

A Comparison of the Racial Composition of Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates in 2004 and 2008

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Although the body of the extraordinary election we just experienced is still warm, the autopsy of the vote has already begun. Some interpret the election returns as signaling a potential realignment, while others see the vote as an aberration born of unique political circumstances or an outmatched campaign. For those who study voting rights law, this election presents an unprecedented opportunity to examine the correlations between race and vote choice throughout all fifty states. We attempt to begin that conversation here by presenting a rough first cut of the electoral data at the county level and its correlation with the African American population share in selected states.

With all of the caveats one should make as to the available data three days after an election, we present here the simple bivariate relationship between the total estimated African American population of counties in selected states as of 2007 and the vote share received by both Obama and Kerry in those counties. In this first cut, we examine states that have large African American populations but relatively small Latino populations in order to get some sense of the support of African Americans and whites for Obama. We use aggregate population, not voting age population or registered voter population, because we have those estimates for 2007 readily available from the Census Bureau. Of course, those data are “late” for the 2004 election and “early” for the 2008 election, but they give us some sense of the correlation between the racial percentages of a county and Obama’s share of the vote. We employ vote data from the USA Today and New York Times for each county for the 2004 and 2008 election results, respectively.

As a check on our work, we also present the CNN exit poll data from 2004 and 2008 (while acknowledging all of the well-known criticisms of exit polls, in general, and these two, in particular). For the most part, they confirm the patterns in the county level data. We should note that the national exit polls suggest Obama won 43 percent of the white vote, 67 percent of the Latino vote, and 95 percent of the African American vote. In the 2004 election, in contrast, the CNN exit poll said John Kerry won 41 percent of the white vote, 53 percent of the Hispanic vote, and 88 percent of the African American vote.

For purposes of this initial analysis, which simply throws the data out there, we will resist the temptation to discuss potential implications of the data in depth. The easiest conclusion to draw concerns the great variability between states concerning the racial composition of the Democratic candidates’ support. In a follow-up posting to this one, we hope to investigate further the differences in the patterns of support for 2004 and 2008.

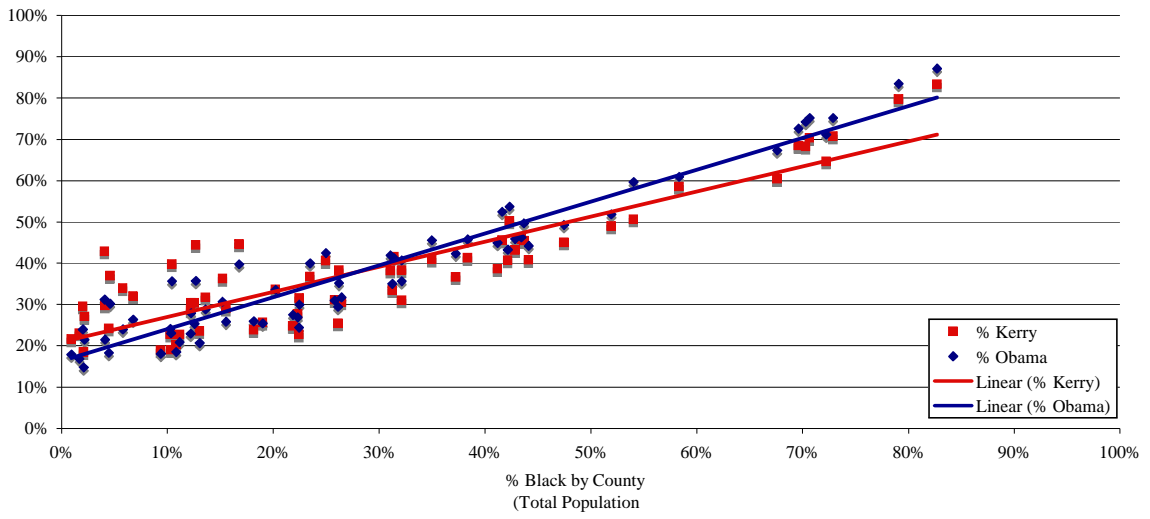
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The Racial Composition of Democratic Support, 2004 and 2008

