CONTEXT MATTERS! RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND PUBLIC OPINION

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Katherine Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in Congress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, 224 pages, ISBN: 0-691-09155-2, Cloth, $18.95; ISBN: 0-691-11786-1, Paper, $18.95.

Karen M. Kaufmann, *The Urban Voter: Group Conflict and Mayoral Voting Behavior in American Cities*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004, 248 pages, ISBN: 0-472-09857-8, Cloth, $60.00; ISBN: 0-472-06857-1, Paper, $24.95.

Vincent L. Hutchings, *Public Opinion and Democratic Accountability: How Citizens Learn about Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, 192 pages, ISBN: 0-691-11416-1, Cloth, $35.00.

A good deal of empirical research in political science is done without regard to the context in which the attitudes, behaviors, elections, and so forth occur. We realize that context is important and plays a role, possibly a major role in some instances, for example, in influencing the attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes we observe, but taking that context into account is difficult to do. What is context? How do we identify it? How is it defined? Once defined, how should it be operationalized? Is it possible to determine causality? Or should we be concerned with causality? Maybe just knowing the context in which behaviors occur will give us a prism through which to view our results. For most of us, the difficulty of addressing these questions is such that we find it easier simply to ignore context. These three books, however, have tackled the difficult task of situating their studies, and consequently their results, within the contextual frame in which their studies sit. Having done so, these scholars provide a richly textured and nuanced view of their results and conclusions.

Du Bois Review, 2:1 (2005) 145–150.
© 2005 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/05 $9.50
DOI: 10.1017/S1742058X05050113

Karen M. Kaufmann's *The Urban Voter: Group Conflict and Mayoral Voting Behavior in American Cities*, examines racial politics, minority voting, and partisanship in a historical and contemporary discussion of the mayoral elections in Los Angeles and New York. She makes the argument that we should distinguish between national and local elections in terms of the choices voters make. Local elections, Kaufmann states, are generally the least salient form of electoral politics, and turnout is generally low. When group conflict is present at the local level, however, "the competing sides and their respective interests are generally clear" (p. 20). She suggests that we need to take account of the contextual aspects of the environment of race and race relations in urban politics when we analyze urban electoral outcomes. She develops a group-position model, which she calls her group-interest model of voting, and uses the framework successfully throughout the book.

Using this group-interest model of voting, Kaufmann contends that it was no accident and should have come as no surprise when two Democratic-leaning cities elected Republican mayors over Democratic minority candidates. She argues, and demonstrates compellingly, that attitudes toward racial minorities within the cities at specific points in time led to White Democrats abandoning the Democratic minority candidates and voting for the White Republicans. Social diversity in and of itself does not always lead to conflict, but when racial tension arises it plays out in ways that produce surprising and counterintuitive results.

For example, Kaufmann examines the contexts in which Tom Bradley ran for mayor. The first time Bradley ran was in 1969, four years after the Watts riots. After the riots, both White moderates and conservatives were unsympathetic to the rioters and not supportive of civil disobedience. In 1969, with the memories of Watts still fresh, much of White Los Angeles was on edge when students began demonstrating at California universities. Governor Ronald Reagan criticized the demonstrations and took a hard line with the demonstrators, many of whom were Black and of other minorities. Sam Yorty, the extremely unpopular incumbent conservative Democratic mayor, was able to exploit these concerns with civil disobedience by stoking White hostility toward Blacks, and raising concerns that electing a Black mayor would turn the city over to "dangerous radicals." This strategy enabled him to turn a losing situation into a winning formula. Yet, when Bradley ran against Yorty again in 1973, the issues were the same, but the context had changed—"[t]he fundamental difference between 1969 and 1973 was the electoral climate, and it was this change in political context that enhanced Bradley's electoral prospects and eventually contributed to his election" (p. 73). While Yorty tried the same racial and racist strategy he employed in 1969, "[i]n the political context of 1973, racial fears were less salient than other factors, and as a result [Yorty's] message fell on deaf ears" (p. 76).

As we move forward in time, Kaufmann argues that the election of Republican Richard Riordan over Democrat Michael Woo as mayor of Los Angeles in 1993 should have also come as no surprise. The 1992 riots after the acquittal of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating reactivated the racial divisions and tensions present in an earlier time. Woo, a liberal Asian American Democrat with strong backing among Blacks and Latinos, billed himself as the "multicultural" candidate who was uniquely situated to bring the city together. The majority of Whites, including two-fifths of White Democrats, however, did not vote for the multicultural candidate who could work with Los Angeles's minority communities, but voted for the "white man who had great insight into the needs of the white communities—specifically the San Fernando Valley and the Westside" (p. 102).

