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# Identifying and Understanding Perceived Inequities in Local Politics

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## Abstract

Although there is widespread concern about bias in American democracy, convincing tests of differential responsiveness are rare. We use a unique data set that surveys the views of a large cross-section of urban residents to provide greater insight into this question. We demonstrate clear differences in perceived responsiveness across demographic and political groups with racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, and liberals expressing less satisfaction with local outcomes. Our analysis suggests that these differences are unlikely to be due to underlying differences in individual attitudes but instead appear to stem from real differences in local conditions and perceived governmental responsiveness.

## Keywords

local politics, responsiveness, approval

The legitimacy of democratic government rests on the degree to which those who are charged with making and carrying out public policy represent the preferences of the governed. One of the most regularly articulated concerns about American democracy is that the system represents the interests of more privileged groups at the expense of less advantaged segments of society (American Political Science Association [APSA] 2004; Mills 1956; Schattschneider 1970; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Nevertheless, researchers have had a difficult time providing evidence of inequality in representation. We have a great deal of evidence on the interim stages of the democratic process. These data highlight unevenness in who turns out to vote (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), in who lobbies (Schlozman 1984), in who is elected (Hajnal and Lee 2011), and in how elected officials vote on individual bills (Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2008). But measuring the fit between political *outcomes* and the interests of different groups in society has proven to be a harder task because we rarely have enough data to match group preferences with government actions to be able to determine which groups are most (or least) likely to have their preferences met (Hajnal 2009b, but see Gilens 2012).

However, matching outcomes and group preferences is not the only way scholars can evaluate representation. An alternative approach is to ask the American public directly for their perception of the quality of governance. After all, who should know better how well the government serves their interests, than the principals themselves. Perhaps because local governments are closer to the public and their actions tend to be more visible to the average

citizen, investigations into individuals' satisfaction with government performance have been carried out predominantly at the local level.<sup>1</sup> Studies of satisfaction with local government have consistently shown that racial and ethnic minorities are less satisfied with government performance than their white counterparts (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Marshall and Shah 2007; Rahn and Rudolph 2005; Reisig and Parks 2000; Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immerwahr 2004). In almost every case, blacks tend to be substantially less happy with governmental outcomes—a pattern that suggests that American democracy may not be equally responsive to all its citizens.

Yet, despite the consistent nature of the findings on government satisfaction, questions remain. Do local residents know enough about local government to judge its performance? Are minorities and other less advantaged segments of the public unhappy with the government because policies do not favor their interests or because long-term exposure to discrimination and other aspects of inequality has left them more distrustful or less efficacious? As such, there is an ongoing debate about whether differential responsiveness is real or perceived (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Howell

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2007; Reisig and Parks 2000; Van Ryzin 2007; Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immerwahr 2004).

A second issue with existing literature is that studies tend to focus on race and ethnicity while ignoring other divisions in society. It may be that racial and ethnic minorities are the least well represented in American democracy, but it could also be that the poor or some other demographic group loses more or as regularly. Even more important is the exclusion of specifically political variables from analyses of differential satisfaction. Few of the existing studies of local satisfaction consider conventional political variables like ideology or partisanship that may shape perceptions of political outcomes (Hansen 1975 and Schumaker and Getter 1977 are exceptions). Before drawing conclusions about the predominance of race in shaping perceived responsiveness, we need to show that different groups hold different preferences and then include political variables and the entire range of demographic factors in our analysis.

In this article, we use a unique survey that includes large samples from twenty-six different communities to show that a number of factors beyond race help shape satisfaction with local government. Relative to conservative and upper class respondents, liberal and poor residents are less likely to approve of municipal government and more likely to feel unsatisfied with municipal services. Race is, however, still the largest factor governing satisfaction in the local political arena. Furthermore, we show that these racial disparities are not driven by trust or efficacy, but instead appear to be a function of local policies and municipal services. We provide evidence that when local governments hire African Americans and increase efforts at redistribution, racial disparities in satisfaction diminish.

Our findings make a number of contributions to the literatures on local politics and representation. One implication is that race remains one of the predominant divisions in the local political arena. Furthermore, it is clear that racial minorities are generally less satisfied with the government. Our analysis indicates that local democracy may be substantially less responsive to the preferences of racial minorities—particularly blacks. Our analysis also clearly demonstrates the relevance of political divisions in local democracy. Local governments may have agendas and responsibilities that differ greatly from other levels of government, but divisions along ideological lines play an important role.

## Relevant Literature

Despite formal political equality for adult citizens, concern about unequal representation in American politics is one of the longest standing issues raised by scholars of American democracy. From Mills (1956) to

Schattschneider (1970) to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), there has been a consistent worry that the actions of the government do not represent the interests of the entire public but instead favor the wishes of more privileged segments of society. However, providing evidence of unequal responsiveness has been difficult. We have significant evidence of the uneven nature of interim stages of the political process, but much less is known about the degree to which inequalities persist in overall outcomes of American democracy. For instance, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) provide evidence that political participation is skewed disproportionately toward whites and other more advantaged groups. Schlozman and Tierney (1986) demonstrate that the chorus of the interest group system sings with a decidedly upper class accent. And many studies present incontrovertible evidence that blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans are underrepresented at every level of political office. Hajnal (2009b) shows that blacks end up on the losing side of elections more regularly than members of other demographic groups. Bartels (2008) and Griffin and Newman (2008) find that individual votes in Congress are more closely aligned with the opinions of upper income white constituents than with the opinions of poor and minority constituents. But none of these analyses presents evidence showing that political outcomes are more in line with the interests of one group than they are with another group (see Gilens 2005; 2012 for a notable exception). Ultimately, what matters is not who votes, who lobbies, who is elected, or even which way individual politicians vote, but rather whether policies that are enacted align with the goals and preferences of particular groups.

