

**An Institutional Explanation of State Legislative Black Caucus Formation, 1971 to  
1989**

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**Abstract:** Although scholars examine how state legislative black caucuses influence policy outcomes, much less is known about the factors associated with the formation of state legislative black caucuses. Of the research in this area, the evidence is state-specific and anecdotal, meaning that we lack a systematic analysis of the factors that influence the formation of state legislative black caucuses across time and space. Using an event history analysis, I examine the institutional factors related to the formation of 22 state legislative black caucuses from 1971 to 1989. I hypothesize that the number of black state legislators is positively related to the likelihood that a state forms a legislative black caucus, and I find support for this hypothesis. Neither legislative professionalism, chamber size, the number of committees, nor time independently influences state legislative black caucus formation, suggesting that the presence of black state legislators is the only institutional predictor of whether a state legislative black caucus forms.

## Introduction

Today, state legislative black caucuses exist in 33 states. As one might suspect given that state legislative black caucuses exist in over 60 percent of states, scholars have examined how these caucuses shape policy outcomes (Miller 1990; Clemons and Jones 2000; Legette 2000; Menifield 2000; Orey 2000; Sullivan 2000; Wright 2000; Briscoe 2005; Menifield, Shaffer, and Brassell 2005; Parry and Miller 2006). But, what is surprising is the lack of research that examines why state legislative black caucuses form. Of the research in this vein, scholars focus on a particular state and base their findings on anecdotal evidence (Holmes 2000). Consequently, the little we know about why state legislative black caucuses forms is may not be generalizable.

Most scholars examine how state black legislative caucuses shape policy outcomes in state legislature, and the findings are mixed. While some state legislative black caucuses influence policy outcomes (Miller 1990; Sullivan 2000; Orey 2000; Wright 2000; Holmes 2000; Briscoe 2005), other state legislative black caucuses are less effective (Clemons and Jones 2000; Legette 2000; Menifield 2000; Menifield, Shaffer, and Brassell 2005). Two things tend to distinguish successful state legislative black caucuses from lesser successful ones: a larger black delegation and a higher number of black committee chairs. While this research is helpful, it does not tell us why legislative black caucuses form

Limited research studies why state legislative black caucuses form. One study argues that Georgia formed its legislative black caucus to share information, to better negotiate with the legislative and executive branch, and to better develop outreach programs for blacks throughout the state (Holmes 2000, 772). The benefit of Holmes'

study is he wrote it as both a political scientist and Georgia state legislator, giving him unique insight regarding why Georgia formed its legislative black caucus. Ideally, scholars would be able to interview other black legislators to ascertain why legislative black caucuses formed in their states, but doing so would be too arduous a task considering a) the resources needed to perform such a study, and b) some founding members are likely deceased at worst, or feeble-minded at best since these legislative black caucuses formed decades ago. In sum, although Holmes tells us why the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus formed, it is unlikely scholars can use an anecdotal and state-specific approach to explain why state legislative black caucuses form.

In this paper, I use an event history analysis to explore the institutional factors associated with the formation of 22 state legislative black caucuses, from 1971 to 1989. By institutional factors, I mean that I examine how factors within a state legislature influence the formation of state legislative black caucuses, disregarding how external factors explain the event.<sup>1</sup> I expect the number of black state legislators is the most important determinant of whether a state legislative black caucus forms, and unsurprisingly I find support for conjecture. Surprisingly, no other variable, institutional or temporal, significantly effects whether a state legislative black caucus forms.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. In the next section, I provide my argument for why I expect the greater the number of black state legislators, the greater the likelihood that a state legislative black caucus will form. Next, I describe my data and methods. I present my results in the section that follows. I conclude by

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of external factors include, but are not limited to, the civil rights movement, pressure from interest groups, and policy diffusion.

<sup>2</sup> Although no research to date explores linked fate among political elites, scholars

discussing my findings' implications for studies of comparative state politics, black descriptive representation, and caucus formation for other minority groups.

### **Motivating Factors for Black State Legislators Forming a Legislative Black Caucus**

The number of black state legislators is positively associated with the formation of a state legislative black caucus for a few reasons. The need for coordination to effect policy outcomes is one reason why the number of black state legislators is related to a state legislative black caucus forming. The presence of linked fate is another reason why I expect the number of blacks state legislators influences whether a state legislative black caucus forms. Lastly, the hostile legislative environment black state legislators encounter is why I argue that the greater the number of black state legislators, the greater the likelihood that a state legislative black caucus forms. I delineate this argument in the remainder of this section.

