Introduction

One of the great hopes of the civil rights movement was that African Americans, by gaining the right to vote, would be able to elect representatives who could ultimately reduce or even eradicate racial inequality. To many in the community, black elected officials were "saviors who were going to uplift the people, eradicate police brutality, house the homeless, [and] find new jobs for everyone who was struggling."[1] In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as blacks began to win office and displace thousands of white incumbents, many in the African American community were understandably jubilant. As one voter who witnessed the transition put it, "It was almost like the feeling you have when you see your first-born – a sense of accomplishment, of utter elation" (quoted in Donze 1998).

Decades later, it is clear that black representation has made a difference. Many black leaders have tried valiantly to improve the lives of their black constituents, and black representation at different levels of office has been associated with concrete, positive change for the black community. It has led directly to increases in the numbers of African Americans in many city governments (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Eisinger 1982; Levine 1974), to greater black political participation (Tate 2003; Gay 2001; Bobo and Gilliam 1990), to modest shifts in spending policies (Brown 1996; Karnig and Welch 1980), and to the implementation of reforms to police practices (Headley 1985; Lewis 1987).[2] But none of these

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[1] Bill Campbell, former mayor of Atlanta, made this comment regarding the expectations surrounding the first black mayors (quoted in Fulwood 1995).

[2] Not everyone agrees that black leaders have made a difference. Some scholars have argued that black incumbents have done no more for the black community than white incumbents

changes has been dramatic. According to most studies, black political representation has not lived up to expectations (Smith 1996; Singh 1998; Reed 1988; Perry 1990; G. Peterson 1994; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997; Marable 1992). Despite large gains in the number of black elected officials across the country, there has been only moderate change in basic indicators of African American well-being and, even more importantly, almost no change in various measures of racial inequality.[3] Though black officials have controlled the mayoralty in seven of the ten largest cities in the country and have achieved nearly proportionate representation in the House of Representatives, figures comparing black to white poverty, unemployment, and educational attainment remain largely unchanged. In 1967, when the first big-city black mayors were elected in Cleveland and Gary, blacks were three times more likely than whites to be poor, twice as likely to be unemployed, and one-third as likely to have completed college. Today, with more than 9,000 black elected officials across the country, those figures are nearly identical (Blank 2001; Dawson 1994). Richard Arrington, mayor of Birmingham for twenty years, summed up the situation when he was asked what blacks had to show economically for his tenure in office: "Quite frankly," he said, "we don't have very much" (quoted in Edds 1987).

But only part of the story of black political representation has been told. Studies have overlooked important gains associated with black

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in similar cities and districts (Mladenka 1989, 1991). Swain (1995), for example, has argued that white Democrats have done as much for African American interests as black Congress members from the same types of districts (but see Tate 2003; Whitby 1998; Herring 1990).

[3] The black community experienced undeniable gains in the early and mid-twentieth century (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). The black middle class, for example, grew from just 12% of the black population in 1949 to 41% today (Farley 1996). But since the late 1960s, the story has grown more complicated. Blacks have made progress in absolute terms. High school graduation rates, for example, have improved considerably, and earnings have increased slightly (Farley 1996). But relative to whites, most indicators of black well-being reveal little change in the past several decades (Blank 2001; Klinkner and Smith 1999; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). Despite the passage of civil rights legislation, increased social interaction between whites and blacks, and some claims that race has been diminishing in significance in recent decades, studies reveal only minimal decreases in residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Massey 2001), fairly widespread racial discrimination in hiring and the housing industry (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Massey and Denton 1993), persistent racial stereotyping (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Lee 2000), and strong racial undertones to many of the political choices whites make (Mendelberg 2001; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Gilens 2001). In short, there are few signs of major gains since 1970 and plenty of evidence that race retains much of its significance in American life (Dawson 1994).

officeholding because they have focused almost exclusively on the black community while essentially ignoring the *white* community. In this book, I explore how experience with black leadership affects the attitudes, actions, and political choices of white Americans. Examining white reactions to black leadership – looking specifically at changes in the racial attitudes, voting behavior, and policy preferences of white Americans – demonstrates that black representation has meaningful and positive effects that are rarely considered in evaluations of the performance of black leaders. Although the election of African Americans to public office has not yet improved the condition of blacks to the degree many people had hoped, it has had a significant impact on white attitudes and voting behavior, and these shifts, though small, could ultimately be the catalyst for the acceptance of more significant progress toward racial equality in American society.

