


Hometown Inequality: Race, Class and Representation in American Local Politics

By Brian Schaffner, Jesse Rhodes, and Raymond La Raja.
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A growing body of research investigating the relationship between race, class, and representation—at the state and federal levels—finds that Whites and the wealthy enjoy unequal levels of representation compared to nonwhites and the less affluent. However, our understanding of representational inequality in small and mid-sized cities and towns is limited. Given the centrality of municipal government in the lives of everyday people, it is paramount that we consider the nature of local political (in)equality, how it manifests, and what policies can remedy it.

In their new book, *Hometown Inequality: Race, Class and Representation in American Local Politics*, Brian Schaffner, Jesse Rhodes, and Raymond La Raja draw on recent advances in big data to provide an unprecedented account of political representation at the municipal level. They demonstrate that ideological diversity and its associated racial and class cleavages exist at the local level—as do systemic inequalities in representation biased toward privileged groups. Their findings necessitate a reexamination of the belief that local democracy is non-ideological and more responsive than state and federal government.

Motivated by a familiar question, “How well (or poorly) are people of color and those with lower incomes represented by the local governments in those communities” (p. 4), the authors explore three dimensions of representation: (1) descriptive representation, the extent that elected officials share characteristics with the constituents they represent; (2) ideological congruence, how closely elected leaders’ ideologies align with constituent ideologies, and (3) policy responsiveness, the relationship between constituent ideologies and policy outputs.

To do so, the authors of *Hometown Inequality* use data from the voter-file firm, Catalist, which includes detailed information on 240 million individuals, and community characteristics. With these data, the authors create aggregate measures of ideology across different wealth groups, racial groups, and for elected officials in each city, town, and village in their dataset—500,000 individuals residing in 518 communities, ranging in population from 415 to 1.3 million. To create measures of policy responsiveness and different institutional contexts, the authors use survey data from the International City and County Management Association (ICMA). Three quarters of

communities in the sample had a population below 25,000, making it the first study of its kind to investigate racial and class inequalities in representation across local communities of all sizes.

Early chapters demonstrate that local politics are ideologically diverse with significant cleavages between racial and wealth groups that operate like those commonly found in studies at the state and federal level. Further, they find that participation in municipal politics is low and systematically biased. In most communities, less than a third of the population vote in elections, with participants more likely to be White, affluent, and conservative than the community overall.

Chapter 5 presents evidence that systematic bias in favor of Whites exists across all three dimensions of representation. When comparing the share of population to the share of municipal seats held, African Americans and Latinos are underrepresented while Whites are overrepresented by 20%. Turning to ideological congruence, only when people of color hold over 80% of council seats do they attain ideological congruence equal to what Whites enjoy when they hold 20% of seats. Finally, policy responsiveness, while positively associated with the ideologies of Whites, is unresponsive to that of Latinos and *negatively* related to that of Black Americans.

An equally bleak situation is uncovered when factors that moderate racial inequalities are explored in Chapter 6. Much of the ideological congruence in representation that nonwhites receive comes in the form of coincidental representation, that is, “the happy coincidence of having similar ideologies as Whites” (p. 161). Coincidental representation is least likely to occur in communities where racial inequality in socioeconomic outcomes is greatest. Thus, people of color receive the lowest levels of representation in the communities that need it most. Institutional design, particularly on-cycle elections and ward elections, only moderately improve ideological congruence with little effect on policy responsiveness. Such findings paint a stark picture of local democracy. Not only is the representation of Black and Latino residents heavily dependent upon their preferences overlapping with Whites, institutional contexts—which are most amenable to change—play a smaller role in creating representational equality than previously believed.

Using three wealth groups, Chapters 7 and 8 examine economic inequalities in representation. For the bottom wealth group, findings mirror those found in the analysis of racial inequality, with a few important caveats. First, though class inequalities in representation exist, they are smaller than those found between racial groups. Second, those in the middle wealth group enjoy substantial descriptive and ideological congruence in representation, as well as policy responsiveness. Further, as economic inequality increases in each community, the preferences of the middle and top wealth groups align, while the preferences of those in the bottom diverge. Again, in the communities where the less affluent need equal representation most, they are least likely to receive it.

Hometown Inequality paints a dismal picture of local democracy in the United States. Municipalities fail to fulfill basic democratic principles of fairness and equal representation. Institutional changes, thought by many as a key reform, only slightly ameliorate the levels of representational inequality. Their analyses raise more questions than answers, but they conclude with a host of possible ways forward: bolstering local media; creating organizations that help marginalized groups communicate their preferences to local officials; and reducing the costs of running for public office. They


stress that academics must be active partners in these initiatives, fostering relationships between foundations, activists, concerned citizens, and public officials.

We offer an addendum. The solutions to the seemingly intractable problems of racism and classism that shape our politics may be found in the movements of today. While institutional fixes may offer minor solutions, we—as a discipline and as practitioners—must tackle the intersecting oppressive systems that shape and perpetuate political inequality throughout the United States in all levels of government.

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Race and the Obama Administration: Substance, Symbols, and Hope

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Andra Gillespie boldly ushers the study of executive elected political leadership back into the political science discipline with her analysis of Barack's Obama's governance as president of the United States. In *Race and the Obama Administration: Substance, Symbols, and Hope*, she examines what Obama did for Black people. Despite the many texts that seek to explore the impact of the Obama presidency, none ask this question as directly as Gillespie. As Smith (1984, 370) remarked, there remains “an obvious deficiency in the literature on Black political participation in the failure to study Black appointed officials as well as elected officials.” Gillespie's embrace of this research question alone reveals the clarity her book offers to readers interested in learning how race was incorporated in the Obama administration's agenda and the extent to which those efforts improved the lived conditions of Black people.

Gillespie's empirical study stands alongside formidable political science scholars whose approach to the study of Black politics sought to reveal how power is used to liberate the Black community. In this book, Gillespie takes a strategic, multimethod approach to measure how Obama and his administration appointees sought to improve Black quality of life while taking into careful consideration the institutional powers and constraints of the presidency that can inhibit federal executive action on behalf of Black Americans.

Gillespie introduces a normative theory of political representation and uses a four-pronged analytic strategy to examine the outcomes of Obama's desired impact on Black people, noting that what he actually accomplished for the marginalized and what he