SYMPOSIUM

The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future

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Given the large number of cases and considerable institutional and contextual variation across and within local governments, one might assume that the study of local elections is an area already well harvested by political scientists. The truth however, is that it is a relatively unexplored area of inquiry. In fact, to say that a field of study on local elections exists would be a bit of an overstatement. Not only is the literature rather small and not particularly cohesive, but the data collection and methods of analysis are also somewhat primitive, particularly compared to research on state and federal elections. While on the one hand this means that there are many unanswered and even unexplored questions, it also means that the possibilities for future research are practically limitless.

Clearly, the study of local elections has been made more challenging by the shear number of local governments in the U.S. Of the 89,527 governmental units enumerated in 2007, 89,476 (99.9%) were local governments, with municipalities numbering 19,492 (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Not surprisingly, the number of public officials holding elective positions in local government is also enormous—roughly half a million. In fact, 96 percent of all elected officials represent local rather than state or federal jurisdictions, and municipalities have the largest share with 27% (U.S. Census Bureau 1995).

Beyond shear numbers, several additional features distinguish municipal governments from either state or federal governments and contribute to the complexity of their study. First, at no other level of government is the timing of elections so varied. Indeed, with only 23 percent of cities holding elections exclusively in even years (ICMA 2002), the term, "off-cycle" would be irrelevant were it not for local governments. Keeping track of elections is thus no small matter. Second, the methods by which cities elect officials are considerably varied. Unlike congressional and nearly all state legislative elections, most city council elections (66%) are multi-member (at-large) rather than single-member (district/ward) (ICMA 2002). Finally, the prevalence of nonpartisan elections is a notable feature of local elections with 77% of cities reportedly using them in 2001 (ICMA 2002). The reliance on nonpartisan elections has likely discouraged elections scholars from studying local elections for the simple reason that it leaves no parsimonious way to study vote choice. Indeed, those who have investigated vote choice have approached it as a choice between either the incumbent and challenger(s) (Berry & Howell 2007; Krebs 1998; Oliver & Ha 2007) or the minority and non-minority candidate(s) (Barreto 2007; Barreto et al. 2005; Brockington et al. 2001; but see Ferreira & Gyourko 2009). Consequently, apart from case study research, most local elections studies ignore vote choice completely.

Existing Data: Problems and Possibilities

While these issues create difficulties in collecting local elections data, the institutional variation of municipal governments also provides a unique opportunity to study the relationship between electoral arrangements and a number of outcomes, including turnout, vote choice, candidate

emergence, and the competitiveness of electoral contests. While some urbanists have pursued these questions, for the most part this area of inquiry has been predominantly in the purview of comparativists and state politics scholars. The absence of a central, standardized database on local elections has certainly played a role in this oversight. Unlike federal and state election returns, which are now readily accessible at the state, metropolitan and county levels via publications like the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* and *County and City Data Book,* election returns for local races have never been systematically compiled at any level of aggregation for any period in time. Consequently, most research on local elections is based on case studies and, apart from the research on minority representation in local legislatures (which utilizes rosters rather than election data), a small set of studies that rely on larger samples.

The absence of systematic, longitudinal local elections data has serious implications for both empirical description and causal inference. First, not only do we have a very incomplete and potentially severely biased picture of electoral processes and outcomes at the local level, but the focus of existing studies on the largest cities has limited both the generalizability of empirical findings and more generally, the questions addressed by extant studies. Second, with only a couple of exceptions, existing data are based on cross-sectional designs that are ill-equipped for testing many theories central to debates within electoral studies and political science. Third, all existing local elections datasets look only at the final stage of the electoral process, ignoring primaries (or general elections that do not produce winners), which for many cities include the most salient and competitive races. Fourth, almost no datasets include precinct-level election returns (but see Barreto 2007, Barreto et al. 2005). Fifth, only one study (Oliver & Ha 2007) incorporates multi-level data to investigate cross-level inferences and the effects of context on individual-level attitudes and behaviors. Despite the nested nature of local jurisdictions (individuals-precincts-wards-cities) and the fact that cities offer the best opportunity for studying the impact of context on behavior, no existing dataset is designed to exploit and leverage these comparative advantages.

Beyond questions of local politics and elections, a local elections database with the ability to provide connectivity to several companion datasets would enable social scientists to test an even larger set of theories. Two prime examples include the *Record of American Democracy* (ROAD) (King et al. 1997) and *State Legislative Election Returns* (SLER) (Carsey et al. 2008) projects. The ROAD data include precinct-level election returns between 1984-1990 for all federal offices, partisan statewide elections, and state legislative elections, as well as party registration and enrollment where available, and some political and Census data for precincts and/or slightly more aggregated units. SLER is a candidate-based dataset (N=259,000) that includes information about general elections for state legislative seats from 1967 to 2003 (and some primary elections for 1967-88). While SLER does not include variables measuring political or socio-demographic features of the legislative district, state or chamber, it does include unique district identifiers (within states and chambers) that allow such data to be readily merged. Although neither ROAD nor SLER includes local elections returns, their connectivity with local elections data would enable elections scholars to test an extraordinarily large and diverse set of research questions at various levels of aggregation.

Finally, a local elections database also promises to be an important complement to survey data, which tend to dominate the study of local political behavior. Existing surveys such as the *Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality* (MSCUI), the *National Politics Survey* (NPS), the *Latino National Survey* (LNS), the *National Black Election Study* (NBES), the *Detroit Area Study* (DAS), and the *American National Election Survey* (ANES) provide important information about

potential voters' behavior, information levels, and attitudes, but are not ideal for understanding either electoral behavior per se or the effects of institutional or contextual variables on political behavior. Moreover, the high costs of survey research have historically limited studies to a few cities and a single point in time. Finally, the focus on constituents renders surveys inapplicable to questions about *candidates* in elections, and thus a full understanding of the dynamics of local elections cannot be garnered from survey data alone.

Local Elections in America Project

Given this need for a local elections database, in July 2009 we organized an NSF-sponsored workshop that brought together leading scholars, practitioners, and organizations committed to local elections, minority politics and data collection. We asked participants to consider two questions: First, what are some of the distinguishing features of local governments and elections, and in what ways can these features shed new light on old questions and provide fruitful ground for study of new or emerging questions? Second, what are the fundamental issues surrounding the compilation, organization, and maintenance of a local elections database? This symposium brings together the collective wisdom of many of the workshop participants, and sets an ambitious research agenda for political scientists whose interests span the fields of campaigns and elections, racial and ethnic politics, federalism, and state and local politics.

In the first essay, Karen Kaufman and Antonio Rodriguez make a compelling case for the study of local politics and elections by focusing on the changing demographic composition of the United States. As they point out, these trends have been manifest in American cities for some time. For example, non-Hispanic whites already comprise less than 50% of the populace in 62 of the 245 largest cities (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Moreover, in 2006 approximately 80% of elected officials of color served on municipal councils or school boards (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2007). In his essay, Baodong Liu similarly zeros in on the distinctive racial and ethnic characteristics of cities, examining the issue of multiracial coalitions and the conditions under which they form. Using county level data from the 2008 presidential elections, he illustrates how the support of African American, Latino and Asian voters varied according to the racial/ethnic contexts.