In order to see if the contextual effects observed in Los Angeles were more than an anomaly, Kaufmann examines mayoral elections in New York. She finds a similar scenario played out in that city as well. The mythical notion of solidarity among Black, Latino, and the White Democratic establishment was exposed in 1989 when Manhattan borough president David Dinkins defeated the incumbent Democratic mayor Ed Koch in the primary. The conditions in 1989 favored a Dinkins victory given the racial tensions Koch created with his hostility toward racial minorities during his tenure in office. This had created a backlash among White liberals, Blacks, and Latinos. During the general election, Dinkins focused on racial healing while his opponent Rudolph Guiliani focused on issues important to White voters—crime, corruption, and drugs. Dinkins won a narrow victory—50% to 48%—but only 28% of White voters supported him and 30% of the city's registered Democrats voted for Guiliani. In this race, Kaufmann finds that racial attitudes were more accurate predictors of voting patterns than was partisan identification.

By 1993 when Dinkins ran for reelection against Guiliani, the political context had changed. Several events had increased racial tensions, such as the boycott of Korean grocery stores by Blacks, and the Crown Heights incident that increased tensions between Blacks and Jews. The racial polarization that was emerging in 1989 was full blown by 1993, and the defection of White Democrats, liberals, and moderates to Guiliani was such that Dinkins failed in his bid for reelection. Guiliani won by a 51% to 49% margin.

No book is without criticism. The only one I have is that I wish Kaufmann had explored the effect of racial polarization on Latinos in Los Angeles and New York in the earlier elections given that in 1993, 43% voted for Riordan in Los Angeles and 39% voted for Guiliani in New York. She does explore the effect of Latino voters on the 1997 mayoral election in Los Angeles and New York, but earlier effects of polarization would have added to the study. This is a minor criticism, however, that in no way detracts from the overall quality and significance of the book.

Kaufmann combines substantive historical analysis with careful quantitative analysis to map out the story of why Republican mayors won in heavily Democratic Los Angeles and New York. As she lays out the history of race in each of these cities over several decades, why these outcomes should have been anticipated becomes clear. She dispels earlier journalists' analyses that suggested these cities were becoming more Republican in orientation and voting (Kotkin 1993). Kaufmann's book reminds me of the award-winning book by Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-war Detroit*, where Sugrue argues that the racial unrest in Detroit (and, by extension, in other urban areas) had their roots in racial decisions made decades earlier. This book contributes immensely to our understanding of race, racial attitudes, and contextual aspects in explaining urban electoral outcomes.

Vincent Hutchings's *Public Opinion and Democratic Accountability: How Citizens Learn about Politics* explores the question of political attentiveness among voters and why elected officials should worry about what their constituents think about issues. He challenges the prevailing notion in the public opinion literature that the American public is generally uninformed about issues of public policy. He argues that the political context in which issues are raised will activate some publics, but not others. He suggests that despite the findings in the extant literature that the public is uninformed on issues, legislators adhere closely to what they perceive to be the preferences of their constituents. Hutchings argues that this might in fact be a function of actual, rather than perceived, preferences. He states "[t]he book focuses entirely on the ways in which citizens react to the policy decisions of their elected, or prospective, representatives." Using a mix of data sources, such as content analysis of newspapers and various American National Election Study data sets, he utilizes a number of issues—the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the Gulf War, and abortion—to test his hypotheses about the effect of political context on public opinion and on the votes of Members of Congress.

In his examination of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, he challenges the prevailing notion that certain issue publics, in this instance Blacks, are not as informed on issues as are other populations. What Hutchings finds is that regarding some issues, for instance the Gulf War, Blacks' knowledge might be less than that of Whites, but on issues that are salient to Blacks, such as the Thomas confirmation, the racial gap in political knowledge declines significantly. When interaction terms of issue salience and political context were introduced, Blacks not only closed the traditional racial gap in political information but also surpassed comparable Whites.

Hutchings also found that contextual factors, such as the size of the Black constituency in Southern Democratic senators' districts and the presence of a female senate candidate, were related to political knowledge on the Thomas hearings. Hutchings identifies that Southern Democratic senators, who were most likely personally inclined to vote against Thomas, voted to confirm him out of concerns about their election prospects if they voted against the wishes of their Black constituents. Black voters in states with swing Democratic senators up for reelection were significantly more likely than their White counterparts to identify correctly their senator's vote on Thomas's confirmation. According to Hutchings, "[l]egislators likely feared that if they voted 'incorrectly,' interested voters would learn of this and exact retribution at the ballot box" (p. 49). This analysis confirms that Blacks sadly were indeed responsible for the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court of the United States!

On the issue of abortion, Hutchings explores the effect raising it as a campaign issue had on the amount of attention women and religious groups pay to an incumbent's record on abortion. He finds that pro-choice women are more likely than pro-choice men to take an incumbent's record on abortion into account at election time if abortion has been emphasized in the campaign. If abortion is not emphasized, then pro-choice women do not make a distinction between incumbents who score high or low on the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) index. But, if abortion is an issue, then pro-choice women will overwhelmingly support senators with consistent pro-choice voting records. Pro-life voters who are not fundamentalist or Catholic do not consider a senator's voting record on abortion at election time. But pro-life fundamentalists and Catholics do care about the incumbent's voting record on abortion and are significantly influenced by it, but *only* if abortion is an issue in the campaign. When abortion is not an issue, pro-life fundamentalists and Catholics are actually more likely to support senators with pro-choice voting records.