State	Obama % of white vote (CNN Exit Poll, 2008)	Kerry % of white vote (CNN Exit Poll, 2004)	2008 Correlation (% black in county in 2007 and % Obama)	2004 Correlation (% black in county in 2007 and % Kerry)
AL	10	19	0.96	0.89
MS	11	14	0.97	0.92
LA	14	24	0.94	0.83
GA	23	23	0.89	0.89
SC	26	22	0.94	0.96
AR	30	36	0.82	0.71
TN	34	34	0.63	0.37
NC	35	27	0.74	0.71
KY	36	35	0.30	0.10
VA	39	32	0.63	0.58
MO	42	42	0.62	0.64
OH	46	44	0.58	0.54
MD	47	44	0.85	0.85
PA	48	45	0.66	0.65

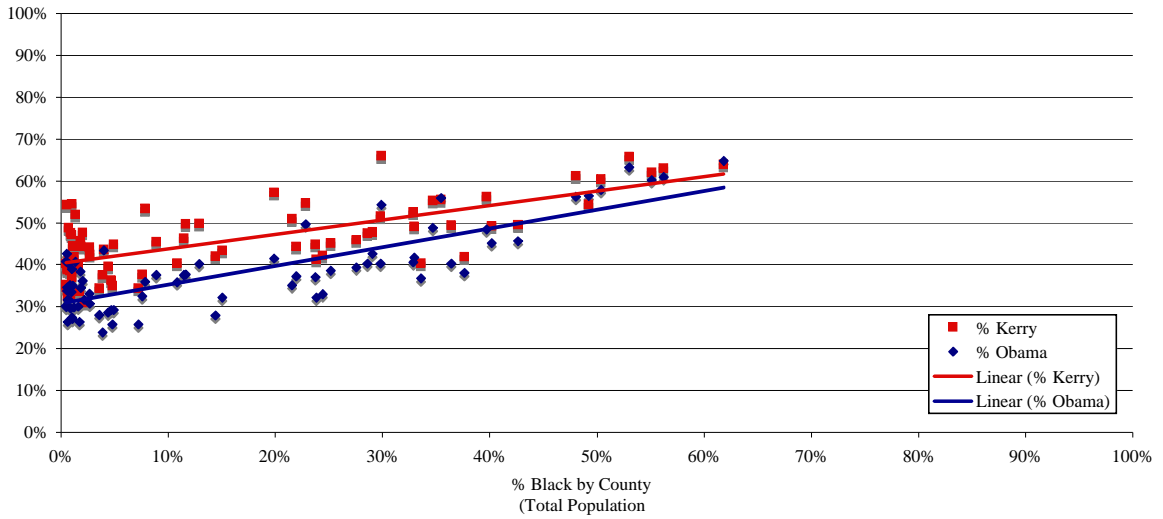
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Alabama



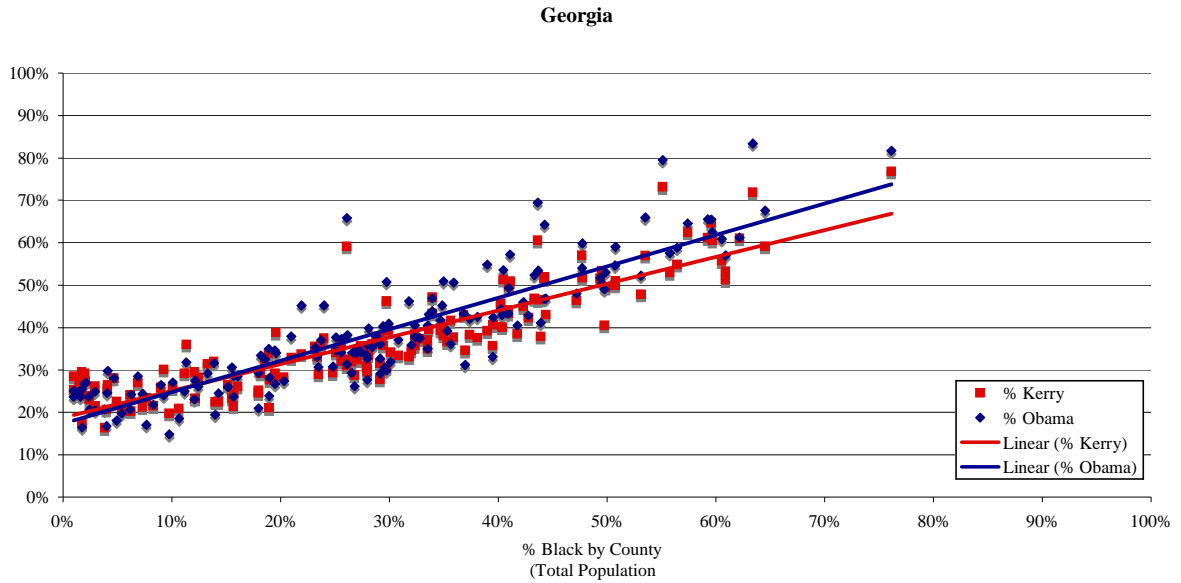
Correlation	
0.8880	(% Kerry)
0.9596	(% Obama)

