Race, Class, and Representation in Local Government

Houston, Texas is a city of roughly 2.3 million people, located in the southeastern portion of the state, near Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. It has a dynamic economy, with two dozen Fortune 500 companies, the nation’s second-most-active port, and significant energy, technology, aerospace, medical, and manufacturing sectors. Although the city has a white-plurality population (37.3 percent of residents identify as white), it is very racially diverse, with 36.5 percent of residents identifying as Hispanic/Latino; 16.6 percent identifying as African American; 7.5 percent identifying as Asian; and 2 percent identifying as “Other.” Compared with many cities of similar size, Houston boasts an attractive combination of abundant jobs, affordable housing, and exciting cultural amenities.

At least at first blush, Houston’s economic dynamism and multiracial demographics make it seem like a modern-day success story — a place where “it’s still possible to attain the American Dream.” Indeed, the city has experienced a dramatic transformation over the past four decades,

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more than doubling in size, diversifying rapidly, and transforming its economy from almost total dependence on oil to reliance on a wide array of industries and services. Yet Houston is also a city with a difficult racial past – a past it still struggles to escape. Although it made a somewhat more graceful transition from the Jim Crow era than did many other southern cities, Houston remains heavily segregated on the basis of race, and economic and racial inequality have increased in recent decades.

Indeed, in 2017 Houston was rocked by allegations of serious violations of federal housing rules by the city’s mayor and city council members. In a memorandum dated January 11, 2017, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that the city’s elected officials violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by blocking a proposal to build a large affordable housing complex (known as “Fountain View”) in the affluent Galleria neighborhood. HUD concluded that the decision by the mayor and city council was in significant part taken in response to opposition from white residents to the prospect of increasing racial and income diversity in the area. More generally, HUD found that the city’s procedures for approving applications for tax credits to support development of low-income housing were “influenced by racially motivated opposition to affordable housing and perpetuate discrimination.” Ultimately, HUD concluded, “the city’s complete deference to local opposition perpetuates segregation by deterring developers from proposing projects in areas where they are likely to face opposition.” At the time of HUD’s intervention, fully 97 percent of the city’s Low-Income Housing Tax Credit developments were located in majority-minority census tracts.

Rather than take decisive steps to address the concerns about residential segregation and lack of access to affordable housing raised in the HUD letter, the city’s elected officials seemed eager to avoid disturbing the

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8 Flynn, “Feds Say Houston’s Housing Policies Violate Civil Rights Act.”
status quo. The city’s mayor, Sylvester Turner – who is African American – insisted that his and the council’s opposition to the project was based on its high projected cost rather than on white resistance to anticipated demographic changes. More significantly, city officials lobbied incoming HUD Secretary Ben Carson – a Donald Trump appointee and staunch critic of federal fair housing rules – to drop the housing discrimination case against the city. Carson was happy to comply. As a first step, Carson directed HUD to release Houston’s federal housing funds, and certified that the city was acting in compliance with federal law. Then, in March 2018, Carson announced a “voluntary compliance agreement” with the city that putatively “resolve[d]” the civil rights violations identified in the January 2017 HUD letter.

The voluntary compliance agreement committed the city to encourage landlords in areas with good schools to rent to families with housing vouchers; set clearer policies to govern the city council’s consideration of tax credit housing applications; and seek support from HUD to develop a comprehensive affordable housing plan. However, the agreement did not require Houston officials to take decisive steps to establish affordable housing units in higher-income neighborhoods. Consequently, both Houston–area housing activists and former HUD officials savaged the agreement, claiming that it effectively amounted to an endorsement of racially discriminatory housing practices by Houston city officials and HUD. “Having concluded that Houston’s generic policies keep that kind of [affordable] housing from being put in affluent, predominantly white, high-opportunity areas, the [voluntary compliance agreement] offers

nothing to undo the segregationist effect of Houston’s policies,” argued Michael Allen, counsel for Texas Housers, a local advocacy group. “Fundamentally, it does nothing to provide another Fountain View development. It does not provide any actual relief in the form of affordable housing in these high-quality neighborhoods.” Betsy Julian, a former HUD assistant secretary for fair housing, argued that the voluntary compliance agreement was “outrageous” because it failed to remediate in a serious way the problems identified in the original HUD report. As Julian concluded, “I’m a little appalled that the government would enter into a compliance agreement that doesn’t address those issues at all.”

Angered by the agreement, Texas Housers have sued HUD for failing to enforce existing civil rights laws.

The struggle over access to affordable housing in Houston raises fundamental questions about the quality of local democracy in the United States. How well (or poorly) are people of color and those with lower incomes represented by the local governments in their communities? What factors – institutional, social, and economic – influence the degree to which municipalities are responsive to the preferences of these disadvantaged groups? Why do historically disadvantaged groups receive considerable representation in some communities, while in others their preferences are largely ignored? And what, if anything, can citizens do to ensure that local governments better represent people of color and the less affluent?

In a “compound republic” like the United States – where responsibility for governing is shared among a national government, fifty state governments, and thousands of local governments – these are foundational questions. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing the centrality of local governments in shaping Americans’ general understanding of politics and democracy in the United States. Americans typically view local governments as “closest to the people” and thus most deserving of veneration and trust. Local politics have also historically been viewed as above the fray of the ideological and partisan polarization that mar national and state politics, enabling more reasoned and informed deliberation of the

14 Capps, “HUD Assailed.”
15 Morris, “Housing Efforts.”
merits of policy proposals.\textsuperscript{18} Finally, the country’s robust tradition of decentralization and local control means that local governments have traditionally served as a focal point of civic education, where citizens learn and practice the skills of self-government and obtain lessons about what government means in their lives.\textsuperscript{19} If local government responsiveness – or lack thereof – affects citizens’ interest in political participation or informs their beliefs about the performance of “government” in general, it is crucial that we better understand whether and to what extent local governments represent their constituents, and particularly less advantaged groups.\textsuperscript{20}

Indeed, local governments play a central role in serving the needs of Americans. The United States has nearly 90,000 local governments, with hundreds of thousands of local elected officials. These governments employ more than 11 million workers, collect roughly 25 percent of the nation’s tax revenues, and distribute many of the public goods that citizens use every day.\textsuperscript{21} In many communities, they perform vital tasks that many citizens depend on but often take for granted, such as policing, trash disposal, water and sanitation services, and road maintenance. In short, local governments are the “frontline” governments that citizens interact with day in and day out. Given their central importance in Americans’ daily experience of democracy, we need to know whether municipalities provide equitable representation to all their residents.