The underlying problem facing researchers is that responsiveness is extremely difficult to measure (Hajnal 2009b). Some scholars have assessed differential responsiveness by seeking to measure the fit between each group's preferences and governmental output. Two problems typically arise. First, we rarely have data on group preferences and government actions apart from a specific policy arena or across a large number of communities (but see Schumaker and Getter 1977). The result is that studies of substantive representation tend to focus on a single locality or a specific policy question. For example, important research has looked at the effects of an expanded black electorate on policy outcomes in specific states (Keech 1968; Parker 1990) or the effect of expanded descriptive representation on a particular policy outcome (like community policing) across cities (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Kerr and Mladenka 1994). More recently, studies have examined the correspondence between minority opinion and the voting records of individual legislators (Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2008; Lublin 1999). These studies provide insight into

one office, one location, or one aspect of policy, but they do not provide an overall evaluation of representation. Judging by these studies, it is hard to know how well American democracy generally serves minorities or other groups that lack political power. As a consequence, there remains considerable debate as to whether inequalities in representation persist along race lines or whether outcomes are largely evenhanded.

The other underlying problem in measuring responsiveness of the government to different groups is a lack of unanimity within each group. When a group is not unanimous in its opinion—as is almost always the case—determining how well represented that group is becomes a complicated issue. Is a group well represented, for example, when a policy is passed after 70 percent of a group expresses a preference for the policy and 30 percent express opposition? Existing studies of substantive representation typically do not consider the fact that minorities are rarely of one mind on policy or that individuals are always members of multiple groups (Cameron, Epstein, O'Halloran 1996; Lublin 1999). Unless we can take into account the diversity of opinions within each group and measure responsiveness in such a way that gives weight to individual opinions (and accounts for cross-pressured identities), we cannot really know how well a “group” is represented.

One of the more fruitful means of overcoming these problems is to focus on the opinions of individual Americans. We can simply ask the principals in this matter—the American public—how they feel about the actions of the government and how well those actions represent their interests. The premise is that individuals should know better than anyone else how well they are being served by the government. In addition to being measurable, this strategy allows us to avoid determining, *a priori*, what counts as responsive or representative government. It can be difficult to know whether a legislature that moves policy incrementally toward public opinion should qualify as responsiveness. By focusing on satisfaction and service evaluation, we allow residents themselves to report how well the government serves their interests. To be sure, satisfaction is not equivalent to representation, so we briefly discuss the meaning we assign to these terms.

We think of representation as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner that is responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967, p. 209). That is, representation requires that government officials respond to the preferences of constituents. We assume that constituents are more likely to say that they are satisfied with the government and evaluate services highly when they believe that elected officials are being responsive to their preferences. At the local level, responsiveness to preferences is likely to be tightly linked to performance. This is because of the nature of local government responsibilities and activities.

Although residents can and do disagree over the prioritization and ideal levels of services like public safety, clean water, and efficient waste disposal, poor performance is more likely to be considered uniformly negative. As a result, differences in perceived responsiveness have a substantial potential to reflect differences in performance. Although not perfectly correlated, scholars (Licari, McLean, and Rice 2005; Van Ryzin, Immerwahr, and Altman 2008) have shown that residents' perceptions of government performance do correspond to objectively measured outcomes. And Van Ryzin (2007) shows that perceived government performance has a significant, positive effect on satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> As a result, we think it reasonable to use individual reports of satisfaction and service evaluation to measure representation across different demographic and ideological groups.

Although a plethora of polls gauge public satisfaction with national and state governments, research on national and statewide approval seldom analyzes approval across different socioeconomic or racial groups. The underlying goal is typically to see whether changes in public sentiments can be traced to changes in economic conditions or other real-world events (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). At the local level, efforts to assess and understand group-level responsiveness are more common (e.g., Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Hansen 1975; Schumaker and Getter 1977; Verba and Nie 1972). We continue this tradition of focusing locally for two reasons. First, because local governments are closer to the public, their actions may be more visible. The average citizen may or may not know whether the national parks service is doing an effective job of managing national parks, but they do know whether their garbage was picked up on time. Second, as explained above, the responsibilities and activities of local government are often less subjective and more concrete than those of the federal government, allowing for a clearer relationship between performance evaluations and representation.

Studies of individual perceptions of responsiveness at the local level are, at least at first glance, fairly clear. Asked in different ways across a wide range of circumstances, there are wide gaps in the degree to which different segments of the public feel they are represented. In particular, study after study has shown that minorities—and most specifically African Americans—are much less happy than white Americans about the policies that governments pursue (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Durand 1976; Marschall and Shah 2007; Rahn and Rudolph 2005; Reisig and Parks 2000; Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immerwahr 2004). If these perceptions are accurate, then American democracy is far from equally responsive to all its citizens.

There are, however, real questions about the accuracy of the perceptions of individual Americans. One issue is that survey respondents may not have enough

information to effectively evaluate the government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Another concern is that a history of discrimination and exclusion will lead certain groups—regardless of the current actions of the government—to be skeptical of American democracy and disapproving of governance. And on this point, there is ample evidence that African Americans (and some other minorities) tend to be particularly distrustful and feel less efficacious (Marschall and Shah 2007).