THE INFORMATION EFFECTS OF BLACK LEADERSHIP

Experience with black incumbents has real consequences for many members of the white community because it imparts critical *information* about black preferences that reduces whites' uncertainty and fear about blacks and black leadership; this information essentially changes the way that many white Americans think about the black community and therefore subtly alters the nature of racial politics and race relations in this country. Prior to the election of a black candidate, most white voters have little or no experience with black leadership. For this reason, many rely on racial stereotypes and past patterns in race relations to assess the likely consequences of a black candidate's victory. The result is that many whites fear that a black leader will favor the black community over the white community. They expect a black leader to redistribute income, encourage integration, and generally channel resources toward the black community. In short, they imagine that black control will have negative consequences for themselves and their neighbors. Once a black candidate is elected, however, whites gain access to better information about the policy preferences of black leaders and the effects of black leadership. They become able to judge black candidates on their records. And because the white community rarely suffers under black incumbents, those records are, in almost every case, better than white stereotypes and fears suggested they would be. When blacks have the power (or are perceived as having the power) to inflict harm on the white community and they choose not to do so, many whites are forced to reevaluate their assumptions.

The idea that white behavior in biracial electoral contests is governed by uncertainty and information is a novel one. Existing explanations of the voting behavior and attitudes of whites tend to focus on two very different mechanisms: (1) prejudice and (2) white backlash against perceived racial threat. Taking these in order, it has been argued that black representation – no matter how positive its effect on the white community – should have little or no effect on white attitudes and political behavior because white Americans are basically prejudiced and unwilling or unable to change their views of blacks (Hurwitz and Peffley 1998; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Allport 1954; Adorno et al. 1950). If prejudice is indeed behind white opposition to black empowerment, then the words and actions of black incumbents cannot affect whites' views, because these views are too stable and too deeply ingrained to be easily altered (Fazio et al. 1995; Devine 1989; Fiske 1998; Rothbart and John 1993). And even when whites experience black leadership and gather information from the experience that runs counter to stereotypes and expectations, they will simply ignore or discount evidence that challenges their prejudices (Macrae, Hewstone, and Griffith 1993; Weber and Crocker 1983; D. Hamilton, 1981).[4] The second model suggests that black leadership spurs white backlash. At least one text (Sidanius, Devereux, and Pratto 1991) argues that whites have a strong incentive to protect America's racial hierarchy and their hegemonic position within it. Indeed, past patterns in race relations indicate that when white social status is threatened by black gains, members of the white community tend to react by mobilizing to reverse those gains (Olzak 1990; Stenner 1995). If past patterns prevail, the election of blacks to office might represent just another step in an ongoing racial battle.

UNDERSTANDING THE VARIATION IN REACTIONS

Certainly, neither of these two theories applies to all white Americans across all contexts. Why do whites in some cities learn to accept a black

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[4] The fact that stereotypes of blacks are still widespread is taken by many as evidence that "blatantly prejudiced attitudes continue to pervade the white population" (Kuklinski et al. 1997). The specific terms that whites use to describe blacks may have changed but there is ample evidence that large segments of the white community continue to see blacks as less intelligent, less hardworking, more difficult to get along with, and more violent than whites (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Lee 2000; Devine and Elliot 1995; Schuman et al. 1997).

mayor, while in other cities whites' opposition remains constant or even grows? And why within a particular city do some white residents react more positively to black leadership than do others? In addition to assessing the general nature of white reactions to black leadership and testing my information model of those reactions against the existing prejudice and white backlash models, it is an important secondary goal of this study to explain variation in whites' reactions to black leadership.

Variations in white reactions follow predictable patterns. First, white reactions are affected by the actions of specific black leaders and the information that those actions provide. A black mayor who presides over a city where housing prices plummet and crime soars is likely to provide white residents with different information, for example, than a black mayor who aids in a city's renaissance. But the actions of particular leaders are not the central factor governing white reactions, because black representation almost always proves to be less detrimental to white interests than many whites fear. What accounts for most of the variation in white responses is not variation between individual black leaders, but rather white voters' judgment of the *credibility* of the information that they receive about black officeholders: the more power that whites believe black leaders have, the more they will credit and be influenced by the information they receive from those leaders' words and deeds. Practically speaking, this means that whites' reactions to black representatives are heavily dependent on racial demographics, which influence a representative's efficacy in office. In addition to variation among leaders and across locations, it is important to consider differences between individuals, focusing particularly on partisanship and exploring the question of whether Democrats or Republicans are more likely to learn from black leaders.

WHY BLACK REPRESENTATION AND WHITE LEARNING MATTER

Understanding the relationship between black leaders and white voters is important for a number of reasons, both substantive and theoretical. It is clear from the trends in the number of black elected officials that African American representation is an important and growing phenomenon. In 1960 only 280 blacks held office across the entire United States (Jaynes and Williams 1989). Today there are over 9,000 black elected officials in America (JCPS 2003). Blacks have won the mayoralty in most of the nation's big cities, there are roughly 600 African Americans in state legislatures nationwide, and blacks now hold about 10 percent of the seats

in the U.S. Congress. African Americans are still underrepresented at most levels of government, but undeniably they play a role among America's political elite.