The essays by Paul Lewis and Brian Adams shift away from issues of race and ethnicity to instead address different substantive areas associated with local politics and elections. Lewis investigates the issue of scale – the number of inhabitants (or alternately, constituents or voters)—and its relationship to behavior of local politicians and voters. He considers explanations for why political scientists have tended to overlook this issue and lays out several intriguing areas for future research. Adams looks at the issue of campaign finance, a well-studied topic for political scientists yet one that has been virtually ignored when it comes to local elections. In his essay he explores how various features of local politics and elections provide new avenues for inquiry and additional leverage for understanding more commonly examined relationships. Finally, in the last essay of this symposium Christine Kelleher Palus returns to the issue of data collection, sharing personal experiences and words of wisdom based on her own efforts at compiling a large-N sample. In addition, she maps out additional avenues of research that could be fruitfully exploited with local elections data.

All of contributors to this symposium highlight theoretical and empirical advancements that could be made with the creation of a local elections database. The breadth and depth of the institutional, demographic and candidate features characterizing the 85,000 or so local

governments in America provides a fertile and as yet, untapped resource for political scientists. We believe that the old adage that "all politics is local" rings as true today as it has at any period in our history. Indeed, as the nation continues moving toward a multi-racial/ethnic reality, the lessons learned from local politics and elections today will pave the road for a better understanding of state and national politics. As the essays that follow document in greater detail, the study of local politics and elections represents a looking glass into the future.

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**Political Behavior in the Context of Racial Diversity:
The Case for Studying Local Politics**

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Within contemporary political science, local elections are the perennial bridesmaids of behavioral research. While municipal contests are more numerous than any other, academic interest in the factors that motivate local participation and voting behavior pales in comparison to the attention given to national politics. Case studies of individual elections in a small subset of larger American cities do exist, but within the local politics literature, few studies argue for a general theory of local voting behavior (but see Kaufmann 2004; Oliver 2007). And even in those cases that do, insufficient data exist to rigorously test or replicate these results on a large scale.

The dearth of research on local politics likely stems from a number of different factors. Public interest in local politics and turnout levels in local elections are notoriously – though not uniformly – low. From this point of view, if voters do not care about the nature of their local representatives, then the lack of scholarly attention to such low salience political events seems rational. More importantly, however, available data on local elections are extraordinarily difficult to obtain. There is no ANES equivalent for local elections, and, as such, researchers interested in municipal politics must engage in intensive data-collection efforts that, even at their best, often fall short of social science ideals. Finally, much of the conventional wisdom pertaining to municipal elections embodies the old adage that "all politics are local", where local implies idiosyncratic to the particular characteristics in any given city. The presumption that voter behavior across cities is too context-specific to allow for generalization, undermines the perceived value of large n, multi-city studies.

Regardless of these obstacles – perceived and real – cities remain the nation's foremost venues for the study of political behavior in the context of significant racial and ethnic diversity. And in a rapidly diversifying nation, studies of local elections constitute an important opportunity to foresee the future of American state and national politics. In spite of Barack Obama's historic victory in a majority white nation, one cannot simply conclude that U.S. national politics are now "post-racial". As noted in local elections research, it is not unusual for disparate groups (racial minorities and white liberals) to rally around that first groundbreaking racial or ethnic minority candidate, especially if the candidate aims to overturn an unpopular, ideologically conservative regime. This kind of broad based electoral coalition is quite likely in local politics when excluded groups see the potential for a "first of its kind" minority leader, assuming that sufficient numbers of racial minorities and racially tolerant whites can be mobilized (Pettigrew 1971; Sonenshein 1993; Browning et al. 1984; Kaufmann 2004). The notable interracial and interethnic cooperation that enables these historic elections is not typically sustainable, however. As racial diversity in cities increases, so too does the diversity of the candidate pool. Coalitions of the "excluded" are founded on the shared goals of political inclusion, but when the group-specific interests of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and white liberals diverge, interracial conflicts of interest place enormous strains on these coalitions (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Kaufmann 2007). As is noted in many studies of local, racial and ethnic

politics, competition and conflict among racial and ethnic minority groups has become commonplace.

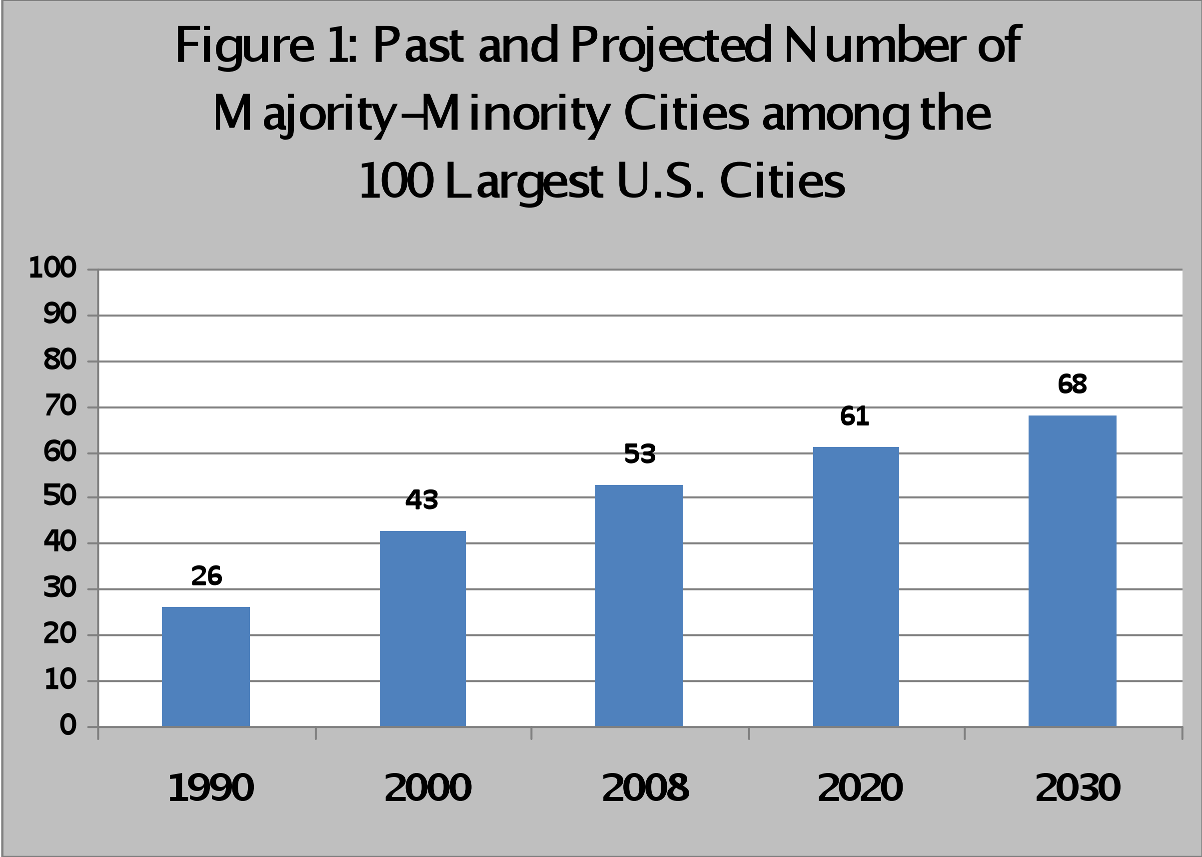
Contemporary research on U.S. voting behavior typically places partisanship at its core. As argued by Campbell et al. (1960) in *The American Voter*, individuals identify with political parties in much the same way they do with other social groups – ethnic, racial and religious. From their perspective, however, political identities are more influential than other group identities in the context of elections, because they are the most proximate. Written about presidential elections during a time period where candidate diversity was virtually non-existent, the basic insights from *The American Voter* continue to inform many of our fundamental theories of political behavior. In the context of national and state elections, the notion that partisanship trumps most other factors in its explanatory power remains largely intact. As the nation becomes more racially diverse, however, party attachments will likely become less reliable predictors of voting behavior. What we know about <u>local</u> politics in the context of a racially heterogeneous electorate and an increasing diverse pool of political candidates is that party attachments are but one of many social identities that inform political decision making (Kaufmann 2004; Liu 2001; Liu and Vanderleeuw 2001).[1] Sometimes voters are predictably partisan in their choices, and in other instances, they are not. This observation regarding the variable importance of party identification within diverse electorates is derived from the collective wisdom of city-level election case studies. And while there is considerable piecemeal evidence that racial group interests are often salient voting considerations in racially diverse communities, this remains an important, albeit seriously understudied topic of inquiry. Local elections are simply the preeminent venue to study the relationship between demographic change, increasing racial diversity and voter choice. And what we learn about local politics today will provide much needed insight into state and national politics in the future.

