DRAFT MEMO:

From The Roots: A Call for More Descriptive Research in Local Politics

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Political Science and its Gripe with Local Politics

Political science often pays considerable attention to state and federal politics, with local politics at the periphery (Judd, 2005; Trounstine, 2009). Arguments have been made that cities are no longer relevant avenues for research because many Americans have moved out and only use cities as a domain for labor (Liberman, 2009). But urbanists have long argued that local politics is at the root of understanding what shapes state and national politics. I further claim that local politics is not only ideal but a prerequisite for understanding racial group behavior. I also argue that descriptive research provides a framework that makes this study area accessible, addressing concerns about using local context data effectively. As COVID-19 illuminated for many what urbanists already knew, local politics is and can present ideal arenas for unearthing intra-group differences that further our understanding of politics and power.

As political science evolved into a more quantitative discipline, urban politics was viewed as "hyperbolic and overly normative" because they tended to use qualitative analysis in small case studies (Judd, 2005). However, unlike quantitative analysis, qualitative methods allow researchers to live in nuance and further probe known relationships and theories. Living in nuance is more reflective of the human experience, and qualitative analysis is more conducive to these complex realities. For example, we know that law enforcement's mandate is to serve and protect American citizens. However, through a local politics lens we can interrogate the extent to which this mandate manifests in the daily lives of Americans. While many were oblivious to the entrenched nature of police discrimination, COVID-19 and the racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd placed local interactions on the national stage.

With state-sanctioned violence at the hands of police at the forefront of global civil unrest, national attention was redirected to local politics for answers. Mayors like Keisha Lance Bottoms and Lori Lightfoot were tasked with implementing new regulations following the death of Rashard Brooks and Adam Toledo. Though this has happened many times before, the heightened tensions of BlackLivesMatter and the global pandemic caused many Americans to pay better attention. Beyond police violence, Americans were concerned about how mayors were keeping residents safe from the COVID-19 virus. Regulations on school closures and vaccine mandates were closely scrutinized. Using New York as an example, the safety of residents living outside the city largely depended on the success or failure of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's COVID plan in New York City.

Local Politics as the Conduit to Understanding Racial Group Relations

While much of the political science discipline is preoccupied with understanding ideology, partisanship, and mobilization, urban politics scholarship has documented how modern conservative movement first developed as a response to racial group relations in cities (Kruse,

2005; O'Connor, 2007; Trounstine, 2009). Segregationist policies to keep Black people away from northern cities also led to federal and state regulations (Massey and Denton, 1993). Time and time again, we see that local politics are the roots of understanding these political phenomena. It continues to be so today in understanding racial group conflict, tension, behavior, and leadership.

CNN hosted a special called "Mayors Who Matter" in June 2020, with the title and content illuding to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Four Black Women mayors, Mayor Lori Lightfoot of Chicago, Mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington DC, Mayor London Breed of San Francisco, and Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta were welcomed to the national stage to talk about their cities' states of affairs. Specifically, they discussed how their lived experience as Black women had influenced their leadership. Breed said:

> "I've had family members killed by police here in San Francisco, young people that I know, love and care about. When this happened, it brought up a lot of pain. And I think even though we're mayors, I say I'm a mayor, but I'm a Black woman first.."

Breed is bringing to center stage her lived experiences as a Black woman and how these experiences are not divorced from her duties as mayor. Considering this explicit intersectional messaging that Breed deploys, I considered how a competitive political environment, like a campaign trail, engenders similar behavior and how little that's been considered in political science scholarship. I use descriptive research as a framework to execute this study.

In a forthcoming paper in *Politics & Gender,* I found that Black women mayors leveraged their lived experiences, rooted in their racial and gendered identity, more than their race and gendered counterparts when advocating for their policy preferences in cities. To do so, I developed a framework called "experiential rhetoric" using insights from an original dataset comprised of YouTube videos, Facebook lives, News reports, and Radio broadcasts. I first explored how Black women's rhetoric differs from their race and gendered counterparts after coding for all the mayoral candidates (38) in three major cities (Atlanta, Washington D.C, Chicago). Then, I argued that experiential rhetoric is at the core of this distinction, which I define as using their lived experiences as a means of persuasion.

I utilized 62 mayoral debates and generated an original dataset through social media sources. By analyzing the 62 transcripts ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes, I conducted a content analysis through NVivo, a qualitative data analysis tool. Using candidates as the unit of study, I reported the race, gender, age, and location of 37 candidates in total. I did a keyword sweep across all candidates with words associated with their lived experience, partisanship, and profession. My coding scheme of rhetoric in campaign speeches is both unique and applicable to datasets at the local level and beyond it. I utilized an inside (emic) coding scheme generated from within the population I was interested in (candidates in majority-minority districts) rather than an etic approach, which is most common in descriptive work. In other words, the keywords I used for my experiential rhetoric counts were informed by the language of each mayoral candidate and was generated in tandem with the editing process, as opposed to coming up with the terms independently.

I share this to argue that though studying local politics does not afford us a centralized data repository, in the way state and federal political study may, there are still feasible and rigorous approaches one can take to compile useful data at the local level.

Transitioning From a Moment to a Commitment

While there's been national attention in local politics recently because of COVID-19 and how cities have responded, this commitment to understanding racial groups and the urban context it operates should be an ongoing endeavor. As a scholar who views America as a racialized state, in which the construction of the political institutions we operate in are designed such that treatment is contingent on what racial group one occupies, there is no better arena to closely observe this reality than in local politics. While the strategies I've described here are remote, there are several fieldwork centric approaches to examine racial groups and cities. Now that in-person activities are swiftly becoming more acceptable, data collection at the local level should become even more viable, and junior scholars are already capitalizing on this opportunity.

In a project before the pandemic, I used Chicago as a case study to probe the interactions among Chicago's one-party Democratic machine, Black feminist ideology, and Black women's political choices - specifically, Black women's appraisals of Black women candidates. I examined attitudes towards Lori Lightfoot and Toni Preckwinkle, both Black women that were, at the time, run-off candidates for mayor. My findings – gleaned through semi-structured interviews with 20 Black women in three different neighborhoods - challenged conventions within Black feminist and the larger political science literature regarding the role shared identities play in determining how Black women evaluate Black women candidates. Some junior scholars are also doing this work by using descriptive research to transform the terrains of urban politics and what it can amount to.

Natasha McNeely uses local data, including news reports in Washington D.C, to uncover how Muriel Bowser attempts to reduce Black Maternal mortality in her city (McNeely, 2022). Jenn Jackson uses interviews from Baltimore, NYC, Oakland, and Chicago to uncover how young Black Americans perceive "threat" and its impact on the perception of police violence (Jackson, 2019). Sally Nuamah has a forthcoming book that uses large cities in the U.S to explore how school closures have democratic consequences for Black citizens (Nuamah, 2022). These works have in common their commitment to tackling a difficult area of study and meeting that challenge with creative and innovative strategies for making these racialized dynamics visible.

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