Moreover, white voters are becoming increasingly critical to black electoral victories. Each year more blacks win office in racially mixed and predominantly white areas (Bositis 2002). Already six of the ten largest plurality white cities have had black mayors. Douglas Wilder's term as governor of Virginia marked the first time a black politician had been elected governor of an American state. Notable black congressional representatives such as Julia Carson, Robert Scott, and Barbara Lee can also be added to this expanding list of successful cross-over candidates.

It is also clear that if black representation is to continue to expand, black candidates will have to win over more white voters. Black politicians already represent most of the majority black districts and cities around the country (Handley and Grofman 1994; Handley, Grofman, and Arden 1997). In addition, court decisions in the 1990s have made it more difficult to alter electoral lines to create additional majority-minority districts. If more blacks are to be elected, they will have to win in racially mixed districts.

Black representation, furthermore, may be setting the trend for an even bigger phenomenon: Latino and Asian American representation. The Latino population is expected to double in the next ten years. By mid-century, Latinos may represent as much as one-third of the U.S. population, while Asian Americans, currently the fastest-growing population in the country, could account for almost 10 percent (Bureau of the Census 2002b). Latino and Asian American representation still lags far behind African American representation, but these demographic projections suggest that the situation may change relatively quickly. Already, recent gains in Latino and Asian American officeholding have far outstripped black advances (NALEO 2002; APALC 2003). What all of this suggests is that minority representation is likely to become an increasingly central aspect of American politics. Whether white and non-white Americans follow a path toward mutual understanding and interracial cooperation or move instead toward distrust and escalating conflict may well depend upon today's minority leaders and their interactions with white constituents.

In addition to speaking to these substantive issues, this study provides insight into a number of important theoretical questions about the nature of race and politics in America. One of the most central debates in American politics today concerns how much race shapes political choices. On

one side of the debate are scholars who insist that race and racial pre-
judice remain the primary factor in American politics in general and in
white voting preferences in particular (Reeves 1997; Bell 1992; McCrary
1990; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989). According to these scholars, "racism
is an integral, permanent, indestructible component of this society" (Bell
1992: 217). Epitomizing this camp, Robert Starks maintains that "race
is such an overriding factor in American life that to support its elimina-
tion or diffusion as a factor in elections through deracialization is folly"
(1991: 217). On the other side of the debate stand those who believe that
race has lost much of its significance in the electoral arena and that white
voters are now willing to support black candidates in greater numbers
(Swain 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). As Abigail Thernstrom
notes, "Whites not only say they will vote for black candidates; they do
so" (Thernstrom 1995). Some scholars even suggest that race is no more
an issue in biracial elections than it is in other electoral contests (Highton
2004; Citrin Green, and Sears 1990; Thernstrom 1987). A black candi-
date is likely to lose, they argue, for many of the same reasons that a white
candidate is likely to lose.

One of the central goals of this book is to show that this debate
addresses the wrong issue. The key question is not *if* race is central in
the minds of white voters, it is *when* race is central in the minds of white
voters. By showing that the transition from white to black leadership
frequently leads to notable shifts in white attitudes and behavior, I will
demonstrate that race plays a much more dynamic role in American pol-
itics than we have understood. Though race and racial prejudice remain
prevalent in American society, change is possible under the right circum-
stances. To really understand how race "works" in the American context,
we have to find out when racist voting is more likely, when color-blind
politics tend to emerge, and ultimately why these differences occur.

In this study, I also make important observations regarding the role
that information plays in the minds and voting decisions of the Ameri-
can population. For decades, scholars have argued that Americans simply
do not have enough information about politics to make reasoned, ratio-
nal decisions (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and
Keeter 1996). It is true, for example, that less than half of all Americans
know both the name and the party affiliation of their representative in
Congress (Jacobson and Kernell 1981). Many cannot even distinguish
between the policy platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties
(Bennett 1995). What political knowledge Americans do have is usually
not molded into coherent, consistent reasoning about issues and events

in the electoral arena (Converse 1964).[5] From this viewpoint, it would seem unrealistic to expect experiences under a relatively small number of black representatives to inspire real change in the views or actions of the public. But recent scholarship suggests that the average American does have enough information to make reasonable decisions about the political arena (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lau and Redlawsk 1997). If the job of evaluating leaders only requires individuals to know basic facts about their own well-being and trends in the welfare of their communities, then they may have enough information in their daily personal lives. Moreover, there is clear evidence that voters regularly incorporate current events in the making of political decisions (Popkin 1991; Alvarez 1997; Bowler and Donovan 1994; C. Franklin and Jackson 1983; Allsop and Weisberg 1988).