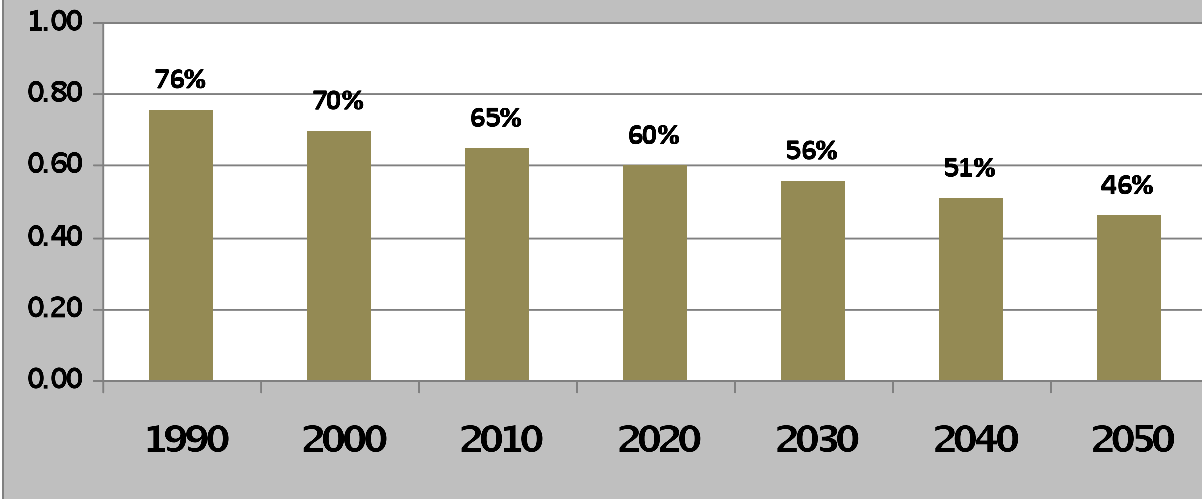
Census projections all point to the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the nation. According to census estimates from 2008, 53 of the largest 100 cities in the U.S. are majority minority. By 2030, this number is estimated to rise to 68 (See Figure 1). According to national population estimates, by 2010 65% of all Americans will be non-Hispanic whites, dropping to 46% by 2050 (See Figure 2). Even considering the possible error associated with long-range population estimation, the implications of these data are clear. The U.S. will become considerably more racially diverse over the ensuing four decades to the point where non-Hispanic whites will comprise a minority of the population. Eventually, they will comprise a minority of the electorate, as well. The types of candidates that run for national office will likely mirror this growing population diversity, and when it does, the possibility that racial and ethnic group interests will, at times, compete with party attachments as primary voting cues seems ever more certain.

Not so long ago, cities were viewed as premier laboratories of democracy; in fact, seminal works on democracy and power were based upon city-level observations (Dahl 1961; Hunter 1953). Somewhere between the 1961 publication of Robert Dahl's, *Who Governs?,* and today, city politics lost its cachet as a top-tier subject for understanding democracy. Given the profound demographic changes that have and will continue to occur in the nation, however, the time seems ripe for a renewed focus on the politics of American cities. What studies of race, ethnicity and city politics have shown us to date is that context matters. In order to gain a full understanding of American political behavior in the context of racial diversity, we need to invest

[1] This is just as true in cities with partisan elections as it is in those with non-partisan contests.

in data collection efforts that include a large and varied sample of municipalities. Serious study of city politics should allow for the systematic exploration of biracial and multiracial coalition formation and answer important questions about the contextual factors that incite intergroup conflict and exacerbate racialized voting behavior. It should also identify the conditions that facilitate interracial cooperation and enhance the political voice of traditionally marginalized groups. The future of American national politics is happening right now in U.S. cities, and it is time for students of American political behavior to sit up and take notice.





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Obama's Local Connection: Racial Conflict or Solidarity

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Local elections in the last four decades have provided valuable data for political scientists to test various hypotheses concerning racial relations in the United States. Past research has shown, for example, that the elections of African-American candidates to powerful offices in urban America were closely related to the changing racial demographics of cities (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 2003). More specifically, racial polarization in a city's mayoral election tends to be at the maximum when both Whites and Blacks are about 50 percent of the city population. On the other hand, a biracial coalition between Whites and Blacks, led by a charismatic Black candidate, is more likely to win elections when Blacks become a clear majority of the city (Liu and Vanderleeuw 2007). One remaining question that has increasingly drawn attention from scholars is the condition under which a *multiracial* coalition may be successfully formed.

Many analysts of national elections assumed that minority voters are monolithic, and the racial solidarity among Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in competitive elections is automatically high. "Except for the Cubans who migrated after the revolution, a majority of Hispanics have voted Democratic," claimed Judis and Teixeira (2002) in their influential book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (p. 57). Moreover, "Asian, Hispanic, black, and other minority voters, swelled by the enormous wave of immigration during the 1990s, now are about 19 percent of the voting electorate, and they gave Gore at least 75 percent support in the 2000 election…If these voters remain solidly Democratic, they will constitute a formidable advantage for any Democratic candidate" (p. 61).

However, this assumption of minority solidarity, according to previous empirical studies at the local level is premature, to say the least. The Los Angeles multiracial coalition led by Tom Bradley in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, fell apart in the end. Racial riot took place in 1992, which gave to the rise of the Republican mayor Richard Riordan in the City of Los Angeles between 1993 and 2001 (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 2003; Kaufmann 2004). As McClain and Stewart (2006) aptly indicated, interracial "coalition" or "conflict" between African Americans and other minorities has always presented a strategic dilemma for minority groups in their pursuit of political empowerment and racial equality. Indeed, minorities do not always "get along" in political and electoral arenas.

