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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,

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


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.  

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.  

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.

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. 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. 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...

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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.\(^{26}\) 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.\(^ {27}\) 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.\(^ {28}\) Still others have polled residents of different racial or class backgrounds to obtain their opinions of how well...

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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.


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. 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. 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. 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 [t]he 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