In fact, determining whether and to what extent local governments represent their residents is especially pressing today. The United States, like many advanced industrialized democracies in the Western world, is becoming both more racially and ethnically diverse and more economically unequal, creating a range of new and complex demands on municipalities.\textsuperscript{22} At the same time, the impact of local government activity on the lives of citizens is growing markedly due to a paradoxical increase in both


the mandates issued by, and the devolution of significant responsibilities from, the federal government and the states. The collision of increasing diversity and inequality, on one hand, and increasing local government responsibility, on the other, has drastically increased the range and complexity of tasks facing local governments today. This makes understanding whether and to what extent municipalities represent disadvantaged residents more important now than ever.

Finally, studying how well (or poorly) local governments serve the demands of less advantaged residents provides a powerful lens for examining questions about unequal representation in general. Many scholars have expressed concern that American democracy fails to equitably represent the preferences of historically disadvantaged citizens—particularly people of color and the less affluent. However, data limitations and


research design choices have, to date, largely prevented them from studying both racial and class biases in representation at the same time. And the relatively limited variation in social and institutional contexts at the federal and state levels has circumscribed understanding of how such factors may moderate, or exacerbate, biases in representation. As we explain, our research design allows us to simultaneously examine both racial and class biases in representation, in a large sample of communities with very diverse social and institutional characteristics. This approach allows us to make direct comparisons of the respective scales of racial and class biases in representation at the local level, while also permitting new insights on how community characteristics can either reduce or increase these inequalities. As such, we are in an especially good position to assess how race and class influence responsiveness in American politics, and to identify practical courses of action for addressing inequities we observe.

Of course, many scholars have sought to understand how well local governments serve disadvantaged communities. Some have examined racial or class patterns of support for political candidates in an effort to assess who wins and who loses in municipal electoral democracy. Others have investigated how racial diversity, economic inequality, or both, influence access to public jobs and spending on “public goods” like education or anti-poverty programs. Still others have polled residents of different racial or class backgrounds to obtain their opinions of how well...
local governments serve the needs of diverse constituents. And another group of scholars has used so-called audit experiments to investigate potential biases in the responsiveness of representatives to different groups of constituents.

While each of these studies has, in its own way, advanced understanding of how local governments (fail to) represent their constituents, our goal is different. In this book, we seek to determine how well the underlying preferences of (different groups of) residents are reflected on municipal councils and in local government policy. As we argue throughout the book, focusing on the preferences of (groups of) residents—and how well or poorly they are represented on municipal councils and in local government policy—provides an intuitive and powerful lens for observing both the overall quality and the fairness of representative democracy at the local level.

Since our goal is to probe how well residents’ preferences get represented at the municipal level, we need a direct measure of these preferences. This is not as straightforward a task as it might seem. In principle,
we could ask residents in a survey about their voting decisions and policy preferences and then observe who gets elected and what policies they pursue. The fundamental challenge with that approach, however, is the overwhelming cost of surveying so many residents and elected officials across hundreds of communities. Moreover, residents may not necessarily be familiar with all the candidates and specific policies, even if they have latent preferences about both. Finally, comparisons across communities would be exceedingly difficult because candidates and policies can be so different across far-flung communities within the United States.

What we need, then, is a concept that taps into individuals’ desires and preferences that might tell us something about the kinds of candidates and kinds of policies residents might prefer across a range of choices. The concept of ideology is well suited for this. Political scientists see ideology as a set of interconnected and stable beliefs that compose an individual’s worldview.31 This ideology can predict more specific attitudes and behaviors in politics, such as preferences in certain policy areas or predilections for particular candidates. To be sure, the concept of ideology is an imperfect distillation of individuals’ preferences. People are complicated, and the world is even more complex. But research shows that individuals draw on ideologies in predictable ways to make sense of the world and their place in it.32 Whether used consciously or (more likely) unconsciously, ideology is a powerful organizing device used every day by individuals to make shortcut judgments about politics. It can help individuals choose among political alternatives, explain the way things are, or make claims about how politics should be.

Of course, few individuals are consistent ideologues. They may be “liberals” on one issue and “conservatives” on another. This is especially true of ordinary individuals, who are not always as consistent in their beliefs as political elites.33 For instance, in a world comprising individuals of complete ideological consistency, a person who supports additional government spending on education would also support additional spending on health care. Clearly, this is not always the case, and scholars have arrived at more nuanced understandings of how Americans sort into

different clusters of political reasoning. But despite these complexities, ideology is among the strongest and most consistent predictors of political preferences. For example, simply knowing somebody’s ideology – in the way we measure it for this book – would allow us to correctly predict their 2016 presidential vote choice with greater than 80 percent accuracy. Our ideology measure is also a strong predictor of peoples’ positions on issues that often confront local governments, such as support for increasing funding for education, law enforcement, and infrastructure. Accordingly, we use ideology as a simple heuristic for tapping into underlying preferences about politics. In the next chapter we explain how we measure ideology among both municipal residents and among elected officials; for now, though, we focus on why we center attention on ideological representation as our key measure of the health of local democracy.