As a consequence, there is a reasonable debate as to whether differential responsiveness is real or perceived. Some contend that racial gaps in satisfaction are based on actual performance (e.g., DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Howell 2007; Howell and McLean 2001; Howell and Perry 2004). Similarly, Marschall and Shah (2007) find that substantive changes in policing policy are associated with predictable changes in black and white trust in local police. An extensive literature on minority empowerment shows that black efficacy, trust, and participation all increase after blacks win office, presumably because black elected officials are more likely to serve the interests of black constituents (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Howell and Fagan 1988, but see Swain 1995).<sup>3</sup>

But others contend that factors that are largely unrelated to performance dominate individual evaluations (Parks 1984; Stipak 1979). Reisig and Parks (2000) show no reduction in the racial gap in the evaluation of the police when neighborhood conditions are included in their models. Roch and Poister (2006) find no reduction of the gap when respondents' expectations regarding service levels are taken into account. Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immerwahr (2004) also find that a substantively large and statistically significant racial gap in evaluation of city services remains after controlling for some aspects of neighborhood conditions.

However, each of these studies has limitations. One is an almost exclusive focus on race and ethnicity over other potentially relevant political divisions.<sup>4</sup> This focus on race is easy to understand, but race is not the only variable that could affect perceived responsiveness or satisfaction. For instance, it is possible that low socioeconomic status could be the real driver of dissatisfaction with the government (as Gilens 2005; 2012 might predict). The fact that race is often correlated with a host of other demographic variables suggests that conclusions about the importance or irrelevance of race need to wait until other potentially relevant factors like class are incorporated and the relative impact of each of the different factors is compared.

The most important omission in studies of local government approval is the absence of specifically political variables. Although some view local politics as largely issue-less or devoid of ideological content (Peterson

1981) and it is true that political parties often do not play the central role at the local level that they play in national politics, it is hard to imagine that there is no room for politics in local government decision making. Indeed, a long line of scholars starting with Dahl (1961) has demonstrated how political interests shape outcomes at the local level (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Clark and Ferguson 1983; Hajnal and Trounstin 2005; Trounstin 2008). Because most local analyses of responsiveness do not account for respondent ideology or partisanship, it is difficult to know the degree to which demographic divisions are actually driven by other identities (Rahn and Rudolph 2005 is an exception). For instance, it is possible that liberal interests might be less well served by local governments if policy tends to be dictated by a coalition of elected officials and business leaders (Peterson 1981; Stone 1989). Failing to incorporate politics into an analysis of government approval may lead to an incomplete story.

A final hurdle that has proven difficult to overcome is empirical breadth. Existing studies tend to investigate a small number of communities (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Hero and Durand 1985; Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immerwahr 2004) or a single policy area (Sharp and Johnson 2009). As DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons (1990) explain, "this failure is due not to a lack of theoretical imagination but to limitations in our tools of investigation" (p. 808). Simply put, very few cross city surveys of local political opinion exist.

We offer insight into the topics of responsiveness and citizen satisfaction in three ways: (a) by explicitly incorporating a core set of socioeconomic, demographic, and political variables, and comparing the impact of these factors with the effects of race and ethnicity, (b) by determining whether differences in perceived responsiveness across groups are a function of attitudes unrelated to local government or are related to local conditions and basic services, and (c) by testing these different accounts against a unique data set of local public opinion that contains large samples of respondents across a broad set of American cities. In the sections that follow, we determine the extent to which perceived responsiveness varies across social groups, analyze the relative importance of different group memberships for perceived responsiveness, and then turn to an analysis of city-level factors that affect approval of local governments.

## Data for Analyzing Perceived Responsiveness

To study perceptions of local government responsiveness, we use a series of surveys carried out by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Conducted in 1999 and 2002, the



**Table 1.** Inequities in Resident Satisfaction.

	Police	Fire	Libraries	Schools	Government approval
<b>Race</b>					
Black–white	–21.3***	–8.1***	–4.8***	–8.2***	–10.1***
Latino–white	–9.3***	–2.3***	–4.7***	–2.2	–0.5
Asian–white	–2.8***	–4.6***	–2.3***	5.3***	9.3***
<b>Class</b>					
Income stress–no income stress	–8.4***	–2.7***	–1.5***	0.3	–2.9***
Low vs. high education	–12.0***	–4.3***	–1.4**	1.0	–4.8***
Renter vs. home owner	–7.6***	–1.8***	–2.1***	–0.3	–0.2
<b>Politics</b>					
Liberal/conservative ideology	–8.0***	–1.8***	–2.3***	–2.3*	–4.0***
<b>Other demographics</b>					
Unemployed vs. employed	2.8***	0.0	1.2***	2.9***	3.6***
Under 65 vs. 65 and older	–9.2***	–1.6***	–4.0***	–6.8***	–7.0***
Gender (male vs. female)	–5.8***	–1.3***	–2.5***	–1.2***	–6.1***
Church attendance (never vs. weekly+)	–6.6***	–0.3	–2.6***	–4.7***	–6.0***

Number of observations ranges from 28,768 to 36,694. Cells show the difference between demographic groups in proportion approving of government/service. Sampling weights used.