The need for coordination to effect policy outcomes is one reason why the number of black state legislators is positively associated with a state legislative black caucus forming. Although individual black legislators tend to introduce bills that benefit blacks (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Haynie 2001), as the number of black state legislators grows, it becomes more difficult to come a consensus concerning a) the issues that should comprise the black agenda and b) how to cast a roll-call vote on a given issue. As a group that is numerically underrepresented in state legislatures (King-Meadows and Schaller 2006), black state legislators can ill afford to have high levels of disagreement since it would weaken their ability to shape policy outcomes. One way to overcome the potential coordination problems associated with an increasing number of black state legislators is to form a legislative black caucus. Scholars find that state legislative black caucuses lead

to a greater level of agreement upon the issues that makeup black agenda (Miller 1990), and they engender higher levels of vote cohesion (Menifield, Shaffer, and Patrick 2005; King-Meadows and Schaller 2006). In other words, state legislative black caucuses provide a growing number of black state legislators with the coordination needed to translate their numerical strength into black substantive representation.

Linked fate is another motivating factor for a larger number of black state legislators forming a caucus. Dawson (1994) tells us that because of a shared experience of racial discrimination, blacks in the United states tend to have high levels of linked fate, meaning that they tend to see world based on how blacks are doing as a whole, not based on their individual circumstances.<sup>2</sup> I expect that for black state legislators, as they watch their numbers grow, the logical step is to form a group (caucus) that consists of blacks aiming to represent black interests.

The hostile legislative environment is the final reason why the number of blacks is related to state legislative black caucus formation. Scholars reveal that compared to non-black state legislators, blacks are more likely to report experiencing discrimination (Button and Hedge 1996) and are more likely to be perceived as ineffective legislators (Haynie 2002). If most blacks individually experience state legislatures as hostile environments, then as the number of black state legislators grows, then the collective black experience of the hostile legislative environment also grows.<sup>3</sup> I expect that one way

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<sup>2</sup> Although no research to date explores linked fate among political elites, scholars find that highly educated blacks tend to have higher levels of linked fate (Dawson 1994; Gay 2004). Since black state legislators are highly educated (King-Meadows and Schaller 2006), I assume that they have at least comparable levels of linked fate as blacks that are not elected officials.

<sup>3</sup> I am careful here to not depend on the percentage of blacks as the mechanism for blacks experiencing the legislature as a hostile environment since this would be

to address this hostility is to form a state legislative black caucuses where blacks commiserate with one another about the challenges of being racial minorities in white-dominated legislatures.

My argument leads to the following testable hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: The greater the number of black state legislators, the more likely a state is to form a legislative black caucus.*

### **Data and Methods**

The third column of Table 1 provides the distribution of the dependent variable, the years that state legislative black caucuses formed between 1971 and 1989.<sup>4</sup> There are 22 states in total, and some noteworthy trends. First, over two-thirds of states examined in this study formed state legislative black caucuses in the 1970's (15), with half of them (11) forming between 1975 and 1975 alone.<sup>5</sup> The remaining third of caucuses formed in the 1980's, and caucus formation is evenly split between the first and second half of the decade. Overall, two-thirds of all state legislative black caucuses formed during the era I examine, making it an ideal time frame in which to study this phenomenon.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

The second column of Table 1 presents the number of black state legislators serving at the time of caucus formation, the key explanatory variable. The data come from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, an organization that collects data on black elected officials across the country. On average, about eight black state

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different from my argument that the number of blacks is what is driving a state legislative black caucus formation.

<sup>4</sup> See Table 1 for data sources.

<sup>5</sup> Arguably this is because of the newly drawn districts following passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), which increased black electoral representation across the country (Lublin 1997).

legislators were serving in the legislature at the time of caucus formation. As the data reveal, the number of black state legislators serving at the time of caucus formation varies by state, with one state forming a black caucus with as few as two black state legislators (Alabama), while another state did not form a black caucus until there were 21 black state legislators (Georgia). While these descriptive statistics provide us with a sense of the point at which most states formed a legislative black caucus, they say little about the effect that the number of black state legislators has on the likelihood of black caucus formation relative to other factors.