Ideological representation is central to contemporary understandings of democracy. As a first observation, Michael MacKuen, Robert Erikson, James Stimson, and Kathleen Knight suggest that

\[ \text{the nature of democratic government depends in large part on citizens’ and politicians’ ability to communicate with each other about their preferences and actions. In the contemporary United States ... the shorthand language of “ideology” facilitates such conversation. Here by ideology, we mean the notions of liberalism and conservatism or left and right that are used in everyday political discourse.} \]

In short, ideology is essential for representation because it is a simple and direct way to facilitate meaningful communication between constituents and elected officials.

More pointedly, the idea of ideological representation – by elected officials of constituents – undergirds the core normative principle of democracy that the people are ultimately sovereign, and therefore should exercise “control” over their elected representatives. When we assess

elected officials’ representation of their constituents, we typically want to know “how close” representatives are to their constituents’ political views, as well as “how responsive” they are to their constituents’ demands. All things being equal, representatives who are “closer” and “more responsive” to their constituents better conform to the principle of popular sovereignty than do those who are more distant and autonomous. In short, ideological representation captures both a key feature of how democracies operate in practice and a core normative principle of how elected officials should behave, thus making it a valuable lens for assessing representation at the local level.

While previous research on (un)equal representation at the municipal level has enriched our understanding of how local governments serve—or fail to serve—residents of color and the less well-to-do, none of these studies directly assesses how well the ideologies of disadvantaged groups are reflected in the ideologies of local government officials or the overall ideological orientation of local government policy. As Zoltan Hajnal and Jessica Trounstine, two preeminent scholars of local politics, note, evaluating the representation of group ideologies at the municipal level is typically bedeviled by two problems: Scholars “rarely have data on group preferences and government actions apart from a specific policy area or across a large number of communities”; and they typically want for measures that account for the “lack of unanimity [of opinion] within each group” being studied. As we have noted, conventional sources of information about individuals’ preferences—typically, surveys of public opinion—simply are not expansive enough to provide detailed measures of group ideologies across a wide array of diverse communities. Even studies that pool multiple surveys and use sophisticated methods such as multilevel regression and post-stratification to estimate resident ideologies in municipalities have, to date, lacked a sufficient number of observations to estimate racial and class group ideologies in most communities across the United States.

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40 Warshaw, “Elections and Representation.”
Focusing on ideological representation, this book provides a more rigorous and detailed assessment of the quality of representative democracy in local governments in the United States. We use advances in “big data” – specifically, data drawn from the Catalist database, a national database of demographic, political, and marketing information on over 240 million adults – to estimate the ideologies of various racial and class groups in hundreds of diverse communities from around the United States. Using Catalist, we also estimate the ideologies of thousands of municipal councilors in the same communities. To measure the ideological orientation of local policy, we draw on surveys of municipal policy adoptions developed by the International City Managers Association (ICMA). These data allow us to evaluate directly how well or poorly the ideologies of different racial and class groups are represented in both the ideology of municipal councils (Catalist) and the ideology of local government policy (ICMA).

We combine these data with comprehensive information about the characteristics of local electoral and governing institutions to determine whether and how (1) the openness of local political institutions and (2) the “overlap” in ideologies – that is, shared ideological leanings – between various racial and class groups affect the representation received by less advantaged groups. We also incorporate data from the US Census to investigate how (3) patterns of economic and racial inequality within local communities affect the prospects for representation of the ideologies of disadvantaged groups.

Our research reveals several striking insights about the character of local democracy in the United States:

1 While some scholars and pundits have portrayed local politics as relatively nonideological (especially outside large cities), our research suggests just the opposite. We find remarkable variation

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in the ideologies of different racial and class groups within and across local communities. The United States is characterized by an extremely rich diversity of perspectives among whites and non-whites and among rich and poor, and this diversity is in evidence within many municipalities, including suburban communities and small towns. While this plurality of perspectives is a major source of national pride and strength, it also greatly increases the complexity of the task of representation facing local governments. Because many localities are quite diverse ideologically, providing equitable representation of diverse views is no easy task, even for the most conscientious elected officials. Furthermore, the presence of significant ideological diversity that falls along racial and/or class lines creates the potential for tensions between groups within communities.

Indeed, the challenges involved in representing a wide diversity of perspectives is plainly illustrated in our findings about how different groups are represented in their local communities. In a departure from recent studies that emphasize the responsiveness of local governments to the average resident, our research reveals systematic racial and class biases in representation in local government. Whites and wealthier people receive substantially more ideological representation both from local government officials and from municipal policy outputs than do nonwhites and less wealthy individuals. The inequities in representation we identify are frequently shocking in their magnitude. For example, we find that it is only when blacks make up 80–100 percent of the community population that they receive the same amount of ideological representation from elected officials on municipal councils that whites attain when...
they represent only 20–40 percent of the population. Such findings—which appear again and again in the pages that follow—raise profound and difficult questions about the capacity of municipalities to represent the interests of less advantaged residents. Our results suggest that the current trend toward political decentralization and reduced federal government authority in the United States—itself part of a broader global drive toward government decentralization—will likely hurt already vulnerable Americans the most.44

3 Of great importance to studies of inequality in American democracy, we find that racial biases in representation in local politics are much larger and more pervasive than are economic biases. In an era of rising economic inequality, many scholars have understandably focused attention on the relationship between affluence and influence in American politics. Yet, as we show in this book, at the local level the magnitude and pervasiveness of racial biases in representation far exceed those based on wealth. These findings are consistent with an emergent literature on biases in representation in national politics that directly compares inequities in representation on the basis of race and class, respectively, which also finds that racial biases are much more serious.45 In highlighting the greater severity of racial inequalities in representation, we hope to encourage scholars, activists, and ordinary citizens to face head-on the deep-seated racial divides that pose such a difficult challenge to American democracy.

4 Our work also suggests important—and quite troubling—conclusions about the respective roles of local political institutions, racial inequality, and economic inequality in conditioning the representation received by less advantaged groups within communities. We find that while specific local political institutions that make local politics more open and accessible—such as holding local elections concurrently with federal ones—modestly reduce inequalities in representation, the formal structure of local institutions plays a very limited role in determining how much (or how little)


representation nonwhite and less affluent people receive from local government. Of course, we encourage efforts by residents, activists, and local officials to institute reforms and experiment with novel institutions as ways to enliven the practice of local democracy. But our findings caution against excessive confidence in the efficacy of such institutional “fixes” to reduce racial and class biases in representation in local politics.

