Hometown Inequality

Local governments play a central role in American democracy, providing essential services such as policing, water, and sanitation. Moreover, Americans express great confidence in their municipal governments. But is this confidence warranted?

Using big data and a representative sample of American communities, this book provides the first systematic examination of racial and class inequalities in local politics. We find that nonwhites and less affluent residents are consistent losers in local democracy. Residents of color and those with lower incomes receive less representation from local elected officials than do whites and the affluent. Additionally, they are much less likely than privileged community members to have their preferences reflected in local government policy. Contrary to the popular assumption that governments that are “closest” govern best, we find that inequalities in representation are most severe in suburbs and small towns. Typical reforms do not seem to improve the situation, and we recommend new approaches.

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Hometown Inequality

Race, Class, and Representation in American Local Politics

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To every American who has struggled to make their local government more responsive, just, and equitable.
## Contents

**List of Figures**  
ix

**List of Tables**  
xi

**Acknowledgments**  
xxv

1. Race, Class, and Representation in Local Government  
1

2. Studying Inequality in Representation in Local Government: A New Approach  
36

3. Municipal Politics As Sites of Racial and Class Contention  
62

4. Local Political Participation, Municipal Elections, and the Prospects for Representation in Local Government  
84

5. Racial Inequality in Representation on Municipal Councils and in Policy  
103

6. Predictors of Racial Inequality in Representation  
131

7. Economic Inequality in Representation on Municipal Councils and in Policy  
164

8. Predictors of Economic Inequality in Representation  
191

9. Race, Class, and Representation in Local Politics  
213

**Bibliography**  
237

**Index**  
253
Figures

2.1 How Catalist’s ideology scale relates to issue positions  page 43
2.2 Validation of Catalist household wealth model 47
2.3 Validations of Catalist ideology model 49
2.4 Illustration of ideological congruence representation of racial groups 52
2.5 Distribution of policy liberalism in our sample of communities 55
2.6 Distribution of population of communities in ICMA database 57
3.1 Variation in ideology in our sample of communities (with the United States as a reference) 66
3.2 The least and most ideologically diverse communities 67
3.3 The distribution of ideology by race across communities in our sample 70
3.4 Distribution of communities based on ideological differences between black and white residents 72
3.5 Communities with the smallest and greatest differences in ideology between African Americans and whites 73
3.6 Distribution of communities based on ideological differences between Hispanic and white residents 74
3.7 Communities with the smallest and greatest differences in ideology between Latinos and whites 76
3.8 The distribution of ideology by wealth group across communities in our sample 78
3.9 Communities with the smallest and greatest differences in ideology between low and high wealth groups 80
4.1 Distribution of ideology by frequency of voting 91
List of Figures

4.2 Distribution of ideology by frequency of voting, whites, African Americans, and Latinos  
4.3 Distribution of ideology for meeting attendees and non-attendees  
4.4 The ideological distribution of local elected officials  
5.1 Share of community population and municipal council seats held by whites, blacks, and Latinos in communities in sample  
5.2 Scatterplot of share of council composed of a racial group against population share of the group in the community  
5.3 Scatterplot of the mean ideology of the municipal council against the mean ideology of the population in the same community  
5.4 Mean ideological distance between municipal councils and racial groups, by group population share  
5.5 The relationship between descriptive and ideological congruence representation for blacks and Hispanics  
5.6 The relationship between elected officials and citizens among each racial group  
5.7 Responsiveness of municipality’s policy to population’s ideology  
5.8 Responsiveness of municipality’s policy to each racial group’s ideology  
5.9 Responsiveness of municipality’s policy to ideologies of racial groups  
6.1 Distribution of mean ideological distance from municipal council  
6.2 Distribution of ideological overlap between whites, African Americans, and Latinos  
6.3 Importance of factors in predicting ideological congruence representation for whites, blacks, and Hispanics  
6.4 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of whites  
6.5 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of blacks  
6.6 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of Hispanics  
6.7 Role of institutions on ideological congruence representation of blacks  
6.8 Descriptive and ideological congruence representation of African Americans on municipal councils
List of Figures

6.9 The relationship between descriptive and ideological congruence representation for blacks and Hispanics, by ideological context

6.10 The distribution of communities along measures of black–white socioeconomic inequality

6.11 Racial disparities in socioeconomic indicators and ideological divergence among whites and blacks

6.12 Policy responsiveness to citizens and elected officials in local communities

7.1 Share of community population and municipal council seats held by various wealth groups in communities in sample

7.2 Scatterplot of share of council belonging to a wealth group against population share of the group in the community

7.3 Mean ideological distance between wealth groups and municipal elected officials in communities in sample

7.4 Mean ideological distance between wealth groups and municipal elected officials in predominantly white communities

7.5 Mean ideological distance between municipal elected officials and wealth groups defined in absolute terms (actual wealth)

7.6 The relationship between descriptive and ideological congruence representation for each wealth tercile

7.7 Responsiveness of municipality’s policy to each class group’s ideology

7.8 Responsiveness of municipality’s policy to ideologies of class groups

8.1 Distribution of mean ideological distance from municipal council

8.2 Distribution of ideological overlap between bottom and top wealth terciles

8.3 Importance of factors in predicting ideological congruence representation for wealth terciles

8.4 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of bottom wealth tercile

8.5 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of middle wealth tercile

8.6 Contextual factors and ideological congruence representation of top wealth tercile

8.7 Role of election timing on ideological congruence representation of wealth groups
List of Figures

8.8 Role of wealth dispersion on ideological congruence representation of wealth groups 208
8.9 Relationship between economic inequality and ideological distance between wealth terciles 210
9.1 Racial inequality in ideological congruence representation across community types 219
9.2 Wealth inequality in ideological congruence representation across community types 221
Tables

2.1 Communities scoring highest and lowest on policy liberalism scale  \hspace{1cm} page 55
2.2 Description of towns and cities in the ICMA database  \hspace{1cm} 58
4.1 Racial composition and median wealth of frequent and infrequent voters  \hspace{1cm} 89
4.2 Demographics of individuals who report having attended a local political meeting  \hspace{1cm} 95
4.3 Demographics of individuals who report having run for municipal office  \hspace{1cm} 98
7.1 Communities with greatest inequities in ideological congruence representation between low and high wealth residents  \hspace{1cm} 180
Acknowledgments

Throughout our careers as political scientists, we have each had a strong interest in studying local government. But the endeavor always seemed too challenging, particularly because it was often so difficult to get even the most basic data about communities and their elected officials. (One of us can even remember driving hours through cornfields just to photocopy precinct-level data on local elections from two communities.) Today, the data landscape in our discipline has been completely transformed. The past decade has witnessed a surge in scholarship seeking to understand inequalities in representation at the national and state level, but much less has been done to extend that work to local government. We saw an opportunity with the detailed voter file data that has recently become available to researchers and began developing the idea for this book.

This book was five years in the making. Even though data on local communities and elected officials is easier to collect than it once was, it is still not simple or straightforward. And much of the work was tedious and time-consuming. Catalist provided the core data on constituents and elected officials that we rely on in this book, and we are appreciative for their help along the way in helping us make sense of that data. In particular, Bob Blaemire and Jonathan Robinson have been helpful at various points in terms of answering our questions (or pointing us to those who have the answers). Of course, the fact that the Catalist data was available to us at all is due in large part to the pioneering efforts of Eitan Hersh to encourage Catalist to make their data available to the academic community. Eitan, Steve Ansolabehere, and Bernard Fraga have all been particularly influential by producing pathbreaking research using Catalist data. To the extent that this book succeeds in its implementation
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