Obama and Minority Solidarity at the Local Level

To study minority solidarity, this essay takes advantage of the 2008 presidential election dataset. Instead of a case study of one or a few cities, the 2008 presidential election offered all eligible minority voters a chance to vote for a Black candidate that had a realistic chance to win. It is thus possible for researchers to examine the specific "local contexts" in which a multiracial coalition may be successfully built. Overall, Barack Obama's success in winning the highest office in 2008, for sure, was not only because of his 43 percent of the nation's White votes, but also a result of his appeal to the minority voters. According to the exit poll, 95 percent of African-American voters in the general election voted for Obama, while Asians and Latinos

offered 67 percent and 62 percent of their votes for Obama, respectively.[1] Obama's Black support was critical for his win in the primaries when Latinos and Asians were more supportive of Hillary Clinton (see Liu 2010; Barreto et al. 2008). In the 2008 general election, Latinos' support proved to be vital to Obama's success in states such as New Mexico and Colorado (Liu 2010).

To further examine minority solidarity in 2008, a county-level analysis is invaluable. This is because though Whites are still the dominant majority in most states (with the exception of Hawaii and California), minorities such as Blacks and Latinos may in fact enjoy a "majority status" at the county level due to their numeric advantage. Figure 1 shows the non-white support for Obama on the vertical dimension, a measure of minority solidarity in the 2008 general election derived from EI method.[2]

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 reveals that as Black density increases at the county level, so does the minority solidarity for Obama. Obviously, this solidarity was mainly a function of Black voters' loyalty to Obama in 2008. However, it is also important to note that minorities in 25 percent of the 3,111 counties cast more votes for McCain than for Obama (see the 781 counties below the 50 percent horizontal line in Figure 3). The triangle distribution of minority solidarity in Figure 1 strongly suggests that when Blacks are less than 20 percent of a county's population, other non-Black minorities tend to have a large variation in terms of their support for Obama, i.e., the minority solidarity is low in this context. We turn to Figures 2 and 3 to further investigate the voting patterns of minority voters in other Latino and Asian-related contexts.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between minority solidarity and Latino population concentration. The quadratic curve indicates that minorities tended to reduce their level of support for Obama as Latinos came close to 40 percent of the county population (see the U-shaped relationship). Figure 3 examines minority solidarity based on Asian population. Minority solidarity was at the highest level when Asians represented 20 to 40 percent of the county population. It is also shown in this figure that as Asians reached 40 percent of a county's population, the minority solidarity started to decline (see the inverted U-shaped relationship).

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

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[1] The exit poll data were retrieved from the CNN web site at www.cnn.com/Election/2008/result. The state-level election outcome data were obtained from www.uselectionatlas.org. The state racial population data are based on the 2006 census figures. This study focuses on the 48 continental states. Hawaii and Alaska were excluded from the analysis, due to various data limitations.

[2] King's Ecological Inference (EI) estimated the white support for Obama at 44.11 percent with a standard error of .33 percent. This result is extremely close to the exit poll result reported by the media at the 43 percent level. Furthermore, the EI estimates were checked for possible model violation according to the diagnoses, such as "tomog" and "boundx" visual tests, recommended by King (1997, Appendix) and other research (Liu 2007). No clear aggregation bias was discovered. Both external knowledge and diagnoses showed a high degree of accuracies of EI estimation for the 2008 presidential election. One more reason for using EI, rather than other regression-based methods such as Goodman and/or Double Regression, is that when county-level election outcome and racial-makeup data are available, EI provides both county-level and national-level racial estimates for Obama's voter support. This is a major methodological improvement over other previous methods, which can only estimate national-level racial support for Obama with county-level data (see Liu 2007 for a comparison of major methods estimating racial voting).

Conclusions: Explaining Racial Conflict and Minority Solidarity

The county-level analysis of this essay showed variations of minority unity for Obama in different minority contexts. Taken as a whole, the notion of minority solidarity was far from the reality in 2008. While Blacks were clearly the most loyal voting bloc for Obama, the vote choices of Latinos and Asians were much more "context specific." The most intriguing finding is that minority solidarity for Obama's election was at the lowest point after Latinos and Asians reached roughly 40 percent of the county population. This finding suggests that Latinos and Asians may perceive an element of "black threat" when their own electorate share reached a threshold of about 40 percent.[3] In other words, it is at the level of emerging power from a minority group status to a more dominant majority group status that Latinos and Asians tend to look at Blacks as competitors, rather than coalition partners. This finding sheds important light on the future of minority politics in the United States. As Latinos and Asians become more electorally powerful through their population growth in certain local areas, the competition for elected positions among minorities may be increased rather than decreased.

This essay also finds an important divergence in the multiracial coalition-building process between Latino and Asian local contexts. The U-shaped relationship between minority solidarity and Latino population concentration in Figure 2 suggests that minorities in <u>homogenous</u> Latino communities are likely to "come back" to the multiracial coalition to support a viable Black candidate such as Obama. As for Asian American context, as shown by the inverted U in Figure 3, a more dominant and racially homogeneous Asian community may lead to less interest in the multiracial coalition led by a black candidate.[4] This opposite pattern invites future investigation into the intricacy of multiracial coalition building process in America.[5]

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[3] See Liu and Vanderleeuw (2007) for a conflict and accommodation model found at the local level to discuss the dynamics of racial coalition.

[4] One limitation of Figure 3 is that there are only five counties with more than 30 percent of Asian population.

[5] Another area of future study involves the comparison of the relative effects of county and state contexts voter preferences.