Our research strongly suggests that the degree of “overlap” between the ideologies of less advantaged groups and the ideologies of advantaged groups plays a very important role in determining the amount of ideological representation enjoyed by the less fortunate. When nonwhite groups (or less affluent groups) have similar ideologies to white groups (or wealthier residents), they receive considerable ideological representation from municipal councils and local government outputs. But when the ideologies of nonwhites (or less affluent residents) are distant from those of whites (or affluent residents), they receive little representation. This finding suggests that, due to the happy coincidence of overlapping ideologies between disadvantaged and advantaged groups, opportunities for substantial representation of the ideologies of nonwhite/less affluent residents in local politics and policy do exist.46

However, such opportunities for “coincidental representation” are more available for some disadvantaged groups than for others. For example, the ideologies of Latinos are on average much closer to the ideologies of whites than are the ideologies of African Americans, suggesting much greater opportunities for the coincidental representation of the ideologies of Latinos than of African Americans.47 Of equal concern, the prospects for coincidental representation vary considerably – and in systematic ways – across communities. Indeed, we find that communities with the greatest racial inequities on socioeconomic benchmarks are also those with the worst prospects for coincidental representation, because these

are the communities where more and less advantaged residents disagree the most. Finally, we need to keep in mind that coincidental representation will always be a poor substitute for genuine responsiveness to the ideologies of less advantaged groups. After all, if residents of color and those with low incomes must depend on their agreement with the relatively powerful in order to obtain representation in local government, they will always be “in a politically tentative and precarious position.”

Patterns of racial and economic inequality within communities have important consequences for inequality in representation. When there are more racially disparate social and economic outcomes within communities, African Americans and whites tend to have more distinctive ideologies. Because African Americans are highly dependent on coincidental representation with whites for ideological representation on municipal councils, greater racial inequality within communities reduces the likelihood that African Americans will be well represented. Greater economic inequality within communities has cross-cutting effects for representation in local government. In communities with more economic inequality, the ideologies of the least affluent are more distant from those of the wealthy; but they are closer to those of the middle class. Ironically, higher levels of economic inequality within communities may help poorer residents find common cause with more politically powerful middle class residents.

Together, our findings present a sobering portrait of the state of local democracy in the twenty-first century. Our work suggests that many local governments fail a central test of democracy, falling well short of their responsibility to provide equitable representation to their residents without regard to race or class. Of course, representation is a complex task, and this is especially true in today’s increasingly diverse communities. Nonetheless, in failing to equitably represent the demands of residents of color and those with lower incomes, municipalities are arguably complicit in the entrenchment of racial and class disparities that are the primary obstacles to the full realization of the promise of American life.

There are no easy solutions to the severe shortcomings of local democracy that we identify in the pages that follow. Rather than being a

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surrender to despair, however, this book is a call to action. All Americans – but particularly the relatively advantaged (including, we suspect, many of those who are reading this book) – have the responsibility to contribute to the advancement of democracy and to the fuller extension of its benefits to their fellow citizens. Faced with serious threats to the practice of local democracy, we must ask ourselves, and each other, hard questions. What can we do to make local governments more responsive to the demands of their less advantaged residents? What should we do? And, perhaps most importantly, do we have the determination to do it? Ultimately, whether the promise of local democracy withers, or is reborn, is up to us. We hope that, by exposing the limitations of local democracy as it is currently practiced, we will inspire scholars, activists, and ordinary citizens to remake municipalities so that they express the highest ideals of American democracy and meet the needs of all their residents.

**DO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS PROVIDE LESSIDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION TO DISADVANTAGED GROUPS?**

Do local governments provide less ideological representation to disadvantaged groups than they do to privileged residents? While the question appears straightforward, there is as yet no consensus on the answer. Rather, working in a variety of research traditions, scholars have developed theories and provided empirical evidence that suggest – without demonstrating conclusively – divergent views on this question.

A large and diverse body of research suggests reasons for skepticism about the presence of systematic biases in ideological representation by local governments. As a first observation, recent empirical research reveals that local governments are responsive to the policy preferences of the average resident, with more liberal communities enacting more liberal policies and more conservative municipalities adopting more conservative initiatives. By demonstrating the “robust role for citizen policy preferences in determining municipal policy outcomes,” this work provides initial reasons for optimism about the responsiveness of local governments to the demands of groups of residents within communities.

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50 Tausanovitch and Warshaw, “Municipal Government.” Notably, influential research on state politics similarly suggests a close correspondence between public preferences and
Furthermore, there are reasons to suspect that, due to constraints on the scope of ideological conflict at the municipal level, racial or economic biases in representation in local politics are likely to be muted. The fact that individuals have the freedom to migrate to communities that better reflect their preferences for taxation and spending on social services may serve as a natural limit on the representational biases of local governments. Second, the substantial legal and fiscal dependence of local governments on state governments and the federal government may reduce the range of ideological conflict in local politics. State governments and the federal government frequently restrict local government activity, as, for example, when state governments prohibit local sales taxes. They also circumscribe local government discretion through their involvement in areas of policy where responsibility is shared, as through legal conditions on grants in aid to municipalities. Such constraints on the autonomy of local government might, by handcuffing local government discretion, limit the degree to which local governments can favor some residents over others.

Finally, the rigors of economic competition among municipalities may constrict local government decision-making and thereby curtail biases in municipal representation. Because local governments must

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53 Ladd and Yinger, Ailing Cities.