Arkansas

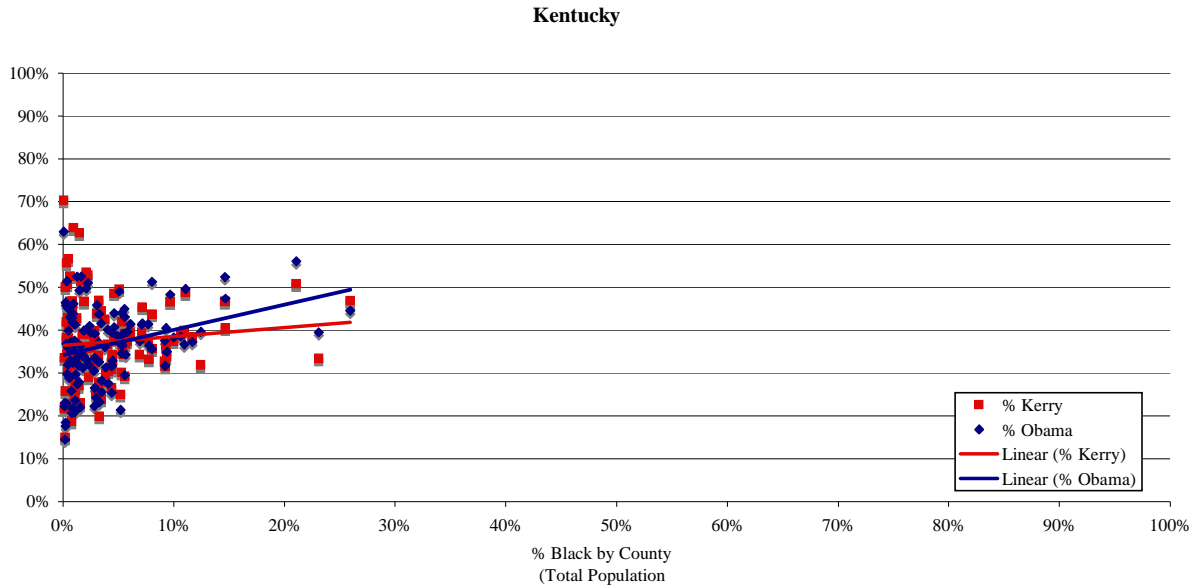


Correlation	
0.7116	(% Kerry)
0.8179	(% Obama)