\* $p < .20$ . \*\* $p < .10$ . \*\*\* $p < .05$ .

surveys intended to document the quality of life in twenty-six communities where the Knight-Ridder Corporation published newspapers and the foundation provided community initiative grants.<sup>5</sup> The surveys of these communities were supplemented with data from a national random sample in both years. The total number of respondents is just above 35,000. A list of communities surveyed as well as the total number of respondents for each survey year is included in the Appendix Table 1 (see online appendix at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>).<sup>6</sup> To correct for the survey's deliberate oversampling of racial and ethnic minorities as well as biases in response rates, we use the sample weights provided with the data for all our analyses. While these cities are not a random sample of U.S. cities, they are fairly representative of medium- to large-sized cities on a range of demographic measures (see Appendix Table 2).

Although not specifically focused on political evaluation, the Knight survey included two sets of questions that allow us to analyze local government satisfaction and responsiveness. We use these as our dependent variables. First, the survey asked respondents to evaluate their local government. The question was,

I'm going to read a list of local institutions and organizations. For each one, please tell me if you think they are doing an excellent job, a good job, a fair job, or a poor job serving your community. (First/How about) YOUR CITY OR TOWN GOVERNMENT—are they doing an excellent job, a good job, a fair job, or a poor job?

Second, the survey asked for feedback on specific local government services. Question wording was

identical to the general government approval measure. Respondents were asked to rate the quality of their LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENT, their LOCAL FIRE DEPARTMENT, their LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS, and their LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES. All these approval variables were re-coded so that higher values reflected higher approval. We added the four service evaluations together to create a service evaluation index for each respondent that was also rescaled to take a minimum value of 0 and a maximum value of 1.

For our independent variables, we garnered data on race, class, other core demographic characteristics, and political divisions from the survey. In terms of race, respondents were asked whether they identify as Hispanic or Latino, and then their race. We coded respondents as *Latino* regardless of their race and coded the remaining respondents as *White* non-Latino, *Black* non-Latino, *Asian* non-Latino, and *Other* non-Latino.

To assess the impact of class on approval and responsiveness, we used measures for income, education, and home-ownership. Specifically, we included one measure for education (coded with seven categories from less than a high school education to postgraduate schooling), one for home-ownership (home owner or not), and one for *Income Stressed*. Because only the 1999 survey asked a complete question on family income, we used three different survey questions to create the *Income Stressed* variable.<sup>7</sup>

Political ideology is measured with a scale that ranges from very conservative to very liberal and is derived from responses to the following question: "In general, would you describe your political views as very liberal, liberal,

**Table 2.** The Determinants of Inequities in Service Evaluation and Government Approval.

	Service Evaluation Index				Overall government approval			
	Basic model		Adding efficacy and trust		Basic model		Adding efficacy and trust	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<b>Race</b>								
Black	-0.055***	0.010	-0.055***	0.010	-0.030**	0.015	-0.029**	0.014
Latino	-0.020***	0.008	-0.020***	0.007	-0.004	0.012	-0.004	0.012
Asian	-0.011*	0.007	-0.012*	0.007	0.035***	0.011	0.036***	0.012
Other race	-0.041***	0.010	-0.031***	0.009	-0.045***	0.015	-0.028**	0.015
<b>Class</b>								
Income stress	-0.007**	0.004	-0.003	0.004	-0.014***	0.006	-0.008*	0.006
Education	0.015***	0.006	0.013***	0.005	0.022***	0.009	0.022***	0.009
Own home	-0.002	0.003	-0.006**	0.003	-0.003	0.006	-0.009*	0.006
<b>Ideology</b>								
Ideology	-0.018***	0.007	-0.010*	0.007	-0.031***	0.010	-0.020***	0.009
<b>Other demographics</b>								
Employed	-0.004	0.003	-0.004	0.003	-0.007	0.005	-0.006	0.005
Religiosity	0.034***	0.005	0.024***	0.004	0.054***	0.008	0.039***	0.007
Age	-0.005	0.036	0.058*	0.037	-0.351***	0.055	-0.250***	0.053
Age squared	0.092***	0.045	0.041	0.046	0.468***	0.067	0.384***	0.063
Female	0.023***	0.002	0.018***	0.002	0.039***	0.004	0.032***	0.004
Length residence	0.008	0.006	0.007	0.006	-0.039***	0.013	-0.039***	0.013
Kids 5-17	0.011***	0.003	0.008***	0.003	-0.003	0.005	-0.007**	0.004
Spanish interview	0.022**	0.012	0.027***	0.010	0.031*	0.021	0.042***	0.018
<b>Efficacy/trust</b>								
Efficacy			0.114***	0.005			0.163***	0.009
Trust local news			0.059***	0.005			0.117***	0.007
Trust local TV			0.066***	0.006			0.071***	0.008
Rate racial tensions			-0.057***	0.005			-0.085***	0.007
Constant	0.668***	0.014	0.523***	0.011	0.557***	0.016	0.342***	0.015
<i>n</i>	22,301		22,301		21,859		21,859	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.08		.16		.05		.13	

OLS = ordinary least squares. OLS regressions with Taylor-linearized standard errors, sampling weights used; fixed effects for city and year included but not presented.

\**p* < .20. \*\**p* < .10. \*\*\**p* < .05.

moderate, conservative, or very conservative?" We also include controls for employment status (employed or not), age (in years), religiosity (measured as frequency of church attendance), gender, whether there are children in the household, and length of residence in the city (in years), and whether the interview was conducted in English or Spanish. Summary statistics for the whole sample and by race are included in Appendix Table 3.