Figure 1: Black Density and Minority Support for Obama at the County Level

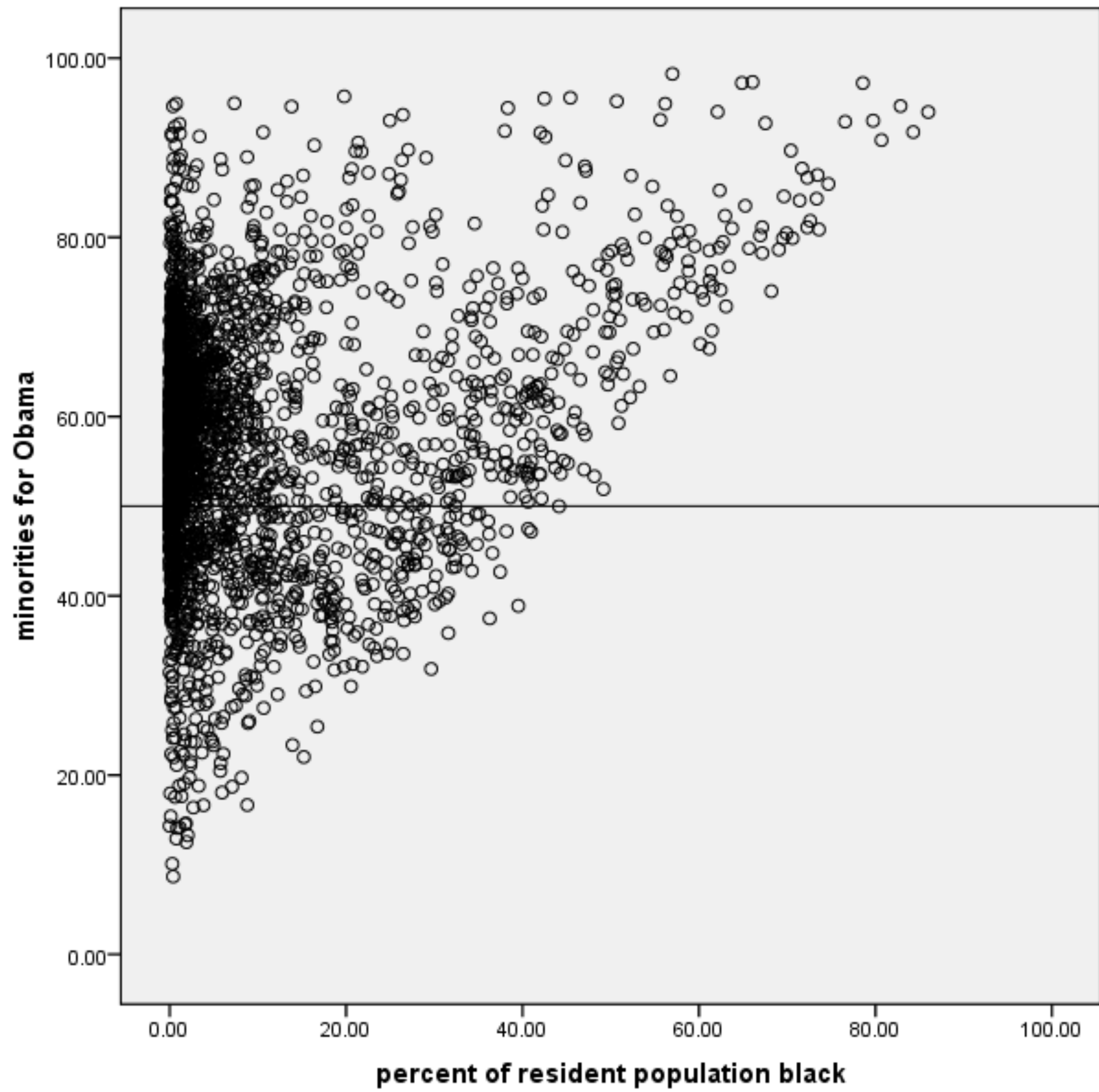


Figure 2: Hispanic Density and Minority Support for Obama at the County Level

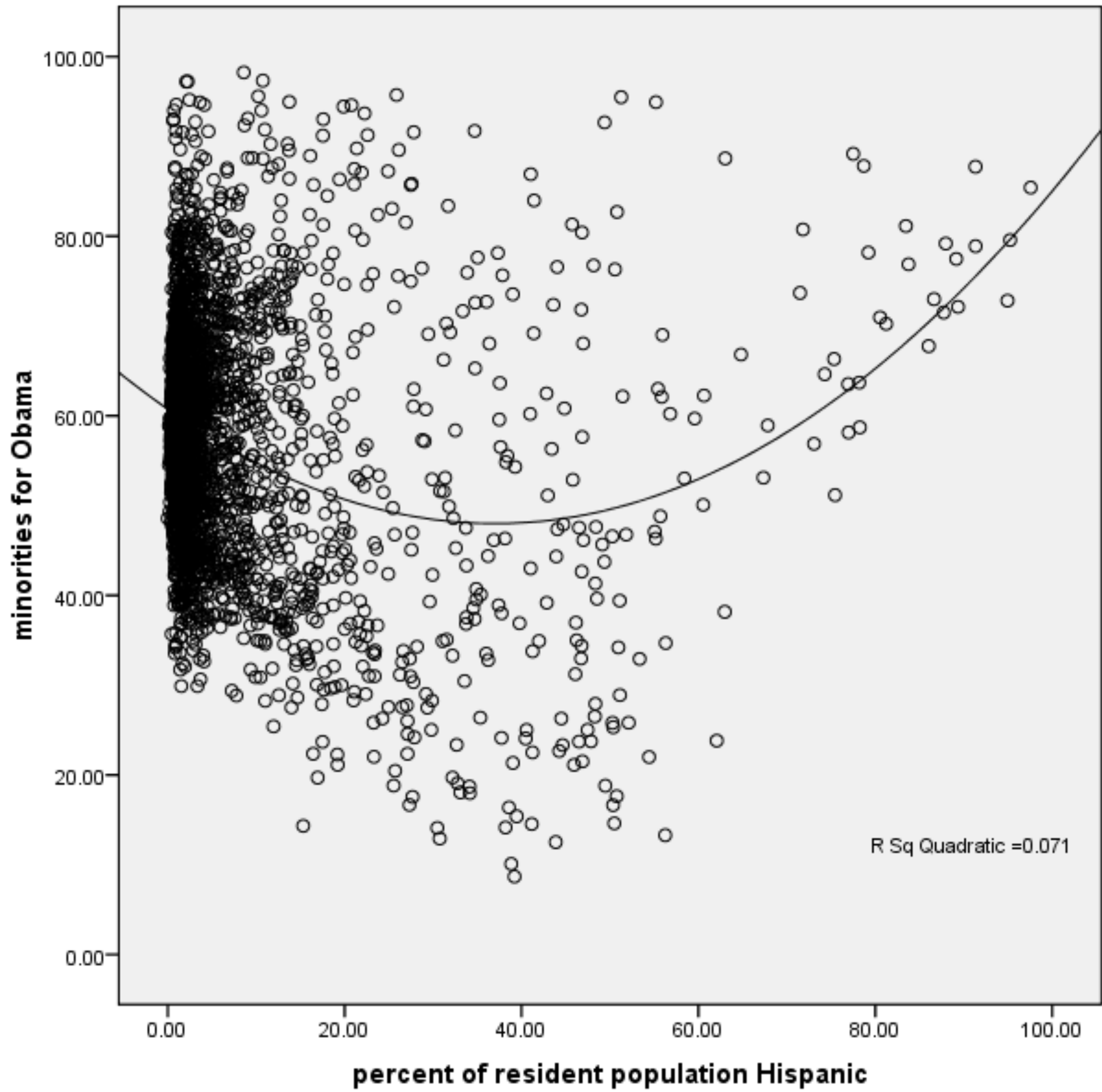
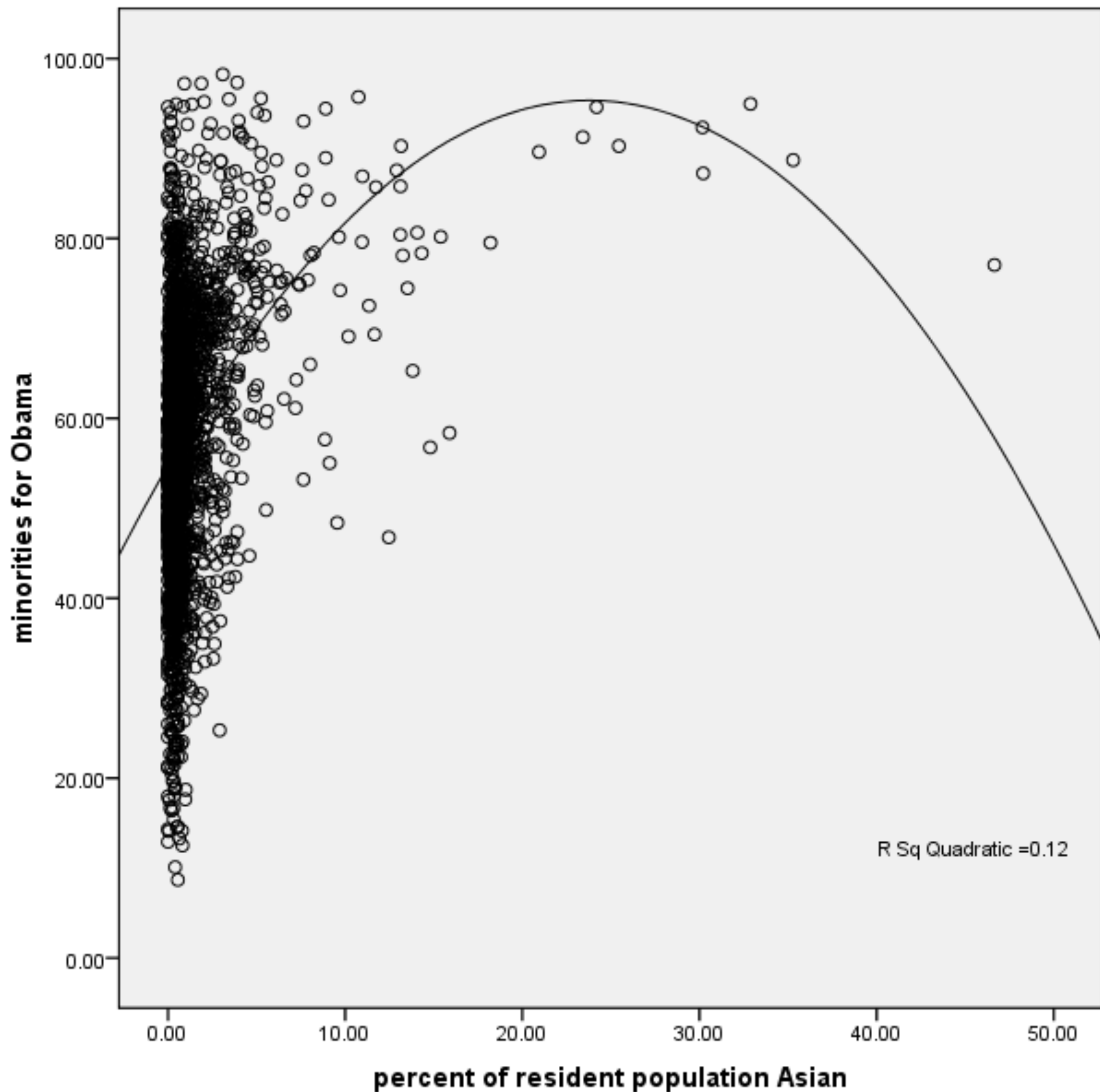