To understand the systematic pattern underlying state legislative black caucus formation, I run a logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors that are clustered by state, and I include a lowess function of the baseline hazard rate to model duration dependency. I will now consider each component of the model specification. Since my dependent variable is discrete, whether a state forms a legislative black caucus in a given year, then I can run a logistic regression analysis, as long as I code my data as if I am running an event history analysis (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).<sup>6</sup> One potential problem with using logistic regression analysis with event history analysis is I assume that the likelihood of forming a caucus is not dependent on time, but if this is a false assumption, then I have improperly specified my model.<sup>7</sup> Thus, I model the duration dependency with lowess function of the baseline hazard rate, following the

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5 in Box-Steffensmeier and Jones for an excellent discussion on discrete models for event history data.

<sup>7</sup> One advantage to the Cox proportional hazards model is that it makes no assumption about the hazard rate, but I prefer logistic regression since it is easier to interpret the results.

advice of Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004).<sup>8</sup> Lastly, I specify robust standard errors that are clustered by state to account for the lack of independence between observations (states), following Beck and Katz (1995).

Although I expect the number of black state legislators is positively related to states forming legislative black caucuses, other institutional variables may matter as well. As members of standing committees, blacks are able to shape legislation in a way that benefits the group (Hammond 1998; Gamble 2007; Minta 2011). But, just as with the number of black state legislators, as the number of committees grows, it becomes increasingly difficult for blacks to effectively represent the group's interests. Thus, I control for the number of standing committees, with the idea that the greater the number of standing committees, the greater the need for blacks to coordinate, which a state legislative black caucus provides. Legislative professionalism might also shape the formation of state legislative black caucuses. Professionalized legislatures tend exercise greater influence over policy than citizen legislatures (Mooney 1995), and coupling that with blacks being more likely to serve in professionalized legislatures than citizen legislatures (Squire 1992), then I control for legislative professionalism since it may require a caucus to coordinate blacks' policy representation goals. Finally, I control for chamber size. My argument is that higher numbers of state legislators represents higher levels of cacophony, so blacks might form a caucus to have their voices heard in the midst of competing voices. See Appendix 1 to see how I coded explanatory variables.

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<sup>8</sup> The advantage of the lowess compared to transformations of time (e.g. linear, quadratic, and log) is that it empirically models the duration dependency, while transformations of time assume that duration dependency takes on a certain form (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).



## Results

Table 2 presents the results from the logistic regression model, and as expected, I find support for Hypothesis 1. Figure 1 illustrates two trends in the relationship between the number of black state legislators and the likelihood that a state legislative black caucus forms. On the one hand, when there are fewer than eight black state legislators, adding an additional black state legislators linearly increases the probability that a state will form a legislative black caucus. On the other hand, once there are eight or more blacks serving in the state legislature, adding additional black state legislators exercises a curvilinear effect on the probability of forming a legislative black caucus. It might be helpful to talk about this second trend in terms of thresholds. At 12 black state legislators, the probability crosses the 25 percentage points threshold; at 16 black state legislators, the probability crosses the 50 percentage points threshold; and at 20 black state legislators, the probability crosses the 75 percentage points threshold. So, although the number of blacks serving in the legislature is positively related to the formation of a state legislative black caucus, the relationship is not strictly linear. Instead, there appears to be some tipping point, around eight black state legislators, at which adding an additional black state legislator precipitously increases the likelihood that state legislative black caucus forms.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

No other variable accounts for the formation of a state legislative black caucus. For the institutional variables, the p-values for legislative professionalism, the total number of committees, and chamber size exceed .80, suggesting that the variables have

little to no effect on whether a state legislative black caucus forms. In addition, the duration dependency variable lacks statistical significance, meaning that the likelihood that a state formed a legislative black caucus is no different in any given year throughout the era examined.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I show that even when controlling for other institutional factors and the role of time, the number of black state legislators is the only significant predictor of whether a state legislative black caucus forms. This finding has implications on studies of race in comparative state politics, black descriptive representation, and caucus formation for other minority groups.