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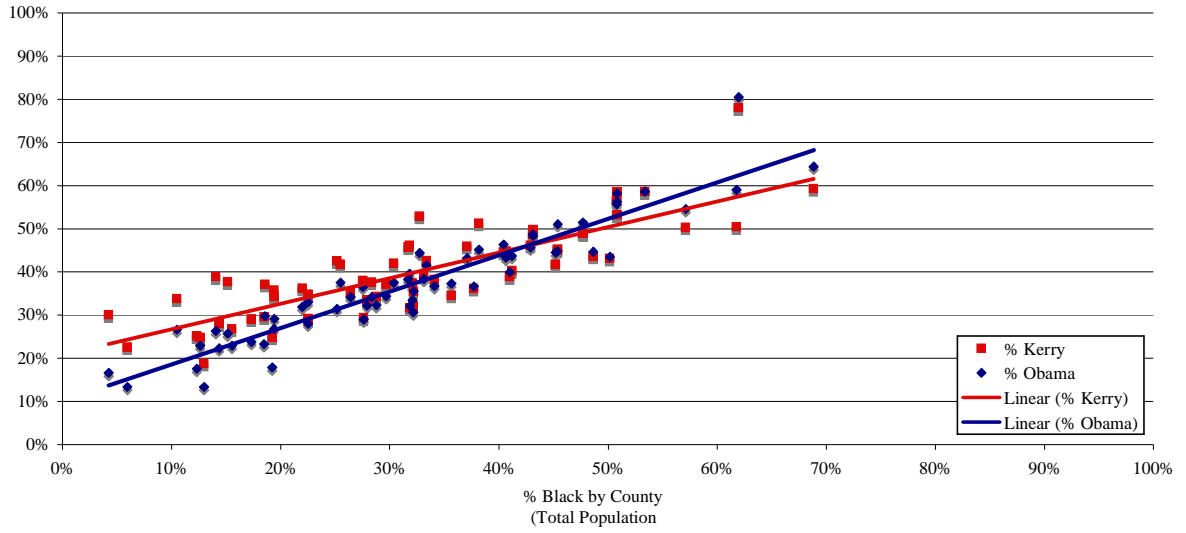
Correlation	
0.8947	(% Kerry)
0.8924	(% Obama)



Correlation	
0.0997	(% Kerry)
0.2989	(% Obama)

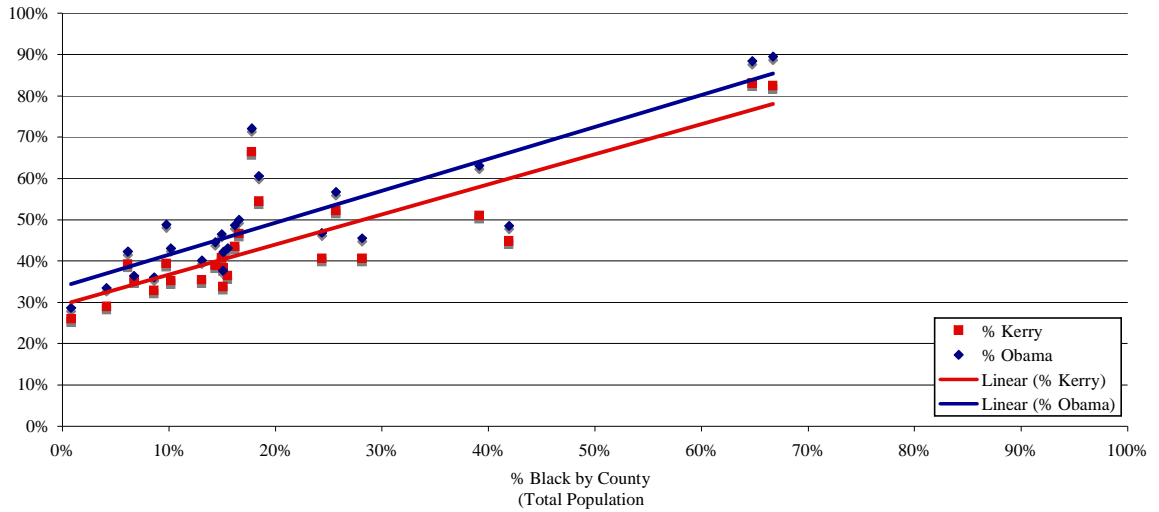
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Louisiana



Correlation	
0.8285	(% Kerry)
0.9416	(% Obama)