Figure 3: Asian Density and Minority Support for Obama at the County Level



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Size and Local Democracy: Scale Effects in City Politics

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As James Madison would not hesitate to tell us, the scale of a polity or jurisdiction is potentially one of the most basic factors organizing political life. By *scale*, I refer to the number of inhabitants (or alternately, constituents or voters) in a political unit, although geographic size may well also shape political behavior. Large jurisdictional scale implies that candidates for office must campaign in larger constituencies, probably necessitating more use of paid media, more fundraising effort, and professional campaign advice. To residents, government in large-scale polities often seems more distant, remote, and bureaucratic, and the intercession of interest groups, lobbyists, or organized protest activity may be more necessary to access or influence public officials. In these and other ways, the incentives, constraints, and opportunities facing politician and citizen alike tend to differ systematically depending on a jurisdiction's scale.[1]

A generation ago, Dahl and Tufte (1973) highlighted some of the ways in which the scale of a polity can affect political participation, efficacy, and electoral competition, although they readily admitted that a paucity of suitable data made their exercise more suggestive than definitive. Today, although the scale of municipal jurisdictions in the United States varies considerably across the landscape, scale remains oddly under-analyzed as a variable that might shape the behavior of local politicians and voters.[2] Among the major contemporary works in urban political behavior, only Oliver's (2000, 2001) research takes considerable account of scale effects. Controlling for other relevant factors, Oliver finds larger city population size to be associated with reduced levels of voting and of nonelectoral forms of political participation. He further shows that residents of larger cities are less interested in local (though not national) politics and are less likely to be politically mobilized. Oliver's findings were derived from data not initially intended for the study of local politics: He used the national Citizen Participation Study and then geocoded the place of residence of the respondents, matching them to local Census data. Despite this somewhat herculean effort, an assessment that rests on a widely-scattered sample of individuals is probably not an ideal way to examine the nuances of local electoral systems.

Overall, little research on local political behavior takes on the scale issue in a self-conscious way. This oversight may arise from the organization of American political science. There is not really a recognized subfield of "local politics," per se, in which the size of the local unit might be considered as one of its most basic political facts of life. "State and local politics" specialists sometimes treat the "local" as an afterthought, whereas "urban politics" experts typically limit their focus to large cities, with *large* defined somewhat arbitrarily (Danielson and Lewis 1996). But political boundaries – and the scale of a political unit – surely do more than carve out neutral containers for politics; rather, they help construct the politics that takes place within them (Weiher 1991; Burns 1994).

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[1] The greater social and ethnic/racial diversity that tends to characterize larger jurisdictions also affects political life, but this dimension can be considered distinct and separable from the question of size itself.

[2] Similarly, the scale of counties and of special-purpose governments (e.g., school districts, utility districts) also varies markedly. For simplicity, here I consider only municipal (that is, city, town, village, or borough) government.

Recent work in urban politics often goes beyond individual case studies to examine larger-N samples of municipalities - but usually ones meeting some prescribed size threshold. The insignificance of smaller localities seems to be presumed rather than researched. A relative few urbanists explicitly examine suburbs, but their focus has tended to be on features of suburban communities other than scale. Indeed, in an era when many suburban jurisdictions (particularly in the Sunbelt) have population sizes that exceed those of some traditional central cities, one ought not to conflate "suburban" with "small."[3] The city/suburb dichotomy – if such a dichotomy exists – is distinct from, though related to, the question of jurisdictional scale.

If scale is a key factor organizing local political life, then attempts to generalize about cities by focusing only on communities of, say, 50,000 or more residents result in a truncated sample. The only reliable way to consider the effects of scale is to assemble and analyze relevant data for cities with a wide range of sizes. This is not to say that one would want to randomly sample all 19,000-plus municipalities in the United States, since most of them are tiny, with nearly half having fewer than 1,000 residents as of 2002 (Christensen and Hogen-Esch 2006, 87). One defensible approach would be to sample municipalities of various size ranges in relation to their relative shares of the national population – although ultimately one's sampling strategy should be dictated primarily by the research questions posed.

Ideally, researchers could use an appropriately constructed local elections data archive for three levels of analysis: (1) the *voter*, (2) the *candidate or campaign*, and (3) the *political jurisdiction* itself. Such a multilevel approach – potentially with empirical modeling that explicitly takes account of the nested character of the data – could deliver a trove of important findings about political behavior and electoral institutions. One can sketch out some preliminary hypotheses regarding how jurisdictional scale might matter at each level:

1. Individual voting behavior. Imagine two voters participating in mayoral elections: one in a large city that comprises a major share of the land area and economic activity in its metropolitan region, and the other in a small suburb that constitutes a small slice of its metropolis. We might anticipate that the big-city voter will hold her mayor responsible, at least in part, for the health of the economy and job market in the area, whereas her counterpart voting in a small suburb nested in a large metropolis would likely realize that her mayor holds little or no effective control over economic conditions that affect her success as a labor-market participant. Retrospective, sociotropic, or economic voting, then, may well be conditional on jurisdictional scale. The relevant scope of control by elected officials increases with city size, and voter expectations probably adjust accordingly. In this case, it is the city's scale in relation to the surrounding metropolitan area that matters. A city of 50,000 residents that is the principal city in a largely rural county may have voter expectations that differ considerable from a city of 50,000 within a metropolitan area of 5 million residents. In the smallest-scale jurisdictions, where the municipality approximates a neighborhood in size, votes seem more likely to be cast on the basis of neighborhood-level issues, such as "not in my backyard" land-use concerns.