## Inequities in Satisfaction with Municipal Policy

Table 1 presents basic data on differences in overall government satisfaction and perceived responsiveness across four areas of government activity. The table displays satisfaction divides by race, class, ideology, and

other demographic characteristics. For each group, we calculated the proportion of respondents who said that the government is doing a good/excellent job to represent satisfaction and perceived responsiveness. We then took the difference in approval between pairs of groups and calculated the statistical significance in the difference of these proportions.

Table 1 makes clear that satisfaction with local government is substantially divided along several dimensions. Racial differences are, however, clearly the largest. Compared with white respondents, blacks are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the performance of the police department, the fire department, local schools, and local libraries, and are significantly less likely to approve of their local government overall. In each case, the difference is substantial, ranging from about 5 to more

**Table 3.** The Concrete Sources of Racial Inequalities in Political Outcomes.

	Overall government approval					
	Basic model with efficacy and trust		Controlling for service evaluations		Controlling for local conditions	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<b>Race</b>						
Black	-0.029**	0.014	0.011	0.009	-0.009	0.013
Latino	-0.004	0.012	0.008	0.009	0.008	0.011
Asian	0.036***	0.012	0.039***	0.011	0.050***	0.017
Other race	-0.028**	0.015	-0.004	0.013	-0.007	0.012
<b>Class</b>						
Income stress	-0.008*	0.006	-0.005	0.005	-0.001	0.006
Education	0.022***	0.009	0.014**	0.007	0.007	0.010
Own home	-0.009*	0.006	-0.007*	0.004	-0.017***	0.005
<b>Ideology</b>						
Ideology	-0.020***	0.009	-0.010*	0.008	-0.019***	0.009
<b>Other demographics</b>						
Employed	-0.006	0.005	-0.003	0.005	-0.012***	0.005
Religiosity	0.039***	0.007	0.020***	0.007	0.036***	0.007
Age	-0.250***	0.053	-0.291***	0.050	-0.164***	0.065
Age squared	0.384***	0.063	0.352***	0.061	0.275***	0.080
Female	0.032***	0.004	0.021***	0.004	0.042***	0.004
Length residence	-0.039***	0.013	-0.031***	0.011	-0.035***	0.012
Kids 5-17	-0.007**	0.004	-0.012***	0.004	-0.012***	0.005
Spanish interview	0.042***	0.018	0.024**	0.014	0.040***	0.013
<b>Efficacy/trust</b>						
Efficacy	0.163***	0.009	0.084***	0.008	0.140***	0.009
Trust local news	0.117***	0.007	0.073***	0.007	0.097***	0.008
Trust local TV	0.071***	0.008	0.026***	0.008	0.065***	0.009
Rate racial	-0.085***	0.007	-0.041***	0.006	-0.016**	0.009
<b>tensions</b>						
<b>Local service evaluation</b>						
Police			0.260***	0.008		
Fire			0.058***	0.011		
Schools			0.212***	0.008		
Library			0.078***	0.008		
<b>Local conditions</b>						
Crime					-0.013*	0.008
Unemployment					-0.035***	0.007
Schools					-0.089***	0.007
Affordable					-0.018***	0.006
<b>housing</b>						
Safe at home					0.093***	0.012
Safe in					0.063***	0.010
<b>neighborhood</b>						
Constant	0.342***	0.015	-0.053***	0.015	0.274***	0.017
<i>n</i>	21,859		21,859		19,618	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.13		.30		.16	

OLS = ordinary least squares. OLS regressions with Taylor-linearized standard errors, sampling weights used; fixed effects for city and year included but not presented.

\**p* < .20. \*\**p* < .10. \*\*\**p* < .05.

than 21 percentage points. For instance, when asked how well the police served their community, 82 percent of white respondents said that they felt the police were doing

a good or excellent job, compared with only 60 percent of blacks who felt that way. This means that 40 percent of blacks said that the police were doing a poor or fair job.



Latinos feel almost as underserved by local government services—the gap to whites ranges from about 2 to more than 9 percentage points. Similar to blacks, close to 30 percent of Latinos felt that the police were doing a poor or fair job serving their community. Latinos, however, do not rate local government as a whole, any worse than do whites. Asian Americans fall somewhere near the middle, rating some services worse than whites but then providing a higher overall grade for local government than do whites.

Akin to the black/white and Latino/white divides, those who are on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum tend to feel underserved by local government. Respondents who are income stressed, those who have not graduated from high school, and those who do not own their homes are more likely to rate government services poorly and less likely to approve of the government relative to their more well-off counterparts. But the gaps are generally smaller than the gaps by race. Finally, although there may be good reasons to think that ideology will not play a role in local politics, we find substantial differences on this dimension. Liberals are generally more apt to feel that local government services are not sufficient and significantly less likely to approve of local government overall. The fact that liberals tend to be less satisfied with municipal government and its services lends credence to a long line of urban studies that claim that local elites tend to feel pressures to pursue development-focused agendas (Logan and Molotch 1987; Peterson 1981). Conservatives, more than liberals, appear to be achieving their policy goals in local democracy.

To analyze these gaps in satisfaction more rigorously and to control for the interrelationships between race and income, and the other measures of status, in Table 2, we regress a *Service Evaluation Index* and *Government Approval* on the range of individual-level factors discussed above.<sup>8</sup> The Service Evaluation Index is an additive index of the four service evaluations in Table 1 (police, fire, schools, and libraries).