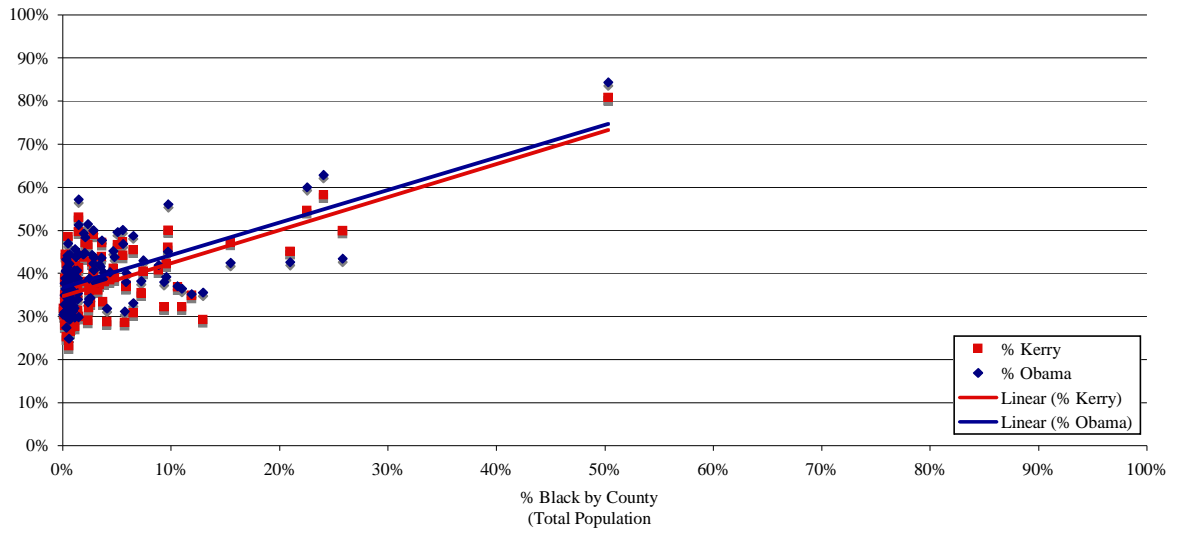
Maryland



Correlation	
0.8479	(% Kerry)
0.8514	(% Obama)

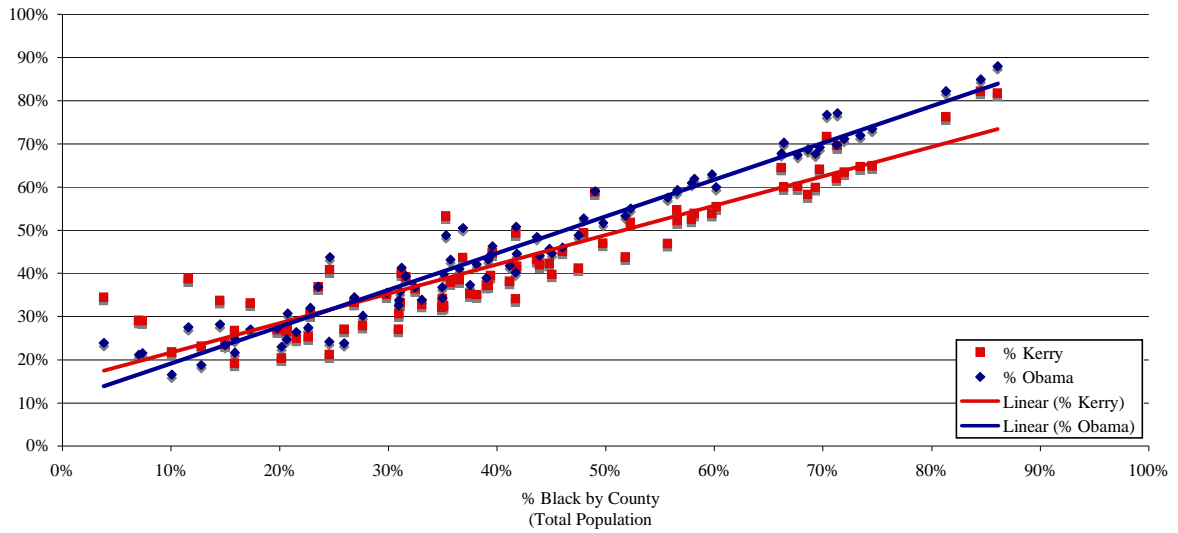
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Missouri



Correlation	
0.6357	(% Kerry)
0.6177	(% Obama)