2. Candidates, campaigns, and political careers. Running for office in a large community likely requires capital-intensive campaign strategies, rather than "retail politics." Of course, this effect may be mediated by local electoral institutions, since large cities that hold

[3] For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 population estimates show that Mesa, AZ, has 80,000 more residents than Minneapolis; Aurora, CO, exceeds Pittsburgh in population; and Plano, TX, is more than double the size of that font of urban political studies, New Haven.

district elections (if the districts are of small scale) may have less demanding campaign environments. Nevertheless, the more professionalized and expensive nature of campaigning in large-scale districts or jurisdictions probably affects candidate recruitment: The individuals who either self-select or agree to run when asked may tend to be those with greater ambitions, organizational connections, and resources. In small communities, by contrast, candidates may view political service as an extension of their community activities in other realms, such as local service organizations and clubs, rather than viewing politics as a career (Prewitt 1970; Sokolow 1989). If such lack of ambition is indeed a function of small city size, the implication might be that many local elected officials see their role as more akin to a trustee than a delegate (Lewis and Neiman 2009). This community-service style of politics also implies a greater likelihood that candidates are informally drafted, lack prior political experience, and exit office due to voluntary resignation, rather than by losing elections or advancing to higher office.

3. Local electoral systems. How, then, might city size affect electoral politics at the jurisdictional level? In large-scale cities, greater scope for political ambition may result in more competitive elections, whereas in small jurisdictions it is not uncommon to see city elections canceled due to a lack of contested races. Party organizations – or party-like slating organizations, in the many localities with officially nonpartisan elections – probably are more influential venues of candidate recruitment, publicity, and issues in large cities. Voter mobilization may rest more on organized get-out-the-vote campaigns in large cities, whereas informal mobilization by friends, family members, or social pressure may prevail in small places. Another potential effect of scale goes to the heart of the old debate over community power. Pro-development business elites such as homebuilders, major landowners, and retailers are some of the interests with potentially the deepest pockets for funding local campaigns. If organized campaign finance activity is less essential in small jurisdictions – and if thereby, candidates are less beholden to campaign contributors – then urbanists' traditional views about the primacy of business elites in local politics may need to be reexamined; it, too, may be conditioned by scale.

All three sets of hypotheses – at the individual, candidate, and citywide level – seem plausible, but they are just that: hypotheses. Without a systematic dataset of local elections – preferably linking information on voters, candidates, races, officeholding patterns, and electoral institutions – we lack a rigorous way to examine the effects of scale on electoral politics. Is there a threshold size at which point politics becomes relatively "professionalized" – a vocation rather than an avocation? And is there a threshold – perhaps exceeded only in the biggest cities – at which the participation-reducing effects of city size on political efficacy become outweighed by large cities' greater electoral competitiveness, increased media attention, and more important policy outcomes? Such questions, and others like them emerging from the local level, go to the heart of voter and candidate psychology. But they will remain largely unanswered without a data infrastructure for researching local elections.

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"Financing Local Elections: The Impact of Institutions on Electoral Outcomes and Democratic Representation"

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The financing of political campaigns has been extensively studied on the national and state level. With the advent of campaign contribution and expenditure databases, scholars have a wealth of data to examine the importance of money for electoral success, the influence of campaign contributions on legislative roll call voting, and the effects of campaign finance reforms. Much less research has been conducted on the local level, largely due to a lack of available data. Research on local campaign finance, however, is needed because local governments are not just smaller versions of their state and federal counterparts, but rather have unique political and cultural institutions that create idiosyncratic electoral dynamics. Further, variation across local jurisdictions generate opportunities to study campaign finance in different contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of how contextual variables influences the role of money. In this essay, I will outline an agenda for local campaign finance research that addresses central questions in the campaign finance and urban politics literatures.

One promising line of local campaign finance research is to explore the effects of electoral rules on the importance of campaign spending. Variation in how elections are organized can influence the amount of money candidates need to run competitive campaigns. For example, some city council members are elected at-large while others are chosen from districts. How much more expensive are at-large campaigns? One hypothesis is that at-large elections would exponentially increase campaign costs, but one of the few studies on this topic found that they are only marginally more expensive in absolute terms and significantly less expensive on a per-voter basis than district elections (Adams 2010). This research suggests that the power and prestige of the office, not the number of voters, is what drives campaign costs, but further analysis is needed to explore these relationships. Another factor that could influence campaign costs is the role of political parties. Unlike national and state elections, there is significant variation in the level of involvement of parties on the local level, both formally (nonpartisan versus partisan ballots) and informally (whether parties actively recruit, finance and campaign for candidates). We do not know whether less active parties alter fundraising dynamics. Perhaps the absence of extensive and active partisan networks makes it more difficult for candidates to raise funds, leading to less expensive campaigns. On the other hand, a candidate-centered campaign system may prompt wealthier individuals to run which in turn will push up campaign costs. These are just two examples of how the institutional variation present on the local level provides a unique venue for examining how electoral structures affect campaign finance patterns.

The local level also presents opportunities for studying the impact of campaign finance reforms. We have learned a great deal about the effects of reform through federal and state-level research, but these studies are limited by the relatively few number of states that have implemented comprehensive reforms. Examining localities can further advance our knowledge because the number of cases and the extent of variation is greater, ranging from full public financing (a.k.a. "clean money" regimes) to a virtual absence of regulations. Local governments are truly "laboratories" of policy experimentation when it comes to campaign finance. This

variation allows scholars to examine the effects of campaign finance reforms in different institutional and political contexts. For example, does public financing work better when elections are formally nonpartisan or when parties are not active in campaigning for candidates? Does public funding have a greater impact on prompting more candidates to run when jurisdiction size is smaller? Contribution limits have been found to have a minimal effect on aggregate fundraising on the state and federal levels—does this also hold true on a local level where the limits are lower and average contribution sizes are smaller?

Studies of local fundraising and expenditure patterns can also illuminate aspects of coalition building and power dynamics, a central concern of the urban politics literature for the past 50 years. Campaign contributions play an important role in forming and maintaining governing coalitions: they have been identified by regime theorists as a selective incentive that forms bonds between regime partners and facilitates cooperation (Stone 1993, 9). We know little, however, about the specifics of this process. Do most campaign funds come from regime partners? How dominant is the business elite in campaign finance? Do different types of regimes lead to distinctive fundraising coalitions? Do fundraising demands prompt elected officials to expand the size of their governing coalition? Research to date has had some surprising findings. For example, despite a bias towards business, the donor pool is more pluralistic than regime theorists might predict (Fleischmann and Stein 1998; Krebs 2005; Adams 2010). These studies have just scratched the surface: understanding the composition of the donor pool is an important first step, but needs to be followed by studies probing the role campaign contributions play in forming and maintaining governing coalitions.