Because we are first and foremost concerned about differences in perceived responsiveness across demographic groups *within* a city, our analysis incorporates fixed effects for each city (with the national sample as the excluded category) as well as year fixed effects.<sup>9</sup> Including city fixed effects focuses our analysis on the differences in perceived responsiveness across demographic groups within cities. This is equivalent to calculating the average difference between perceived responsiveness of each group living in the same community. The regression analyses reveal whether these differences are statistically different from zero. Including fixed effects controls for *all* city-level factors (like the race/ideology of elected officials, differences in municipal institutions, metropolitan fragmentation, unemployment

levels, or crime rates) that might lead to different approval rates across cities.<sup>10</sup> Later in the article, we directly assess the impact of a number of city-level factors that we think could shape intergroup differences in perceived responsiveness, but because we do not have measures of every city-level factor that might interact with race to affect government approval, we take a conservative approach here and include city-level fixed effects. The errors are clustered by city-year.

The results in columns 1 and 3 reveal patterns that are similar to those displayed in Table 1. The table clearly shows that race matters in local democracy. Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents are significantly less likely than white respondents to be satisfied with city services. All else equal, blacks rate local services about 5.5 points lower than whites. On average, whites rated local services as “good” to “excellent,” while blacks rated local services as “fair” to “good.” This means that black respondents rated about one city service more poorly at serving their community than a similar situated white respondent. Latinos rate services about 2 percentage points lower than whites, and Asian Americans rate them about 1 point lower. Blacks also stand out in terms of government approval. Blacks feel substantially worse served by city government overall than do whites. Latinos fall near whites on this measure, while Asian Americans, all else equal, tend to rate city government more highly than do whites. Class effects are once again smaller and less consistent than the racial effects, but the direction is clear. Those on or near the bottom end of the socioeconomic spectrum are significantly more apt to feel underserved by the government and to believe that government services are poorer than those who are more advantaged. The predicted differences here are on the order of 1/5th of a percent to 2 percentage points.

The results in Table 2 also reveal that liberal respondents continue to be less satisfied than conservative respondents with municipal government and the services that it delivers. The gap in satisfaction across the ideological spectrum is nearly 2 points on the service index and about 3 points for overall approval. In the end, columns 1 and 3 of Table 2 lead to two conclusions. The first is that there is a clear perceived bias to local democracy. More privileged members of society tend to rate local government and its services well, while those at or near the bottom feel underserved. And of all the demographic inequalities, race is by far the most severe. Second, it is also clear that perceived differences in responsiveness by race cannot be explained by the lower socioeconomic status of blacks and Latinos or by the left leaning nature of these groups. According to these respondents, the performance of city government is uneven and decidedly favors white Americans. Bias may indeed be a problem for local democracy.

## Uncovering the Source of Racial Difference—Testing Underlying Attitudes

But can the views of residents be believed? Are perceived differences in government satisfaction driven by real biases in government performance? One possibility is that racial minorities have different underlying attitudes about the world that may shape their perceptions about city government regardless of how well or poorly local governments act on their behalf. Ongoing racial discrimination outside the governmental process and a history of discriminatory practices within American democracy could certainly lead to a host of more negative attitudes among the minority population, which could in turn shape attitudes toward local government. As we have noted, there is considerable evidence that blacks are less trusting and less politically efficacious than whites. To capture these possibilities, we add a series of measures of underlying attitudes to our model in Table 2. The first is a basic measure of local *Efficacy*, which is derived from the question, “Overall, how much impact do you think people like you can have in making your community a better place to live . . . a big impact, a moderate impact, a small impact, or no impact at all?” We also incorporate two measures of trust. We include *Trust of Local Television* and *Trust of Local News* to capture individuals’ trust in local institutions that are distinct from the government.<sup>11</sup> Finally, we add a measure that assesses perceived racial tensions in the local area.<sup>12</sup> If minorities are merely expressing their grievances about preexisting racial conflict or racial inequality when they evaluate city government, then such sentiments should be picked up by this measure. The second and fourth columns of Table 2 present the results of adding these variables to the base models.<sup>13</sup>

The results suggest that perceived differences in responsiveness by race are not due to respondents’ concerns about society or to attitudes that pre-date the actions of local government. When these additional controls are added to the models, the impact of race on service evaluations and government approval remains intact and quite powerful. While efficacy and trust serve as important drivers of residents’ evaluations, race still matters.<sup>14</sup>

## Experiences Drive Satisfaction with Municipal Government

To determine the degree to which government approval is based on individual experiences with local government and to see whether racial differences disappear after taking into account perceptions of local conditions, in Table 3, we add a series of measures that assess individuals’

evaluation of their local environment. First, to our analysis of government approval, we added respondents’ evaluations of *Police*, *Fire*, *Schools*, and *Libraries*. If poor and minority residents are more disapproving of local government because they have worse experiences with city services, these variables will positively predict government approval and reduce the effect of race and income. The second column of Table 3 provides strong support for this contention.

When we take into account evaluations of the police department, the fire department, local schools, and local libraries, these different, specific evaluations greatly drive overall government approval, and more importantly for our purposes, their inclusion eliminates racial and class differences in approval.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the coefficient on black respondents changes sign and falls well away from statistical significance. These results suggest not only that the degree to which individuals feel that their local government is doing a good job is mostly a function of their satisfaction with the outcomes local governments produce but also that racial and class differences in responsiveness are a function of perceived differences in the quality of city services that they receive.