55 Peterson, City Limits; Bailey and Rom, “A Wider Race”; Ladd and Yinger, Ailing Cities; Berman, Local Government and the States; Rae, City.
compete for investment capital, employers, and skilled labor, they all face pressures to enact similar bundles of growth-friendly policies, such as relatively low corporate taxes, good schools, well-maintained roads, and high-quality industrial and retail parks. According to this view, economic competition among municipalities hinders communities’ ability to enact the redistributive policies that are commonly the focus of traditional left–right ideological conflict. If the struggle for economic survival curbs local government discretion, municipalities may lack the leeway to substantially overrepresent or underrepresent particular groups of residents.

At the same time, though, there are reasons to suspect that local governments may fail to represent the ideologies of residents of color and the less affluent as well as they represent those of white and well-off residents.56 A large body of empirical research demonstrating that the ideologies and policy preferences of nonwhites and the poor are less well represented by elected officials and in government policy at the federal and state levels suggests that similar patterns may also prevail in municipal governments.57 While some proponents of local self-government tout the superior representative capacities of governments that are “close to the people,” empirical research on the racial and class biases of actual governments suggests a more chastened view of how democracy works—and fails to work.

Furthermore, the fact that less advantaged residents seem to “lose” when it comes to other forms of representation at the municipal level provides a reasonable basis for expecting that they also receive less ideological representation in local government. After all, if nonwhite and less affluent residents are less likely to elect preferred candidates to


local office and are less likely to perceive that municipal services meet their needs, we might also anticipate that they are less likely to enjoy ideological representation on par with that of whites and the well-to-do.  

Finally, indications that racial diversity, racial segregation, and economic inequality are all associated both with reduced provision of “public goods” and with increased use of exploitative revenue sources such as fines and court fees imply that less advantaged residents may receive less ideological representation from local governments than do the more advantaged. Indeed, scholars have hypothesized that increased racial and/or economic diversity impedes the provision of public goods both by increasing ideological diversity (which makes consensus building around redistributive spending more difficult) and by depressing support for public goods provision among advantaged groups. If advantaged groups often oppose the extension of government opportunities and benefits to others who are not of their group, it seems quite likely that less advantaged groups will often be on the losing side of local democracy.

In short, whether disadvantaged racial and class groups actually receive less ideological representation in municipal politics remains the subject of considerable disagreement. In the following chapters, we aim to provide a more definitive empirical resolution to this important debate.

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60 Luttmer, “Group Loyalty.”
WHAT AFFECTS THE IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION RECEIVED BY DISADVANTAGED RESIDENTS? THREE THEORETICAL LENSES

In addition to assessing whether and to what extent racially or economically disadvantaged residents receive (in)equitable ideological representation from local governments, we also seek to shed light on the factors that explain the degree of (in)equality in representation within communities. Building on the most recent research on political inequalities in American democracy at other levels of government, we investigate why disadvantaged groups receive considerable ideological representation from their local governments in some communities, even as they receive little if any from local governments in other communities.61

We draw inspiration from three distinctive theoretical lenses relating to the representation of groups in American politics: the institutional lens; the coincidental representation lens; and the racial and economic inequality lens. We believe that this approach synthesizes various strands of research on the contextual moderators of inequalities in American democracy, providing a useful model for future research on biases in representation at the local, state, and national levels.

The Institutional Lens

Scholars of local politics have long suggested that the design of municipal institutions affects the opportunities available to historically disadvantaged groups. Building on previous research we develop and test hypotheses about how the characteristics of local electoral institutions influence race- and class-based inequalities in local representation.62 We make a


key distinction between institutional designs oriented toward wide participation in elections – what we call a Political Model – and those that prioritize government effectiveness – what we call a Professional Model.

The Political Model is rooted in the mass politics of the nineteenth century, which challenged the elite status quo. The extension of the franchise to propertyless white men encouraged the formation of local parties that mobilized voters around candidates and issues framed by a party ticket. Intense partisan rivalries and electoral competition stimulated an environment of political bargaining in which disadvantaged groups won a share of decision-making power and economic resources. During this era, municipal elections were often highly partisan and frequently contested at the same time as state and federal races in order to maximize the ability of party organizations to mobilize their supporters.

The Professional Model, in contrast, emerged from a reform movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to challenge the Political Model. Progressive reformers sought to thwart the allegedly “corrupt” politics of party machines and create efficient managerial-style government, arguing that municipal policies and services should not reflect partisan loyalties but professional administration. By changing electoral and governing institutions, reformers aimed to professionalize government and insulate it from partisan politics. As Schaffner, Streb, and Wright explain, “The Progressives’ normative view of the good citizen was that of the interested and involved individual, who with other well-meaning and public regarding citizens use the electoral process to select the most competent leaders who will then work for the common good.”

These changes included shifting to nonpartisan ballots, having an


appointed executive, using at-large elections, and holding elections off-cycle to insulate them from state and federal campaigns.

The institutions of the Political Model tend to make politics easier to understand and less costly to engage in, and to strengthen elected officials’ incentives to respond to constituent demands.\textsuperscript{65} In contrast, the institutions of the Professional Model insulate policy decisions from factional politics in order to promote efficient and effective municipal services for the community as a whole. This depoliticized model, though often more efficient, makes politics less accessible to ordinary residents.\textsuperscript{66}

In the Political Model, elections tend to be organized so that they are likely to maximize voters’ interest and information. They feature elections that are concurrent with (high-profile, and often more exciting) federal contests; partisan in organization, thus providing voters with information-rich cues about candidates’ ideologies and policy positions; and organized by specific geographic districts, which provide concentrated interests and communities with their own representatives in local government. By contrast, in the Professional Model elections are organized in ways that are less exciting and less informative to the average voter. Thus, for example, Professional Model elections are typically held off-cycle, organized in a nonpartisan fashion, and controlled by at-large, rather than district-based, forms of representation.