My findings show the benefits of studying race in a comparative state politics framework. Scholars argue that state legislatures provide rich variation and numerous observations (Squire and Hamm 2005; Squire and Moncrief 2010), two characteristics that political scientists seek in research. While some race scholars have taken advantage of variation and numerous observations that state legislatures provide (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Haynie 2001; Preuhs 2005, 2006, 2007; King-Meadows and Schaller 2006), most race scholars study Congress. In general, the disadvantage of studying race in Congress is the dearth of cross-sectional variation, but at least this can be addressed with temporal variation. But for this particular question—the influence the number of black legislators has on the likelihood a caucus forms—the disadvantage of studying black caucus formation in Congress is incorrigible because we cannot compare the event with a similar legislative body in the United States. Thus, my finding demonstrates the

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<sup>9</sup> Then again, with a p-value of .13, it approached statistical significance, suggesting that it is important that I control for duration dependency.

potential fruitfulness of studying race in state legislatures, allowing us to examine questions that we cannot examine in Congress.

My findings have an important implication for studies of black descriptive representation. While numerous studies have shown how descriptive representation shapes the behavior of an individual black legislator (Swain 1993; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Haynie 2001; Canon 1999; Grose 2011), fewer have examined how an entire group of black legislators may provide an important form of descriptive representation for blacks (Nelson 1991; Owens 2005; Griffin and Newman 2008). By illustrating the conditions under which state legislative black caucuses form, I reveal an understudied component on descriptive representation: how a group of black state legislators may provide descriptive and substantive representation to blacks in an entire state. As Congress and the Supreme Court amend and interpret the Voting Rights Act (VRA), my finding may be another way to convince the federal government of black descriptive representation's importance for black constituents.

Lastly, my findings have an important implication for studies of caucus formation for other minority groups. Since I study blacks, one cannot help but question if the findings are comparable for women and Latinos. Although some research explores why women's caucuses form in state legislatures, it is unclear what factors systematically account for the pattern (Mahoney 2011). I am unaware of work that examines Latinos. Thus, I encourage scholars to explore these questions in future work so that we have a better understanding of how the number of women (Latino) state legislators influences formation of state legislative women (Latino) caucuses. Answering these questions will be important because caucuses empower minority elected officials

these groups to provide their respective groups with the optimal form of electoral representation, the sign of a healthy representative democracy.

**Table 1 Total Number of Black State Legislators at Time of State Legislative Black Caucus Formation, 1971 to 1989**

States	Total Number of Black State Legislators	Year Founded
Alabama	2	1974 <sup>a</sup>
Arkansas	6	1989 <sup>b</sup>
Colorado	4	1974 <sup>c</sup>
Connecticut	6	1972 <sup>a</sup>
Florida	4	1982 <sup>a</sup>
Georgia	21	1975 <sup>a</sup>
Indiana	7	1979 <sup>a</sup>
Kansas	6	1975 <sup>a</sup>
Louisiana	10	1977 <sup>a</sup>
Massachusetts	3	1972 <sup>a</sup>
Michigan	17	1977 <sup>a</sup>
Mississippi	6	1980 <sup>a</sup>
Nevada	3	1981 <sup>c</sup>
New Jersey	8	1987 <sup>a</sup>
North Carolina	12	1983 <sup>a</sup>
Oklahoma	4	1979 <sup>a</sup>
Pennsylvania	12	1973 <sup>d</sup>
Rhode Island	4	1986 <sup>a</sup>
South Carolina	13	1975 <sup>a</sup>
Tennessee	11	1975 <sup>a</sup>
Texas	8	1973 <sup>a</sup>
Wisconsin	3	1973 <sup>a</sup>
Average	7.7	--
Median	6	1976
Standard Deviation	4.93	

Notes: Eight states formed a caucus prior to 1971: Arizona (1969), California (1967), Illinois (1969), Maryland (1970), Missouri (1966), Ohio (1967), and Virginia (1969).

The following states did not return my phone calls so are excluded from the analysis: Delaware, Kentucky, and Iowa.

Sources: Data for the total number of black state legislators come from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

<sup>a</sup> means the data acquired from Miller (1990).

<sup>b</sup> means data acquired from Parry and Miller (2006).

<sup>c</sup> means data acquired from a phone call.

<sup>d</sup> means data acquired from the state's black caucus website.

<sup>e</sup> means data acquired from *State of Wisconsin Blue Book* (1973).