Finally, we substitute into the model general measures of local conditions. We include respondents’ views on the severity of four problems facing their city: “crime, drugs, or violence,” “unemployment,” “the quality of education,” and “not enough affordable housing.”<sup>16</sup> And, we add two variables capturing respondents’ evaluations of their neighborhoods. The first variable, *Safe at Home*, measures the respondent’s feeling of safety in her own home at night.<sup>17</sup> The second variable, *Safe Walking*, reflects the respondent’s feeling of safety “when walking in [her] neighborhood after dark.” The results displayed in the third column of Table 3 once again suggest that racial differences in satisfaction are based on real differences in experiences with municipal government. As before, local conditions strongly shape evaluations of local government. When respondents feel that crime, unemployment, schools, and a lack of affordable housing are significant problems in their cities, they are less approving of municipal government.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, feeling unsafe at home or walking after dark leads to dissatisfaction with local democracy. More importantly, when measures of local problems are added, race and class differences disappear.<sup>19</sup> After controlling for the local environment, the racial coefficients become tiny and insignificant (as do the coefficients measuring socioeconomic status). The bottom line is that race and class differences appear to be real. Blacks, Latinos, and poor residents feel less well served than white and wealthier members of their communities.

## Understanding the Connection between Policies and Perceived Inequality

Although the results to this point raise concerns about local democracy, some readers may not be convinced that the differences in perceived responsiveness accurately reflect reality. We have shown that the inclusion of perceived local government actions in our model eliminates racial differences. But what if members of different racial groups perceive these local actions differently?

One way to address this concern directly is to see whether perceived racial differences in responsiveness mirror differences in concrete, objective measures of local policy. In other words, are African American residents happier than whites with local government when the concrete policy choices of the local governments more closely reflect the preferences of the black community? Adding city-level variables to our fixed-effect models above is not feasible. So, in this final empirical section, we use a hierarchical model to analyze the interaction between race of the respondent and policy measures at the city level to determine whether racial differences in evaluations of local services and governments vary systematically and understandably across cities.

Before embarking on this analysis, we look to see whether there is any variation in perceived racial disparities across cities. If blacks are consistently unhappy with their local governments across all of our different cities and years, then it raises questions about just what black residents are evaluating. A quick glance at our cities indicates, however, that there is great variation across cities and years in the degree to which blacks and whites differ in their approval of local government. As evidenced by Appendix Table 1, across cities, our measure of uneven responsiveness ranges from  $-0.23$  to  $0.20$ . At one extreme, blacks are 20 percent more likely than whites to approve of city government. At the other, whites are 23 percent more likely to approve. A closer look shows that while blacks are more often than not less satisfied than whites with their local government, in 20 percent of the city-years in the data set, blacks are more apt than whites to believe that local government is responsive to their needs. Blacks are not universally less happy or less enthusiastic than whites—a pattern that suggests that black and white respondents could be evaluating local policies when assessing local government.

But are these racial differences in perceived responsiveness tied to actual and measurable differences in racial responsiveness across cities? Or put a different way, are African Americans relatively more satisfied with their local government when that local government enacts programs that favor the black community and spends money on policies that African Americans are likely to

prefer? To answer that question, we focus on two regularly highlighted aspects of pro-black policy: affirmative action in hiring and spending on redistributive programs.

For local hiring practices, we look to see whether government approval increases among black respondents when local governments hire a greater share of blacks for the public workforce. A number of scholars have used the racial makeup of public employees as an indicator of substantive representation (e.g., Meier and Stewart 1992; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989). Drawing on this work, we expect that an increased presence of blacks in public employment will increase black perceptions of responsiveness and thus approval of government. Given the disproportionate impact of police practices on the black community and the high degree of attention paid to the racial makeup of local police forces, we control for the proportion of blacks on the local police force in our analysis.<sup>20</sup>

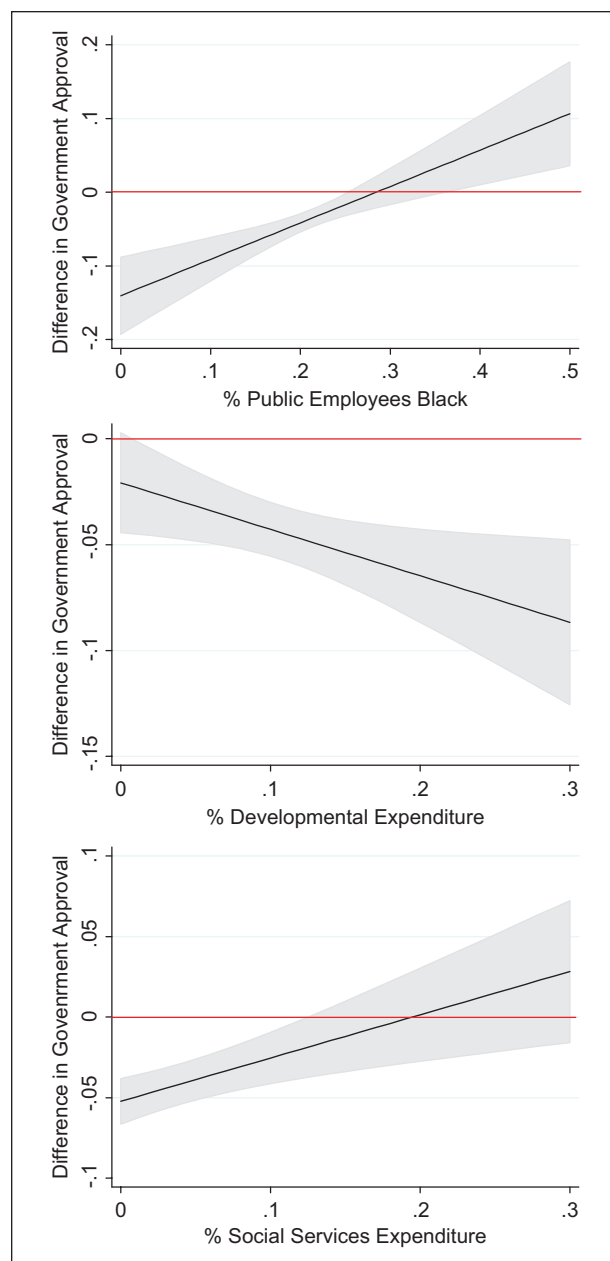
We also analyze the effect of local government spending on government approval among black respondents. Given that local governments spend more than a trillion dollars annually, local politics, at its core, is often a battle over who gets those dollars (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). No racial/ethnic group unanimously prefers one spending area overall, but a range of surveys of urban residents indicates that spending priorities do diverge across racial groups. Welch et al. (2001), DeLeon (1991), and Lovrich (1974) all find that black residents are especially concerned about redistribution and social services, whereas whites are especially concerned about reducing taxes and attracting businesses and other aspects of development. In light of these divergent racial preferences, we look to see whether perceived responsiveness among blacks increases with greater local spending on social services (measured as the proportion of city expenditures on welfare, health, and housing) and reductions in developmental spending (measured as highway, parking, and general construction spending).<sup>21</sup>

