos supported Brown in his bid to be the first Black mayor of Houston.

In another mayoral race in 2001, Jim Hahn, a White candidate, was elected Mayor of Los Angeles over Antonio Villaraigosa, a Latino candidate. During the course of that campaign, Hahn received a majority of Black endorsements and the majority of the Black vote. Four years later, Hahn and Villaraigosa had a rematch of their mayoral contest. In the interim, Hahn failed to reappoint Bernard Parks as the Police Chief — a decision that displeased Black voters. Believing that Hahn was on the wrong side of that issue, Black leaders and voters withdrew support. In the rematch, Villaraigosa prevailed after receiving a majority of the Black endorsements and a majority of the Black vote.

Although some argue that Black and Latino voters have much to gain from alliances that advance shared interests, coalitions between the two groups have not always formed easily or proved durable. My research helps explain variations in vote choice among these groups and the specific conditions under which Blacks and Latinos vote for the same candidate. Drawing on large observational data sets, survey experiments, and qualitative case studies, I develop a theory of endorsements that points to the significance of elite cues from Black and Latino leaders. I demonstrate that voters use endorsements from elites who share their race or ethnicity to inform their voting decisions. Voters take cues from such endorsements especially when race is salient in an election and has real implications for representation and access to political benefits. My research examines how racial and ethnic elite build coalitions in local elections and helps describe Black and Latino political incorporation more broadly.

The Importance of Endorsements

During election season, nearly every day brings an announcement about a candidate endorsement from a local leader. Endorsements act as cues or signals to voters and can convey a lot of information. Although partisan identity is one of the most important cues, not all elections are partisan contests, and primary elections involve candidates in only one party. Because most local elections do not use partisan labels, voters may rely more heavily on endorsements to help them decide which candidate to support. In these instances, candidates hope that endorsements offer important signals to voters indicating that endorsed candidates are better than their competitors.

But politicians' hopes aside, what does research show? Studies on the impact of endorsements are split. Some show that endorsements and preferences move together and others do not, revealing that scholars still have a lot to learn. And pinning down the processes at work can be difficult. Some voters may already prefer the endorsed candidate, or voters may have an opinion about the organization or individual offering the endorsement. For some voters, in fact, an endorsement from a particular group might send a signal to vote for the other candidate.

Although some researchers have found that voters rely on endorsements from organizations, newspapers, and interest groups, there have been few studies specifically about the role of endorsements from racial and ethnic organizations. My research on mayoral elections explores the relationship between the preferences of Black and Latino voters and endorsements from people who share voters' race or ethnicity. Data used in my experiment present various scenarios to people that mimic the real world, and the findings are nuanced. As in the example above of the 1997 Houston election, endorsements do not change candidate support for Latino voters. But endorsements do move Black votes. When I presented a fictional Latino candidate in my

experiment and said he was endorsed by a Black organization, Blacks were more likely to prefer him — as happened for Villaraigosa in the 2005 Los Angeles election.

When endorsements did prove persuasive, Black candidates endorsed by Latino leaders and Latino candidates endorsed by Black leaders do better than endorsed White candidates. Endorsed White candidates need racial or ethnic issues to be highlighted in the election for the ethnic group endorsements to help them. Raising issues of race in the campaign, it seems, tends to make racial and ethnic identities more salient. Yet it is important to note that endorsements alone are not enough for Blacks or Latinos, who sometimes respond but do not follow such cues blindly.

Voters and Endorsements in the Construction of Racial Coalitions

The data presented in my book, *Racial Coalition Building in Local Elections*, suggest that reaching out to leaders and organizations representing racial and ethnic groups is a promising way for candidates in local elections to gain support from voters identified with those groups. For Latino candidates, the best strategy is to court endorsements from Black leaders and organizations, as this seems to encourage support from Black voters while not discouraging White voter support. Biracial coalitions can be led by either Latino or Black candidates, but to be successful, candidates will need endorsements from organizations identified with the other group.

To the extent that Blacks and Latinos want to elect mayors that look like them, elite endorsements from those groups provide a cheap — but very useful — signal that a minority candidate is in line with their interests. Nevertheless, although the data show that minority group endorsements for minority candidates are quite persuasive for Blacks, such endorsements from Latino leaders are less persuasive for Latino voters. Under specific conditions, group endorsements can be persuasive to both Blacks and Latinos, and it is also important that white voters provide support when minority candidates, especially Latinos, receive endorsements.

New cross-racial coalitions are most likely to have a Latino face, and if such coalitions are to come together, Latino candidates need to attract support from Black leaders and organizations. Prospects for White candidates are less promising. Clearly, White candidates can effectively represent minority interests, yet my book shows that White candidates seeking minority votes need to highlight racial issues in order for endorsements from Black and Latino organizations to be persuasive to those voters. However, highlighting racial issues may prove a double-edged sword if it drives unsympathetic Whites to the ballot box to vote for other candidates.

Read more in Andrea Benjamin, *Racial Coalition Building in Local Elections* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).