In keeping with this recent trend, one of my central contentions is that politics – even local politics – can be extremely informative and consequential. Under the right circumstances – for the purposes of this study, when race is involved – Americans *will* pay attention to the political arena and will assess local politicians by evaluating conditions in their own communities. Moreover, this evaluation can have real consequences. By showing that whites tend to oppose black challengers when they are uncertain about how black leadership will affect them, but that they become measurably more willing to support black incumbents when they have experienced black leadership and know more about its effects on their well-being, I hope to confirm the critical role that information plays in the arena of racial politics.

Finally, there are obvious implications for how we view descriptive representation and the degree to which we should try to expand minority representation. If the "politics as usual" that frequently occurs when black representatives are elected has a positive impact on white Americans and leads to a change in the white vote and in the racial sentiments expressed by a sizeable part of the white electorate, then there is at least one reason to try to expand descriptive representation. And if black leaders can help black constituents – even if only to a limited extent – while at the same time subtly changing white views and votes, this alone would seem to

[5] As a result, many claim that political decisions are predominantly shaped by long-term forces, such as party identification, which are acquired early in life and are not easily changed (Campbell et al. 1960; Beck and Jennings 1991; Green et al. 2002; Green and Palmquist 1990).

make it imperative to create a body of elected officials that more closely resembles the public.

THE EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

The empirical goals of this book are twofold. The first goal is to offer a broad account of how white Americans react to having African Americans as their leaders. Few researchers have even thought to ask about the impact of black leadership on the white community. Fewer still have tried to answer that question. And no one has answered it in a systematic way. Studies that have touched on the relationship between black leaders and their white constituents have been largely anecdotal in nature – focusing on one leader or city – and often limited in their scope – focusing on only one aspect of white behavior. The result is a range of contradictory conclusions. We simply do not know how white residents respond to black representation.

To assess how black leadership affects the white community, I will focus on two critical measures of white political behavior. The first is the vote. After experiencing black leadership, are white Americans more or less likely to support black candidates? The second is racial attitudes. After experiencing black leadership, are white Americans likely to view blacks and black leadership more positively, more negatively, or about the same way? If black leadership can bring about real, positive change on both of these measures, it is clear that the election of African Americans to office represents an important step in American race relations.

For each of these two measures, I will assess changes in white political behavior as systematically as possible. Rather than examining a single city or a single leader, I will examine an entire universe of cases of white reactions to black representation. In particular, throughout the book I will analyze white reactions across the full range of cases of black mayoral leadership. That analysis will include an examination of every black incumbent's reelection bid in the twentieth century, a comparison of a complete set of black challenger and black incumbent electoral bids, and a test of white views across a nationally representative sample of cities. Once all of these tests have been performed, we should have a complete and fairly compelling picture of the impact of black leadership on the politics of the white community.

The other important empirical contribution of this book is to test the three different theoretical accounts of the white community. Are most

whites really governed by the information model or is social dominance
or racial prejudice a more important determinant of white reactions to
black leadership? Fortunately, since each of these theories offers different
predictions about changes in the white vote and in white attitudes, by
looking systematically at how black leadership affects the vote and racial
attitudes, we should be able to determine which of these three models is
at play.

THE CASE OF BLACK MAYORS

I focus on the implications of black leadership at the mayoral level for four
reasons. First, in order for white residents to react in any way to black lead-
ership, they must be aware that black leadership exists. Whereas the names
of school board members or lower court justices are relatively unknown
to the residents of most communities, people can usually identify their
mayor. In cities with black mayors, in fact, available evidence suggests
that the overwhelming majority of residents can identify the mayor (Cole
1976).

Second, to test the willingness of whites to support black leadership,
the office to which a black person is elected must be viewed as important
and powerful. Whites may support black candidates who seek offices
that whites perceive as powerless and unimportant without fear of the
consequences. The mayoral office, which is considered by most people
to be a powerful and influential post, represents a truer test of white
willingness to support black leadership than would a test of another, less
powerful position.

Third, for white residents to be able to judge black leaders, they must
be able to observe the actions of a black incumbent and connect them
to changes in local conditions or policies. As the executive of a city, the
mayor focuses on local issues and often acts unilaterally. State and national
legislators, by contrast, often concentrate on regional or national issues
and must generally obtain the support of their colleagues before acting.
Even though the official powers of mayors are often quite limited, evidence
strongly suggests that the public views them as responsible for local con-
ditions. A poll undertaken in Washington, DC, where the mayor's power
is limited, found that a clear majority of city residents believed the mayor
"can control" or "exact influence" on almost every policy issue facing the
city (Coleman and Sussman 1978: A1). Because residents feel that their
mayor has the power to influence policy, they are quite willing to judge
black leadership in general on the basis of a black mayor's performance.