The research indicates that some of these institutions matter quite significantly for participation in politics. For example, nonpartisan elections have been shown to depress turnout and make government policy less responsive to the positions of citizens.\textsuperscript{67} Off-cycle elections appear to have an even stronger negative effect on turnout, thus leading to less


responsiveness. People of color and the less affluent are disproportionately likely to possess fewer of the social, economic, and educational resources associated with robust participation in politics. Accordingly, it is natural to expect that when local institutions produce lower turnout, it is among the disadvantaged that turnout (and representation) will suffer the most.

Consider, for example, the case of Ferguson, Missouri, where two-thirds of the population is African American. In the November 2012 presidential election, 76 percent of registered voters in Ferguson came out to vote – and among those voters, 71 percent were black. This helped Barack Obama win 85 percent of the vote in Ferguson in that election. But the Ferguson municipal elections were not held at that time; instead, they were contested on nonpartisan ballots the following April (2013). In that election, just 12 percent of registered voters turned out to vote and African Americans accounted for less than half of those voters. This experience is fairly typical – when turnout drops, it is typically whites and those with higher socioeconomic status who are left in the electorate, as we illustrate in Chapter 4. And, of course, politicians are likely to be most responsive to those who vote. Accordingly, we expect that the Political Model – which favors institutions that facilitate more participation – will promote more equal representation of disadvantaged groups; while the Professional Model – which depresses turnout – will be biased toward more advantaged community members.

The Coincidental Representation Lens

Scholars of group inequalities in representation have repeatedly found that – despite important differences in life experiences and access to opportunities – distinctive groups may have similar preferences on important political issues. Indeed, a striking finding of research on

68 Anzia, Timing and Turnout; Hajnal and Lewis, “Municipal Institutions.”
economic inequality in representation, for example, is that there is considerable agreement among low-, middle-, and high-income groups in many areas of public policymaking, though there are also areas of substantial disagreement.\textsuperscript{71}

Commonality in preferences across distinctive groups creates opportunities for what researchers call “coincidental representation” of the desires of disadvantaged groups by elected officials.\textsuperscript{72} To the degree that the preferences of a disadvantaged group overlap with the preferences of an advantaged group, the disadvantaged group will receive representation from elected officials \textit{even if elected officials intended to be responsive only to the advantaged group}. As J. Alexander Branham, Stuart N. Soroka, and Christopher Wlezien note in relation to ideological policy representation,

“\text{In these instances [in which disadvantaged and advantaged groups agree], it does not matter whether public policy is more responsive to one group – policy will end up in the same place. This is not to say that it does not matter theoretically, of course – we ideally would want policy to respond to all citizens . . . [But] it does not matter practically, as there will be no substantive difference in policy outputs.”}\textsuperscript{73}

Due to the logic of coincidental representation, democracy may fortuitously work quite well for some disadvantaged groups even in the absence of intentional responsiveness on the part of elected officials.

Notably, however, the prospects for coincidental representation of less advantaged groups vary. For example, they likely differ across geographic space. Indeed, looking at economic gaps in policy preferences at the state level, Flavin found substantial variation across states in the magnitude of differences in preferences between low-, medium-, and high-income groups.\textsuperscript{74} Flavin’s descriptive findings suggest that there is also likely variation in the degree of overlap in preferences between disadvantaged and advantaged groups at the local level. More generally, this observation highlights the fortuitous – and ultimately arbitrary – nature of coincidental representation and underscores the inevitability of inequities in access to coincidental representation across different local communities.

\textsuperscript{71} Enns, “Relative Policy”; Gilens, \textit{Affluence and Influence}.
\textsuperscript{72} Enns, “Relative Policy.”
\textsuperscript{73} Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien, “\text{When Do the Rich Win?”}\textsuperscript{45}.
By the same token, some groups may be more likely on average to enjoy coincidental representation than others, simply because their preferences tend to be closer to those of the advantaged group than do the preferences of other groups. Thus, for example, a commonplace finding in research on economic inequality is that the preferences of the middle class are typically closer to those of the wealthy (the favored group) than are the preferences of the poor, a tendency that tends to create greater opportunities for coincidental representation for the middle class than for the poor. In the same way, the preferences of Latinos are typically closer to those of whites than are the preferences of African Americans, thus implying that Latinos may enjoy greater opportunities for coincidental representation than do African Americans.75

For example, we began this chapter by discussing the case of Houston, a racially diverse city that also seems to struggle to effectively represent its diverse citizens. One reason for this may be the fact that Houston’s racial and ethnic groups differ quite a bit in terms of their political preferences. Surveys of Houston over the years have found that white residents are significantly less likely to back government programs that support child care, job availability, a higher minimum wage, or health care than their African American and Latino neighbors.76 African Americans are also much more likely than whites to say that Houston does not do enough to meet the needs of the hungry and homeless. On most of these items, the opinions of the Latino population of Houston generally lie somewhere between those of whites and Blacks. Accordingly, if the Houston city government is responsive to the demands of white residents, then the views of Latinos (often) and African Americans (especially) will suffer as a result. Furthermore, the fact that African Americans and whites in Houston disagree so much on the issues means that African Americans are particularly unlikely to receive coincidental representation.

By contrast, a city like Boston, Massachusetts may be riper for coincidental representation, largely due to the fact that whites living in Boston are more liberal than whites living in Houston. Because whites in Boston are more liberal, their views are more likely to coincide with those of nonwhites living in the city (as we show in subsequent chapters,

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75 Rhodes, Schaffner, and McElwee, “Is America More Divided by Race or Class?”
nonwhites are on average noticeably more liberal than whites). In fact, in a poll conducted in conjunction with the 2013 Mayoral Election in Boston, 43 percent of white Bostonians identified their ideological point of view as liberal, which was precisely the same percentage of nonwhites who identified as liberals. Perhaps as a result, the preferences of whites in that mayoral election were quite similar to those of nonwhites, with both groups demonstrating strong support for the eventual winner, Marty Walsh. Unlike Houston, Boston is a city where the views of white and nonwhite citizens tend to coincide to a considerable degree, a pattern that means the conditions are good for racial and ethnic minorities to benefit from coincidental representation. This is not to say that racial minorities do not experience significant problems in getting represented in Boston—they most certainly do—but that the overlapping preferences between them and white residents make the prospects for decent representation much more likely than in cities like Houston where the two populations diverge to a greater extent.

