

## Introduction

On a freezing day in January 2009 hundreds of thousands of people lined the mall in front of the Capitol in Washington, DC, to witness Barack Obama take the oath of office as our first African American president of the United States. The changing face of the top US elected official symbolizes a changing of the guard in US political leadership and reflects the dramatic growth and diversification of the nation's population and governing bodies over the last five decades. This change is evident on Capitol Hill where, in January 1965, Patsy Takemoto Mink of Hawaii ascended to federal office as the nation's first woman of color in Congress. She served as the sole congresswoman of color for four years until joined by Shirley Chisholm of New York in 1969. It would be another twenty years before the nation's first Latina congresswoman, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, joined their ranks. Today, women and men of color in the US Congress number in the double digits. A similar change also happened to the nation's highest court when Sonia Sotomayor, a woman from a working class Puerto Rican family in New York City, took the oath of office in 2009 and became the first Latina Supreme Court justice, having been nominated by President Obama. More recently, statewide officials such as Nikki Haley, the daughter of immigrants from India, and governor of South Carolina, argued for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from state property.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As we discuss later, the impetus was the outcry over the murder of State Senator Reverend Clementa Pinckney by a White supremacist. Governor Haley, the Asian Indian American female Republican governor of South Carolina, broke ranks with South Carolina's tradition and called for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from state capitol grounds, flanked by both of the state's Black members of Congress, Rep. James Clyburn (D-SC) and US Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) at the signing of the legislation. All twenty-nine Black state

## CHANGE AND PROGRESS

New faces of diversity appear not only in the halls of the White House, US Congress, Supreme Court, and state legislatures. Across the nation and at all levels of government – federal, state, and local – the racial, ethnic, and gender profile of America's governing officials includes more people of color and women than ever before in the nation's history. Add in the growing share of the population and increased electoral participation of Latinos and Asian Americans due to changes in immigration policies and demographic patterns and it is not surprising to see that people of color have gained greater influence in US society and politics.

They are changing the contours of political leadership and governance in this country. One measure of the scope of change is that the number of Black, Latino, Asian American, and American Indian women and men holding elected office today stands at more than 12,000, compared to just a few hundred prior to the implementation of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965. We discuss the growth for each group, the impact of the VRA, and the factors causing it more fully in Chapter 1.<sup>2</sup>

With the majority of elected officials of color in the United States serving at the county, municipal, and school board levels, their political leadership in those positions both reflects and has the potential to effect symbolic and substantive changes in local governance and for the communities they represent. As a whole, local elected officials oversee budgets totaling a trillion dollars or more every year and make critical hiring decisions, including those of particular concern to communities of color, such as police chiefs

representatives supported legislation to take down the flag compared to 69 percent of their White colleagues. Almost nine in ten women legislators compared to fewer than three-quarters of their male counterparts voted for the ban; the vote included 81 percent of White women but just 67 percent of White men. Source: GMCL Project analysis of South Carolina House Roll Call Vote Number 912, which passed on July 9, 2015, [www.scstatehouse.gov/votehistory.php?KEY=10618](http://www.scstatehouse.gov/votehistory.php?KEY=10618) (Accessed July 5, 2016). Because there is only one (White) woman in the SC Senate, we did not include analysis of the Senate votes supporting S897, which were as follows: Black (male) senators 100 percent; White male: 76 percent, [www.scstatehouse.gov/votehistory.php?KEY=10430](http://www.scstatehouse.gov/votehistory.php?KEY=10430) (Accessed July 5, 2016). State Representative Jenny Horne, a White Republican woman descended from the president of the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, offered her impassioned plea: "I cannot believe that we do not have the heart in this body ... to do something meaningful, such as take a symbol of hate off these grounds on Friday." For one example of the impact of her speech on the outcome of the legislation, see Miller (2015).

<sup>2</sup> The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights reported 300 Black elected officials as of 1964 (Henderson 2005). The numbers of Asian American and Latino elected officials were probably a few dozen; for a discussion of Latinos see Melissa R. Michelson (2010, esp. 166).

and school superintendents. Given that for centuries, people of color along with women of all races were deprived of their rights as equal citizens and excluded from political participation and representation, it is not an overstatement to describe recent progress made to local elective leadership and governance as transformational. It is in this historical context that we celebrate the election of Michelle Wu, a young Asian American woman who became president of the City Council of Boston in 2016; her swearing-in is featured in the cover photograph. She replaced a White man from South Boston, the epicenter of 1970s anti-busing protests, where “*It was like a war zone*” during fights over school desegregation (Gellerman 2014).