**Table 2 Logistic Regression Results for State Legislative Black Caucus Formation, 1971 to 1989**

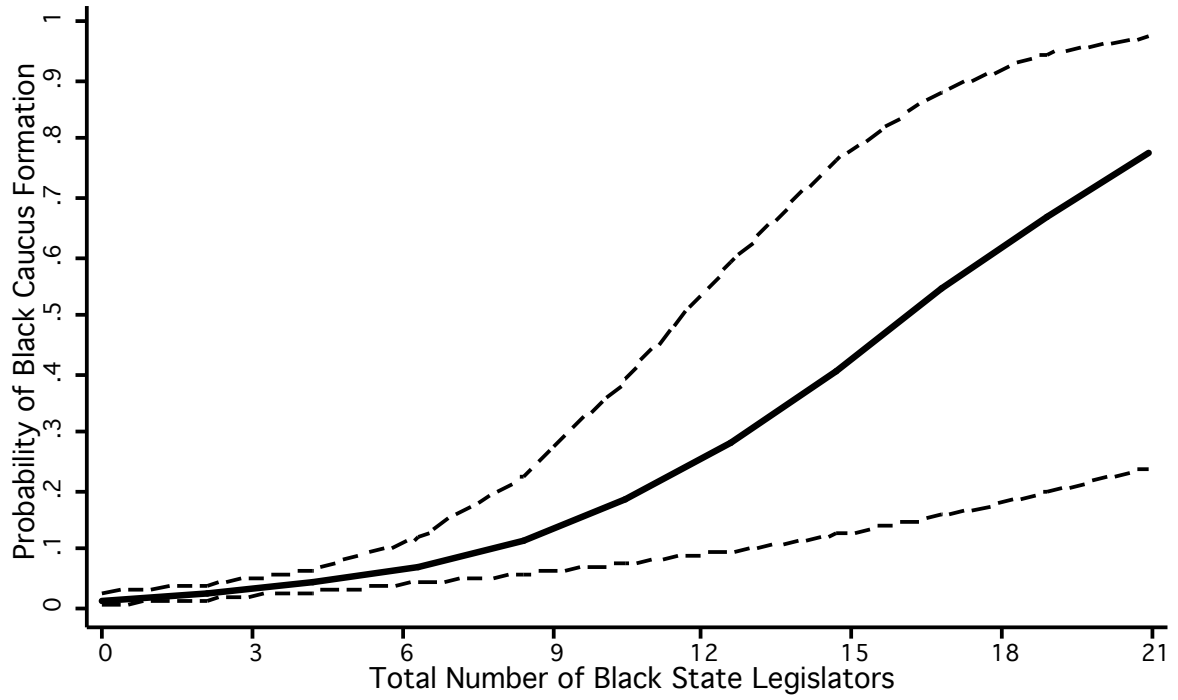
Variables	Black Caucus Formation	P-Values
Number of Black State Legislators	.270*** (.075)	.001
Total Seats	.001 (.005)	.816
Legislative Professionalism	-.537 (4.04)	.894
Number of Committees	-.002 (.018)	.890
Duration Dependency	26.16 (17.52)	.135
Constant	-5.26*** (1.15)	.001
Number of Observations	494	--
Log Likelihood	-70.51	--
Pseudo R-Squared	.216	--

Notes: Table entries are estimated coefficients, and robust standard errors are in parentheses.

The duration dependency is a lowess function of the baseline hazard rate.

\*  $p < .1$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Figure 1 Probability of Black Caucus Formation, Varying the Total Number of Black State Legislators**



Notes: The results come from the logit model in Table 2  
The dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

**Appendix 1 Descriptive Statistics for Explanatory Variables**

Variables (N=494)	Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Number of Black State Legislators	Indicates the total number of blacks the state legislature	2.2	3.2	0-21
Total Seats	Indicates the total number of seats in the House and Senate	142.9	70.8	49-424
Legislative Professionalism	King's (2000) measure of legislative professionalism	.198	.101	.039-.582
Number of Committees	Measures the total number of House, Senate, and joint standing committees	31.5	13.6	13-97
Duration Dependency	Measures a lowess function of the baseline hazard rate	.042	.011	.012-.056

Notes: In total, 39 states are included in my analysis.

Sources: *Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies*. Various Years. "Black Elected Officials in the United States.

King, James D. 2000. "Changes in Professionalism in U.S. State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25(2): 327-343.

*The Book of the States*. Various Years. The Council of State Governments: Lexington, KY.



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