Of course, the specific patterns evident in other geographic or political contexts may or may not be present in the communities we study in this book. Even so, we anticipate that the ideological representation received by less advantaged groups from local governments is likely to be influenced by the degree to which the ideologies of less advantaged groups overlap with those of more advantaged groups. When the ideologies of less advantaged groups overlap to a greater degree with the ideologies of more advantaged groups, less advantaged groups will receive more ideological representation by virtue of the logic of coincidental representation. But when the ideologies of less advantaged groups overlap to a lesser degree with the ideologies of more advantaged groups, they will receive less representation.

The Racial and Economic Inequality Lens

Local patterns of racial and economic inequality may also shape prospects for the representation of disadvantaged communities within municipalities. Indeed, one of the key insights of the most recent research on inequalities in American democracy is that context—and, in particular, the prevalence of race- or class-based disparities in economic and social outcomes—can have important consequences for the severity of racial or

class biases in representation. In this book, we build on this important insight to investigate how local patterns of racial and economic inequality are associated with the degree of representational inequality experienced by less advantaged residents.

The concept of economic inequality is relatively familiar - by this we simply mean the degree to which economic resources are distributed unequally among members of a community. But the idea of racial inequality requires additional explanation. By racial inequality, we mean the unequal distribution of economic and social resources between different racial groups within the same community. As Rodney Hero and Morris Levy, two prominent scholars of racial inequality, explain, it is important to differentiate between these two concepts, because “two societies with the same total amount of ... inequality between individuals may differ greatly in the degree to which resources are unequally distributed across salient social groups.” For example, given two societies that are each composed of equal proportions of two racial groups, it is mathematically possible for the two societies to have an identical overall level of economic inequality, even if in one society the percentages of high- and low-income earners are equal across racial groups, while in the other society most members of one racial group are low earners while most members of the other racial group are high earners. In order to obtain a full picture of the structure of inequality within and across communities, therefore, it is essential to evaluate both the overall degree of inequality and the extent to which resources are equitably distributed across racial groups. Racial inequality indicates systematic biases in the allocation of social and economic resources in the community based on group traits, above and beyond such economic categories as “working class.”

Extensive research has documented the serious adverse consequences of both economic inequality and racial inequality for the well-being of societies. Greater inequities are associated with a range of social ills, including weaker social ties, higher crime rates, worse health outcomes,

78 Ellis, “Social Context and Economic Biases in Representation.”
lower educational achievement, and slower economic growth.\textsuperscript{81} Racial and economic inequalities are also associated with specifically political dysfunctions, including lower provision of public goods and increased corruption by both citizens and government officials.\textsuperscript{82}

Finally, where greater economic and/or racial inequality exists, the advantages in political influence enjoyed by privileged social groups are generally compounded, with important implications for inequality in ideological representation.\textsuperscript{83} Clearly, “political resources” such as wealth and education provide a foundation for superior political influence via greater participation in elections, increased access to elected officials, more expertise and funds for interest group organizing and advocacy, and higher capacity to convey messages to the mass public.\textsuperscript{84} Since this is

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\item Schlozman, Brady, and Verba, \textit{The Unheavenly Chorus}; Gilens and Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics.”

\item Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen. \textit{Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America}. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993; Verba, Brady, and
so, greater inequities in access to such political resources across economic and racial groups are highly likely to yield similarly inequitable outcomes in all of these areas—and, in turn, even more unequal representation in politics. Increasing economic and racial inequality can become self-reinforcing, as more privileged groups use their superior resources to further extend their advantages through the political process.

In fact, there is growing evidence for important links in this causal chain. Research at the national, state, and local levels indicates that increased economic inequality is associated with reduced rates of voting and other forms of civic participation. And studies of economic inequality in representation in Congress indicate that inequality in representation is greatest in congressional districts with higher levels of economic inequality. More worrisome, higher levels of inequality may lead to increased levels of partisan polarization, which can stymie changes to the political system that might reduce inequalities and enhance representation.

Together, these observations suggest that patterns of social inequality likely moderate the severity of biases in representation. Inequality in ideological representation will likely be higher in communities where the socioeconomic disparities are greatest, and should be less in political units in which racial inequality and/or economic inequality are lower.

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87 In a similar vein, Rigby and Wright, “Political Parties and the Representation of the Poor,” find that, at the state level, inattention to the political opinions of low-income residents is particularly flagrant in states with below average median income.
PLAN FOR THE BOOK

Our argument, and its associated evidence, unfolds in a series of steps. In Chapter 2, we discuss our unique approach to studying inequalities in representation at the local level. We introduce our various sources of data and explain how we use them to measure representation of racial and class groups in a representative sample of communities from across the United States.

Chapter 3 exploits the unique characteristics of our data to provide a detailed examination of ideological diversity among racial and class groups both between and within local communities throughout the United States. Contrary to the conventional view that local politics are largely nonideological, we find strong evidence of ideological diversity within local communities, as well as clear indications that ideological differences map onto racial and class cleavages in predictable ways. Generally speaking, significant ideological differences between advantaged and disadvantaged groups exist within many communities, with privileged residents typically adopting more conservative views than their less advantaged neighbors.