Although only time may tell if we are too optimistic, we also share the belief that positive political changes may ensue because of the changing faces of diversity in the city/town halls and elsewhere in the structure of governance. A case in point is that, with the rise of elected leadership of color in a former bastion of White southern dominance, Black elected officials were able to secure an apology from the county for the murder of Emmett Till – the African American Chicago teenager visiting Money, Mississippi, in summer 1954, who was abducted and murdered when he reportedly



FIGURE INT.1 Black officials mark Tallahatchie County’s apology for Emmett Till’s murder. Photograph by Clay McFerrin, *The Charleston Sun-Sentinel*, Charleston, Mississippi, 2007. Used with permission.

whistled at a White woman shop owner. Black local officials also erected a memorial (Figure Int.1) in recognition of Till and the violence perpetrated against civil rights activists and many Blacks in those days.

#### REGRESS AND CONTINUING UNDERREPRESENTATION

Despite the trend of progress since the mid-1960s, incidents of regress and racial conflict persist. Well-publicized episodes of racial violence against non-White minorities have inundated the nation's traditional and social media in recent years. We have also witnessed a seemingly endless stream of videos posted to a variety of social media of young Black men and women interacting with, and all too often being killed by, local police – moving images that may dash any hope for racial harmony and limit our ability to imagine the nation making continued progress toward a more inclusive and multicultural leadership and governance. We are haunted by the tragic and senseless deaths of Black men such as Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland; Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York; Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina; and the death in police custody of Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas. Let us also not forget twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, or Latinos who have suffered the same fate – and on video: Antonio Zambrano-Montes, shot by three police officers in Pasco, Washington, for throwing rocks; and Ruben Garcia Villalpando, an unarmed Mexican immigrant, shot in Grapevine, Texas, while moving toward the police car with his hands up.

What do these events say about sociopolitical progress for communities of color in America today? Some argue race relations recently have become worse in large part *because* of the election of President Obama, which inflamed racial tensions (see, e.g., Lang 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). According to polls taken shortly after his first inauguration, 69 percent of Americans thought race relations were “generally good”; but polling in 2015 showed that a majority of Americans thought race relations became worse under the nation's first Black president, and just 37 percent described racial conditions as “generally good” (Ross 2015). Some might argue that one result of the violence itself, brought to light by the widespread reporting of such incidents, is generating a heightened awareness of racial problems and an reexamination of race in this country that has been long overdue; see, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates' best-selling, award winning book *Between the World and Me* (2015).

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Yet, informed by our research, we also observe that minority elected officials can play critical roles in leading investigations of these racial events, challenging or investigating the police in individual cases, requiring changes to the racialized [mis]conduct of police departments as a whole, and prosecuting (often, but not always, White) policemen charged with crimes. We note that investigations into these deaths, and responses to the public outcry in communities of color, are typically determined by elected officials at the local level (see Chapter 2). In some cases, the race of the political leaders may factor into whether the responses are quick or slow, violent or peaceful, and result in indictments. It remains an empirical question subject to future scrutiny whether changes in descriptive representation in such troubled places will result in a more just society. We note the possibly contested nature of any assessment of substantive change that results from increased descriptive representation in governance; hence, we entitle our book “contested transformation.”

Another reason for questioning the pace and direction of change is that the demographic transformation that we observed in the impressive growth of the nation’s elected officials of color is partial and incomplete. Although their numbers have grown dramatically, elected officials of color still make up a much smaller share of the total number of elected offices compared to their proportion of the population. When the US Census conducted a survey of popularly elected officials in 1992, there were 85,006 governments and a total of 513,200 elected officials.<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama was elected president in the 232nd year of the United States of America’s existence. It has been only in the last decades since passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that people of color have gained any significant number of elected offices in the United States; these dual narratives of recent progress and continuing exclusion are an integral part of Chapters 1 and 2.