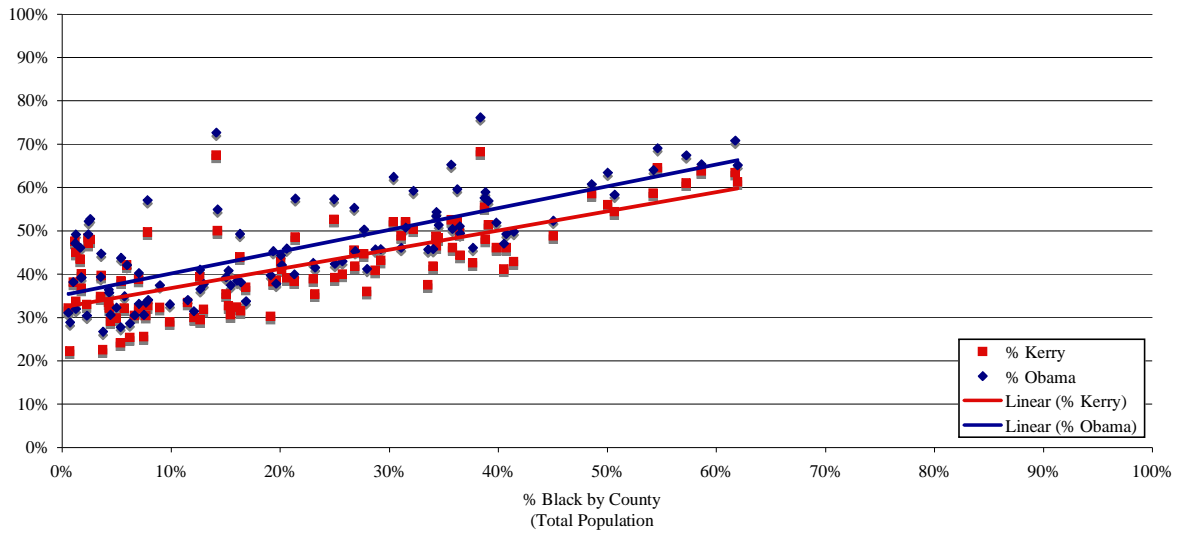
Mississippi



Correlation	
0.9219	(% Kerry)
0.9742	(% Obama)

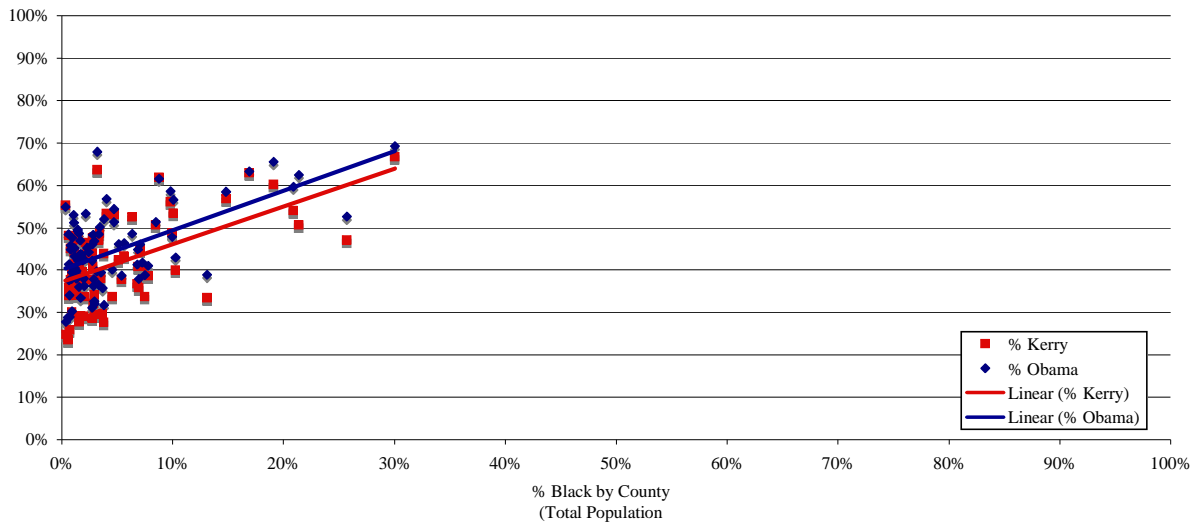
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North Carolina



Correlation	
0.7127	(% Kerry)
0.7368	(% Obama)