In order to see whether the issue of abortion was salient in other types of races, Hutchings examines gubernatorial races in Illinois and Georgia in 1998. He found that if abortion is a campaign issue, voters are more likely to be aware of the candidates' positions on the issue, and campaign context was important in signaling where candidates stood on the issue. This section on gubernatorial elections was the weakest in an otherwise uniformly strong book.

Hutchings is far too modest about the significance of his results. At times he is overly deferential to the extant literature in public opinion. I wish he had been bolder in his statement of his conclusions. For example, he argues that while some issues of importance to some segments of the electorate, e.g., union households, women, Christian fundamentalists, are often not raised in elections, when they are raised the effect can be dramatic on these groups' evaluations of candidates—". . . , the characterization of the American electorate as a collection of sleeping giants likely to stir if any politician should ignore their interests is not far from the truth" (p. 140). If the early analyses are correct that the 2004 election saw an increased turnout of Christian fundamentalists energized by social issues such as gay marriage and abortion, then Hutchings's conclusions on the effect of stirring this group's interest in electoral outcomes were prescient.

Katherine Tate's *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress* evolved out of the debate on race and representation. Much of the early research has been ideologically driven (Swain 1993; Thernstrom 1987), and Tate joins an emerging group of scholars who approach the question empirically (Canon 1999; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997). Her goals are to address the question of whether the racial composition of government is relevant to the political representation of Blacks, and to present a broad and balanced assessment of the value of descriptive representation for African Americans. Her discussion of the concept of representation was one of the best summaries I have read of the evolution of the concept and its various definitions. She examines Black congressional representation and electoral arrangements on Black voting behavior and public opinion. Moreover, she pays attention to the contextual aspects of voting and public opinion. She correctly shows that much of the extant research on race and representation ignored the context, both national and local, that influences Black public opinion.

No data set linking Black respondents to congressional districts or their representatives existed previously for Tate to test her hypotheses. Thus, she conceived the idea, attained grant funding, and collected the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES) data. Tate is to be commended for creating a data set that is already generating a substantial number of studies. Yet *Black Faces in the Mirror* is more than an analysis of the 1996 NBES. Tate demonstrates her ability to use multiple methods and data sources in studying issues of representation in general and Black congressional representation in particular. She draws on historical information to reconstruct profiles of Black congressional representatives from the Reconstruction Congresses to the present. Using these profiles, she is able to determine similarities and differences in Black and White representatives, gender differences within and across race, and whether or not Black representatives had and still have similar characteristics to those that they represent.

Tate pays particular attention to Black female congresspersons and the distinctive characteristics that distinguished them from their White and Black male counterparts. This is an important contribution because research on Black female electoral aspirations and outcomes is sorely lacking. Tate contributes to the budding literature in this area. Yet, the absence of previous work makes some of Tate's conclusions about Black women and why some can be elected to office tentative. She feels that Black female elected officials may have a distinct advantage in politics over non-Black women and Black men, but the results are not as conclusive as one would like. Nevertheless, these results bring us farther down the road in our understanding of Black female elected officials.

One thing the 1996 data reveal is that Blacks have become more conservative on a range of social issues—welfare, food stamps, and Medicare—indicating they did not think funding for these programs should be increased. Additionally, Tate finds a drop in support for racial programs, such as affirmative action and minority aid, although a majority of Blacks still supported the programs. She also finds that Black legislators appear to hold more liberal policy positions than the Black population as a whole.

Tate uses roll-call data, legislative histories, and other related qualitative sources to test the widely held, and incorrect notion according to her data, that Black representatives are not as legislatively successful as their White counterparts. Black members of Congress are just as successful in getting bills passed as are White members of Congress—"Black legislators provide Black constituents with the greatest amount of 'symbolic' representation, but also initiate and participate in providing their Black constituents with policies of substance, namely those that distribute or redistribute tangible public goods" (p. 97). She argues that scholars need to measure legislative success in broader terms than has been done in previous scholarship in order to present a clearer and more accurate picture of the legislative achievements of Black members of Congress, and hence the significance of descriptive representation.

Black Faces in the Mirror is also a controversial book because Tate lets the data and analysis determine her conclusions. Her finding that Blacks are more knowledgeable and favorably disposed to their representatives when they are Black, rather than White, highlights the importance of descriptive representation. Yet, despite the significance of descriptive representation, Blacks, by and large, are not as supportive of the construction of majority-minority districts as one might think. The principle of color blindness is strong within various Black communities despite the reality of continuing racial inequalities in the United States. She challenges and disproves many of the generalizations that stem from earlier, less sophisticated and less careful work in the area, e.g., Swain (1993). These are significant findings that increase our knowledge in this area immensely. Tate has produced an intellectually stimulating volume, one that I predict will become a classic in the area.

These three books make significant contributions to several literatures in political science—public opinion, race and representation, race and politics, urban elections, and intergroup relations—and should be read by scholars working in these areas. The attention paid to the contextual frames within which each study is located is a strength that is difficult to match in other works in their respective genres. These three books drive home the point that social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular, need to pay far more attention to context than we currently do.

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