This brings us back to Governor Haley, mentioned earlier, and another image in the media: the empty chair in the South Carolina state legislature that belonged to State Senator and Minister Clementa Pinckney, who, on June 17, 2015, was murdered along with eight of his fellow parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, one of the nation’s oldest Black churches. This event reminds us that political

<sup>3</sup> The number of governments increased to 89,476 in 2007, but it is not possible to determine the total number of elected officials in the United States today. This is because, although the Census continues to issue periodic reports on the number of governments, it discontinued its survey of elected officials after 1992.

leaders of color have themselves been subject to attack, illustrating their own vulnerability in racially charged political environments.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING ELECTED OFFICIALS OF COLOR

The title of this book, *Contested Transformation*, reflects the tension between change (moving forward toward greater political representation and influence) and resistance toward that change. Such tension is typical of politics and remains uncomfortably at the heart of race and gender in American politics today: Whatever transformation of the polity that *has* been achieved has occurred on contested political terrain and can hardly be considered permanent. Such changes for the betterment of marginalized communities have not occurred without a fight, are vulnerable to setbacks, and have been bedeviled at every point and in numerous ways. Omi and Winant (2015) recognize the give-and-take of racial politics in America in their dynamic model of racial formation in the United States. They depict social change with regard to race as contested – whereby social structures and political elites define power/race relations and yet are impacted by forces pushing for change from the ground up.

The growth in the number of elected officials of color since the mid-1960s, however dramatic in terms of numbers or percentage change, has hardly resulted in permanent transformation of American politics. On the *best* day, the situation for people of color, including their elected officials, has taken on the character of “two steps forward, one step back.” In this scenario, there is some momentum toward a net gain over time. But the events on the very *bad* days such as those of racialized violence previously mentioned represent a situation in which one step forward is followed by two steps back, suggesting Sisyphean efforts with little gain. One of the most recent scholarly attempts to characterize this paradoxical nature of American racial politics is made by Wilson (2015). The attention we pay in this book to the women and men of color, serving mostly in subnational politics, adds an important and critical dimension to the nation’s dialogue and debate on this ever-riveting issue of progress and regress and how and why minority elected officials matter.

#### Why This Book

We would like to share another, more personal image: In 2004, before he was elected to the presidency, Obama was a state senator representing a

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FIGURE INT.2 GMCL Project meeting, Chicago, 2004. (l to r): Carol Hardy-Fanta; (unidentified male); Wartyna Davis; Barack Obama, then candidate for US Senate; Dianne Pinderhughes; Pei-te Lien; and Christine Sierra. (Photograph courtesy of Wartyna Davis; used with permission.)

Southside district of Chicago and running for the US Senate. During one of the meetings of our research group at the University of Chicago, we happened upon him outside a barber shop late on a Saturday afternoon in Hyde Park, striding along 53rd Street near Harper Court.

After telling him about the Gender and Multicultural Leadership (GMCL) Project, he looked at us – a group of women, Black, Latina, Asian, and White (Figure Int.2) – and, with an air of considerable puzzlement, asked, *Who are you guys?* In a sense, the way we wrote this book responds to his question, not about who *we* are, as a multicultural group of women scholars, but rather about *who they are* – the women and men who make up the nation's multicultural elected leadership and govern this country: their personal, family, and political backgrounds; why they first ran for office; and their views on and experiences with political leadership, governance, and representation.

This book offers a timely study of America's multicultural elected leadership in the early part of the twenty-first century. It constitutes a first-of-its-kind, comparative study of racial and ethnic minorities, both women and men, that focuses on those holding elective offices at subnational levels of governance. It is national in geographic scope and comprehensive in the topics covered. Further, our study disaggregates analyses by race and gender (alone) and in combination and provides a baseline portrait of Black, Latino, and Asian American women and men holding elective

office in national, state, and local government in the United States today. (We also include a subsample of American Indians serving in nontribal elected positions in state legislatures.)

### About This Book

The words “contested” and “transformation” in the title carry multiple meanings. That the nation is undergoing a demographic transformation in its ethnoracial profile cannot be disputed. We show in this book how the leadership ranks in the nation’s governing institutions increasingly, if incrementally, reflect the demographic diversity evident in the population at large. The roads leading to demographic and political change, however, have been fraught with “contestation.” Focusing specifically on elected officials of color, we outline further considerations of “contested transformation” by exploring the reasons and ways they ran for their first office, their styles of leadership and governance, and their possible impacts on public policy that aim to protect and advance the interests of disadvantaged communities.

To what extent has American political leadership and governance been transformed by the growing presence of women and men of color in elective offices, especially at state and local levels of government? We do not have definitive answers but raise questions for consideration as we analyze elected officials of color along various dimensions of electoral politics and governing. In grappling with this central question, we submit that transformation implies profound and significant change in the way politics and political institutions function. Challenges to the status quo, that is, the usual ways of doing things, may be a prerequisite for, but do not necessarily involve, transformative change (a debate noted in Chapter 6 on styles of leadership). An increasing body of scholarship on the significance of elected officials of color in the American polity raises important questions regarding the impact of these officials, their connections to previously underrepresented groups (e.g., Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999; Philips 1995), and the institutional characteristics and structural constraints under which they govern.