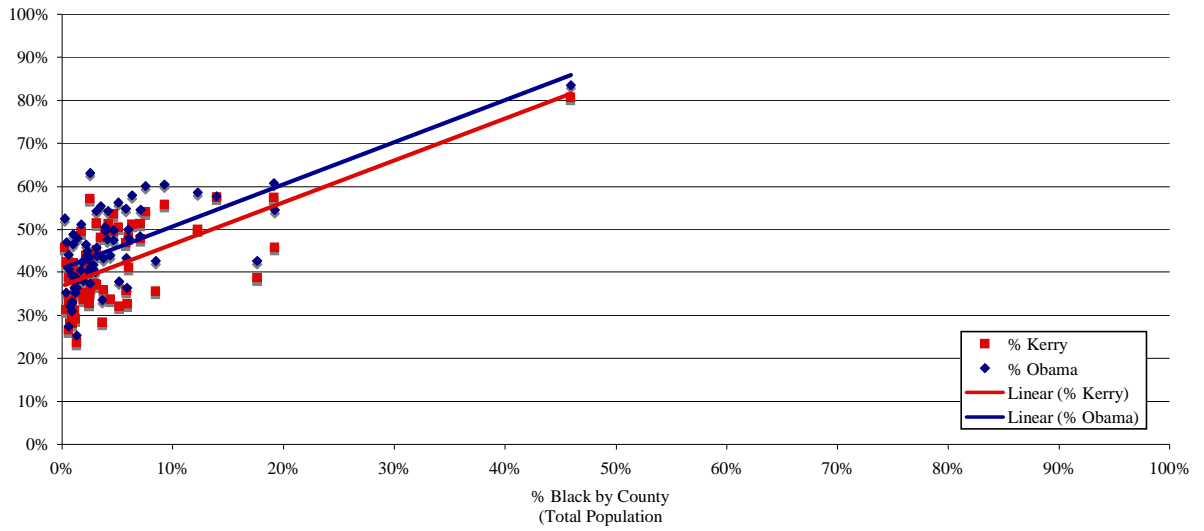
Ohio



Correlation	
0.5382	(% Kerry)
0.5839	(% Obama)

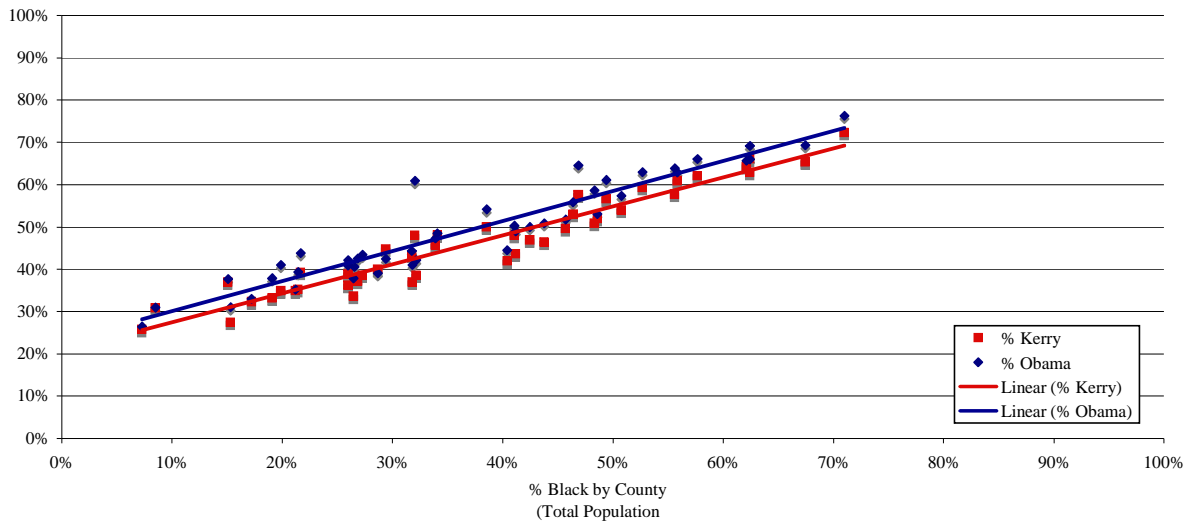
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Pennsylvania



Correlation	
0.6451	(% Kerry)
0.6605	(% Obama)