A central concern of campaign finance scholars is to assess the relative weight of campaign funds and voter preferences in determining electoral success. Critics of the current system argue that candidates can "buy" an election by raising extensive funds from wealthy donors, essentially bypassing the will of the voters. Defenders of the status quo argue that the ability raise funds is an indication of community support and that, ultimately, voters choose their representatives. Scholars have taken different approaches to analyzing this issue, such as focusing on whether the best financed candidates usually win, whether there is a minimum amount candidates need to be competitive, or whether campaign spending changes voter opinions. An additional approach is to examine jurisdictions that are small enough so that candidates do not need to spend money to communicate with voters. One of the problems with past research is that it focused on Congressional and gubernatorial races where paid advertising (such as direct mail, television commercials, and newspaper advertisements) is essential to get a candidate's message out; the number of voters is too great to contact enough of them in face-to-face meetings. In such an environment, having money to pay for advertising is indispensable, and thus it is no surprise that campaign financing is a critical influence on electoral success (even though the best financed candidate does not always win). But is money also an important determinant of electoral success when there are a small number of voters? Some research suggests that even in local races money plays an important role (Strachan 2003; Adams 2010), although further research is needed to fully explore the extent to which raising funds is necessary for electoral success.

Whether money influences electoral success on the local level has important implications for our assessment of how well the American political system reflects voters' choices. Even if national elections are dominated by "moneyed interests," the presence of open and accessible local elections would render the influence of money on the national level less problematic. Running for president, senator, or governor will always be an expensive endeavor, but candidates

for these higher offices frequently start their political careers locally. If money is less influential in local races, the pool of potential candidates for higher office will be populated by individuals who achieved that status through their appeal to voters. Even if the capacity to raise funds influences who is able to win a governorship or a seat in Congress, at least some candidates are recruited from local offices where they had to prove their mettle by knocking on doors and interacting with voters directly. In other words, a robust and healthy local electoral system can mitigate some of the flaws with state and federal elections. From what we know about local elections, they do not match this description. Yet we only have the broadest outlines of how they work; a more detailed and nuanced analysis is needed to provide a better understanding of whether local elections suffer from the same campaign finance problems that plague state and federal elections.

The research agenda described above requires a large-*n* dataset that allows researchers to deal with the extensive structural and political variation across localities. Previous studies have been hampered by too few cases and an inability to isolate the effects of specific variables. The creation of a dataset with a large number of cities would open up vast possibilities for answering new research questions, adding to both the urban politics and the campaign finance literatures. Further, addressing the issues described above will enhance our understanding of the health of American democracy, as local governments are an important institution for maintaining and promoting democratic values.

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Tribulations, Triumphs, and Tentative Trajectories in the Study of Local Political Participation

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Scholars of political science often lament the difficulties associated with finding the most appropriate data to test theories about how the political world works. The study of local political participation and elections more broadly is certainly no stranger to this quandary. However, considering that the nearly 90,000 units of local government generally hold regular elections for a wide array of political offices, this field of study should offer an embarrassment of riches; we should never be at a loss for a means by which to examine questions central to the functioning of democratic governance.

Ironically, though, these lines of research are instead plagued by a paucity of large-n studies, attributable not to a lack of quantity of data, but rather a dearth of quality data. The greatest frustration is not whether appropriate data exists, but how to gain access to it in a useful format. In this essay, I briefly reflect on my personal experiences with a major data collection effort on local elections. I then address how a centralized dataset on local elections would afford researchers multiple avenues of inquiry to more fully investigate the relationship between jurisdiction size, political institutions, and political participation from a variety of angles that are now impossible due to data constraints.

In 2004, David Lowery and I published an article in *Urban Affairs Review* entitled, "Political Participation and Metropolitan Institutional Contexts." We tested our expectations on the most recent municipal legislative elections for 336 municipalities in 12 metropolitan areas. The dependent variable was turnout, the most basic measure of political participation.

Since there is no centralized warehouse for local election data, the returns necessary to construct the dependent variable were obtained from a number of different sources—county and/or city Web sites, county and/or state boards of elections, local newspapers, and direct contact with municipalities. Collecting this information was an exercise in patience, fortitude, and perseverance—taking nearly a full year to complete. And, despite countless efforts to obtain full information for our sample, many difficulties precluded securing the necessary legislative election returns for all of the municipalities we set out to focus upon. Our final dataset included returns from 72% of our initial goal, for a variety of reasons discussed below.

First, election data in select places has a very short shelf life. Despite targeting the most recent elections in the localities for our study, in many instances, records had already been purged and data were simply no longer available. A second (and related) obstacle was the level of detail and aggregation for data that did "stand the test of time." In other words, although some information was available, it had not been preserved at the level of detail needed for our particular investigation. For example, although we were able to obtain official turnout figures for the election as a whole, we could not separate ballot returns across local races for mayor or town president, local legislators, and local judges and thus, were unable to investigate patterns in roll-off. Clearly, the absence of a systematic and timely retrieval of local election data results in a great loss of information for policymakers, administrators, and scholars. Third and finally, in some cases, local registrars simply refused to provide voting returns and newspapers failed to report complete election results. Any effort to partner with these individuals and organizations in order to ensure timely collection efforts would definitively improve the ability to collect

reliable election returns at the local level.

A centralized local elections database has the potential to make a great contribution to the study of local elections, and will enable scholars to ask a myriad of questions now stifled by the enormous time investment required to collect the requisite data. For scholars like myself who are interested in the effect of metropolitan institutional structures on patterns and trends in political participation, this is particularly exciting. Local governments are among the most understudied areas in political science, which is a terrible oversight considering the diversity of their populations, elected leadership, political institutions, and metropolitan contexts.

With a vast, nationwide dataset as opposed to the purposive samples employed in many studies (including my own), we will be able to leverage this variation much more effectively. Greatly enabled by the availability of larger samples over multiple years, we can revisit the conflicting evidence in prior research, expand upon current participation research that relies on self-reported election turnout data, and also begin to explore a whole host of other timely puzzles and hypotheses with both academic and practical application. For example:

- How do regional partnerships influence patterns of turnout across participating municipalities?
- Does the act of "exit" influence the strength of "voice" when one moves from one place to another? If so, how? And is this different based on the nature of the office that is contested?
- What are the most effective mechanisms of mobilization for citizens? And how do these mechanisms interact with institutional variation, leadership patterns and trends, and other municipal-level indicators?

As Oliver wrote (1999, 189), "To fully understand the mechanisms of democratic governance, me must consider both individuals and their environments." Improving the availability of data from elections at the local level will enable scholars to do just that—to make important and necessary continued theoretical advancements with respect to understanding the intersection between jurisdiction size, diversity, and other indicators of metropolitan institutional structure and design. In light of the growing prominence of local governments in the provision of services to citizens, the resonating calls for regionalism and cooperation between municipalities, and discussions about efficiency, effectiveness, and economies of scale in these troubled fiscal times, the "black hole" of local election studies must be addressed. The construction of a local elections data repository that will stand the test of time is critical. It affords the discipline of political science a unique opportunity to collect data that otherwise might be lost and/or underutilized and in doing so, to inform policy and the processes of democratic governance and representation.

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