As we examine elected officials of color and their ability to penetrate governing institutions that at points have been hostile to their inclusion, we draw upon the literature on political incorporation, which can take various forms with regard to how power is distributed within governing bodies (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Schmidt, Barvosa-Carter, and Torres 2000). We draw attention to “four benchmarks of

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incorporation” for racial minorities as outlined in Schmidt et al. (2010, 125): “(1) full access to political participation [among all groups], (2) representation in governmental decision-making offices, (3) substantial power/influence on governmental decisions, leading to (4) adoption of ethnoracially egalitarian public policies.” We discuss in the book various dimensions of political incorporation for the elected officials of color in our study (e.g., levels of office, leadership positions in Congress and state legislatures, political allies, etc.). We note here, however, scholarly critiques that point to limitations involved in governing that may *not* result in transformative change.

Dovi (2002, 736) notes that descriptive representatives may not fulfill the expectations of constituency groups who elected them; elected officials of color (like any elected officials) may “reach out to (or distance themselves from) historically disadvantaged groups.” Several studies on Black electoral politics question the commitment of Black elected leaders who seek elected office out of narrow self-interest and personal ambition, as opposed to commitments to empower communities of color (Gillespie 2010; Reed 1986, 2000; Smith 1996; Walters and Smith 2007).

Beyond individual attitudes and behavior are the rules of the game in governance that impose boundaries on elected officials’ decision-making processes and representational roles. Rosenthal (1998a, 16) draws attention to how leaders are constrained by institutional rules and norms: “Institutions reinforce behavior through powerful written and unwritten norms, through the selection and promotion of leaders who adopt those norms, and in daily processes, rules, and procedures.” Referencing Guinier’s (1994) *The Tyranny of the Majority*, Abdullah and Freer (2008, 99) suggest that the majority support rule “especially restricts the ability of Black legislators to propose more *transformative* policy solutions, since they must gain the support of a significant number of white colleagues for bills to pass” (emphasis added).

Hence, though we admit to a normative value of support for the expansion of elected leadership to underrepresented groups, which we consider expanding democratic participation, we also hold that their leadership may or may not result in transformational change in America’s governing structures and political processes. Bluntly stated by Junn and Brown (2008, 71): “... more women in government – does not always mean better government for women. As long as government – replete with gendered and discriminatory institutions – remains intact rather than transformed, populating it with diversity can at best alter outcomes incrementally. Is small change better than no change? *Perhaps, but let*

*us at least acknowledge it is small change*” (emphasis added). Thus, the notion of transformative leadership must be seen as contested, from above, below, and within institutional structures.

Finally, by placing elected officials of color – especially women of color – at the center of our work and consistently incorporating an intersectional lens in our analysis, we are challenging assumptions, practices, and findings of mainstream political science literature regarding elected leadership and governance. Studies of women and gender in American politics posit that women exercise leadership differently from men. Indeed, some scholars argue that women practice a transformative type of leadership that challenges, if not changes, American political processes and institutions in important and fundamental ways. We advance the argument that changes in America’s elected leadership are under way, which is a more complex phenomenon than simply its demographic diversity and descriptive characteristics. The transformation rests in the descriptive and the substantive dimensions of the participation brought by this new cohort of elected officials.

In this book, we also argue that, if we are to understand fully who the elected political leaders of this country are, we must include a detailed portrait of the Black, Latino, Asian American, and American Indian women and men holding office today. Women of color constitute an especially important part of the demographic change among the nation’s political leadership. As we demonstrate in Chapters 1 and 2, their numbers have increased over time steadily and at a comparatively more rapid pace vis-à-vis their male coethnics and White women, especially in particular offices. Yet women of color and their politics remain understudied in the field of political science. To be sure, a developing literature on women of color is emerging, largely associated with studies of women in American politics or of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Yet even these literatures, with their emphasis on the study of White women and/or racial groups (each considered “minorities”) often ignore or overlook the case of women of color or the politics of gender in their analyses.

The central findings of this book show commonalities and contrasts between, within, and among the different groups by gender and race: in other words, between Blacks, Latinos, and Asian American elected officials; by gender within each racial group (e.g., between Latina women and Latino men); and among women by race (i.e., Asian American, Black and Latina women of color compared to their male counterparts). In this scenario, we present results for three races, two genders, and six groups by race and gender combined. Moreover, we include American Indians,