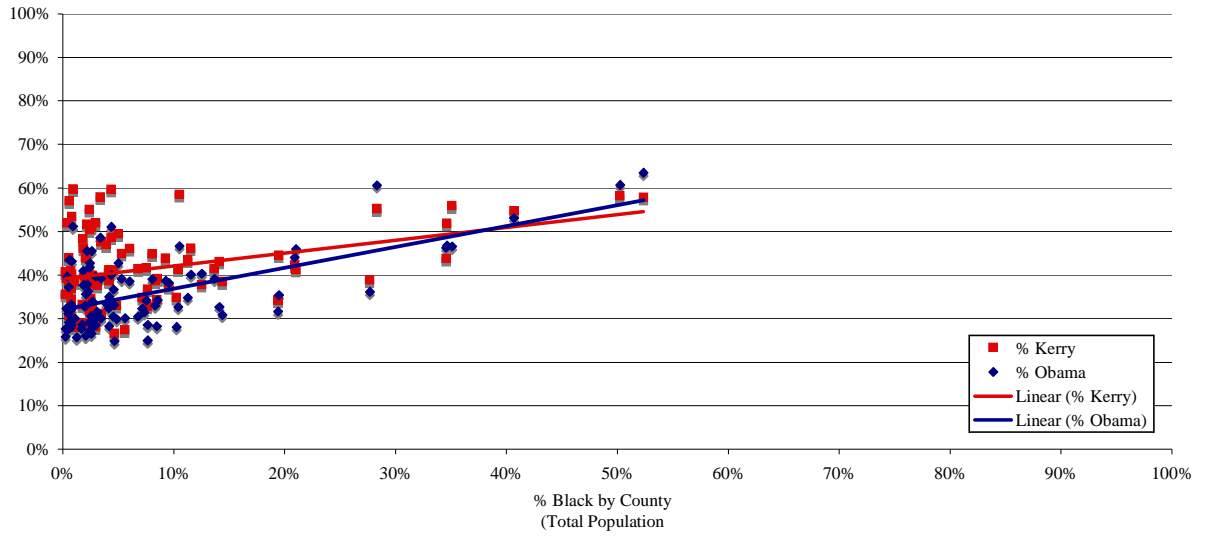
South Carolina



Correlation	
0.9637	(% Kerry)
0.9493	(% Obama)

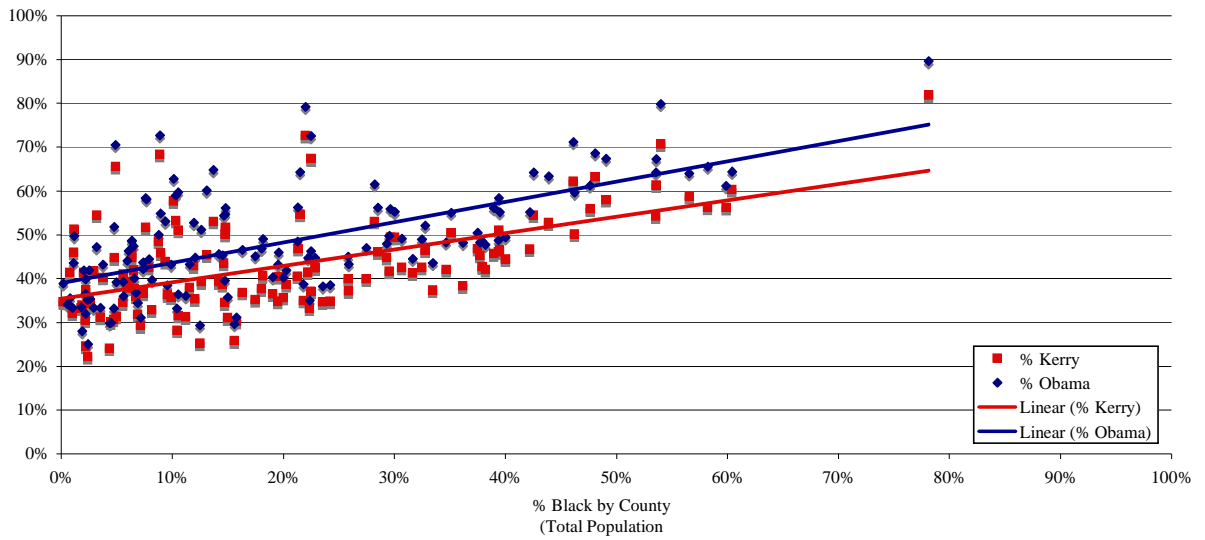
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Tennessee



Correlation	
0.3706	(% Kerry)
0.6250	(% Obama)

Virginia



Correlation	
0.5832	(% Kerry)
0.6347	(% Obama)