Because those who participate in politics tend to enjoy much greater representation in government than those who do not, in Chapter 4 we investigate patterns in participation in local politics. We find that whites, wealthy people, and those with more extreme attitudes are more likely to vote in local elections and contact local elected officials. We also provide evidence that these biases in local political participation seem to translate to racial and class biases in the composition of municipal elected officials. These findings provide strong reasons to suspect systematic racial and class biases in representation in local government.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on racial inequality in representation. In Chapter 5, we explore various forms of representation – descriptive representation, ideological congruence representation between constituents and members of municipal councils, and policy responsiveness by governments to the ideologies of residents – and investigate the effectiveness of municipalities in providing each of these forms of representation to whites, African Americans, and Latinos, respectively. Having demonstrated systematic biases in representation by local governments against African Americans and Latinos, we turn in Chapter 6 to an investigation of factors that may moderate these biases. Troublingly, our results suggest that residents of color are heavily dependent on the logic of coincidental representation for representation in local government; and that the
availability of coincidental representation for African Americans is contingent on the presence of a relatively high degree of racial equality within communities. In contrast, the characteristics of local institutions play a limited role in determining the representation accorded to residents of color.

Starting with Chapter 7, we begin an in-depth investigation of economic inequality in representation at the municipal level. Chapter 7 examines how well local governments provide various forms of representation to residents of different levels of wealth. Again, we find systematic biases in representation. Local governments are quite representative of middle- and upper-class residents, but they are typically indifferent to the concerns of the least affluent. In Chapter 8, we evaluate how local political institutions, the dynamics of conditional representation, and patterns of economic inequality shape the prospects for representation of residents of different economic means. We find that coincidental representation is very important for less affluent residents (though not for the wealthy); and that the scheduling of elections on-cycle with federal elections or off-cycle in November increases representation in local government for all residents without regard to economic circumstances. Surprisingly, we find that economic inequality has cross-cutting implications for the representation of low-wealth residents. Increased inequality leads to a larger ideological gap between the least affluent and the well-to-do, raising obstacles to coincidental representation. But it simultaneously narrows the ideological gap between the poor and the middle class, potentially granting the least affluent a powerful ally in local government.

In the conclusion, we bring together our findings to discuss the broader implications for our understanding of the practice of local democracy in the United States. Our findings suggest the need both for sober reflection about the dismal state of municipal politics in the contemporary United States and for concerted efforts to rejuvenate local democracy. Our analysis raises numerous complex and difficult questions, which readers should keep in mind as they examine the pages that follow. Many, if not most, Americans cherish municipalities as embodiments of the principle of local autonomy and self-government. Yet, as we demonstrate conclusively in this book, local governments – especially in small towns – have great difficulty equitably representing the diverse views of their constituents. Particularly disturbing, local governments consistently favor the “haves” (whites and the well-to-do) over the “have-nots” (residents of color and the less affluent). How can the understandable preference of
many Americans for a strong measure of local self-government be reconciled with the moral imperative that governments treat their residents equitably?

Our research also suggests the need for further consideration of the difficult trade-offs between the merits of geographic diversity and the normative demands of political equality. In the United States, diversity in local government institutions, processes, and outputs has long been celebrated, both as a reflection of distinctive local preferences and as a mechanism for the testing and dissemination of innovations (i.e. the description of local governments as “laboratories of democracy”). However, as we illustrate in this book, geographic variation in local government activity goes hand in hand with stark geographic differences in local government responsiveness to the preferences of the most vulnerable Americans. Some local governments are relatively responsive to the demands of residents of color and those with lower incomes and wealth; but many, indeed most, are not. Given these patterns, how can the virtues of the “laboratories of democracy” be squared with the responsibility of all governments to provide equitable representation to their constituents without regard to race or class?

In the pages that follow, we urge readers to keep in mind the implications of our findings for the politics of municipal reform today. As we demonstrate in the following pages, there are no easy solutions to the problems of inequitable representation in local government. But we do not have the luxury of inaction. The stark evidence of systematic biases against residents of color and less affluent residents that we uncover in this book calls us to grapple with the difficult, but essential, task of making local government live up to its democratic responsibilities.

Although we do not provide a comprehensive plan for reform, we do point to possible avenues for improving the performance of local government. Building on recent research, we highlight that a major challenge for local democracy is a serious dearth of information about the activities of local officials and the performance of local governments. Due to the severe erosion of local media, and in particular local coverage of politics, many residents likely lack adequate information to evaluate how well local elected officials are fulfilling their promises and serving the public interest.89 Indeed, recent research suggests that the loss of local political

news coverage is associated with reductions in citizens’ political knowledge and participation. The impact of the decline of local news is likely to be felt most severely among less advantaged residents, who already face the steepest challenges to obtaining equitable representation from government officials. We suggest that activists, scholars, and citizens must find ways to make information about the workings of local government more available and accessible to all residents, especially those already facing disadvantages.

We also argue that those interested in rejuvenating municipal democracy must find novel and effective ways of communicating to local elected officials accurate information about what constituents want. Existing evidence strongly suggests that several forms of bias – the particular content of elected officials’ beliefs and opinions, the characteristics of the groups they tend to listen to, and the tendency of elected officials to ignore constituents with differing views – lead elected officials to provide limited representation to many of their constituents, and especially non-whites and the less affluent. However, elected officials are motivated to represent their constituents, and they change their behavior when they


learn more about what their constituents want. Thus, we suggest, it is imperative that we develop new and effective ways of conveying clear, detailed information about what constituents want to local leaders. We also argue that state governments, nonprofits, and advocacy organizations need to take clear steps to lower the costs of running for and holding elective office for nonwhite and less affluent residents. If less advantaged residents held a larger share of local elective offices, it is likely that the concerns and needs of nonwhites and less affluent residents would be better represented in local government.

Finally, we suggest that state governments must get more involved in monitoring the quality of local democracy, and possibly intervening in communities with serious and intractable biases in representation. Since municipalities are creatures of state governments, it is ultimately the responsibility of states to take meaningful steps to ensure that localities are providing equitable representation to all their residents.

In the end, our book raises more questions than answers about how to make local governments more responsive to the demands of residents of color and the less economically advantaged. Yet, we hope, these questions will spur scholars, activists, and elected officials to renewed efforts to invigorate the promise of local democracy in the United States. In the end, clearly identifying the problems and raising pointed questions about their causes are the necessary, if painful, first steps in remedying current political injustices. The next steps are up to us all.