In evaluating the impact of local policies on racial differences in government approval, we would also like to control for other city-level factors that could affect black perceptions of local governments' responsiveness, and which may be correlated with spending and employment patterns. One of the most prominent set of factors that could matter is local *institutions*. Reform structure like at-large elections, the council manager form of government, nonpartisan elections, and staggered electoral contests are all viewed by at least some urban scholars as reducing the responsiveness of local government to minority or lower-class interests (Banfield and Wilson 1967; Bridges 1997; Hansen 1975; Hawley and Wirt 1974; Mladenka 1989), and have been found in some cases to be associated with different spending patterns (Trounstine 2008).

Other scholars have highlighted the critical role that *minority representation* can play in responding to the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities. Descriptive representation has been associated with differences in local policy making and support for government among racial and ethnic minorities (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Marschall and Ruhil 2007, but see Swain 1995). Others have highlighted the specifically *political* bases of racial responsiveness (Dahl 1961; Hansen 1975; Schumaker and Getter 1977; Stone 1989; Verba and Nie 1972, but see Mladenka 1980). Three measures of the local political arena have been shown to matter. The overall political leaning of the city has been linked to policy outcomes (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). The level of competitiveness—especially between parties—has been shown to have consequences for different racial groups (Hansen 1975; Schumaker and Getter 1977). In addition, there is compelling evidence that higher rates of local participation can reduce responsiveness bias (Dahl 1961; Hajnal 2009a; Verba and Nie 1972). Still others view politics as a direct struggle between racial communities for power (Bobo 1983). As a result, groups with larger numbers and more resources are more apt to hold sway in local government. Finally, city characteristics like population size have been shown to be related to the receptivity of local governments to minority concerns (Schumaker and Getter 1977). We do not claim that this is a complete list of factors that could increase or diminish responsiveness to minority interests. Rather, we believe that this is a set of the most often mentioned factors and thus some of the most likely candidates for explaining race-based differences in government approval.

Given the relatively small number of cities in our sample, we have to limit the number of city-level independent variables. Thus, our regression model includes one measure from each of these different theoretical perspectives in addition to the policy and spending measures of interest. To represent institutions that may benefit racial and ethnic minorities, we include a dummy indicator noting whether the majority of city councilors are elected by *districts* (vs. at large).<sup>22</sup> We measure minority representation with a dummy variable noting whether the city has a *black mayor*. We measure racial demographics with the proportion of residents who are *nonwhite* (including Black, Latino, Asian, and Other groups). We measure political bias using the mean *ideology* of the white residents (calculated from Knight Survey responses to a standard question that asks respondents to place themselves along the liberal–conservative ideological scale).<sup>23</sup> Finally, we control for city size using the log of total *population* (from the Census of Population and Housing, and the American Community Survey).

We begin with the model of government approval presented in column 1 of Table 3, but instead of using fixed effects for cities, we use random intercepts for city–year.



**Figure 1.** Effect of local policy on black versus white government approval.

Figures show marginal effect of respondent's race on government approval over the range of values of each policy variable. Positive values indicate black approval is higher than whites.

Our dependent variable is the respondent's *approval of government*. Our main independent variables are measures of the proportion of *public employees* that are African American, the proportion of the city budget spent on *social services*, and the proportion spent on *development*. We interact each of these variables with the race of the respondent. To focus on the difference between black and white approval levels, we restrict the analysis to respondents in these two racial categories (with white as the excluded category).



Are perceived racial differences in responsiveness real? Figure 1 suggests that they are. The figure shows the difference in average predicted government approval for black versus white respondents for each of our independent variables (e.g., the marginal effect of respondents' race on government approval at different fixed values of each policy variable). All other variables are held at their mean value. Positive values indicate that blacks are more approving of the government than are whites, while negative values indicate the reverse.<sup>24</sup> The full model is reported in Appendix Table 4.

What we see is that blacks tend to think local government is more responsive than do whites when local governments favor the black community, and vice versa. Local government hiring practices have a clear and substantively large impact on government approval. The more local governments hire African Americans, the more responsive the government is perceived to be by blacks and the less responsive it is perceived to be by whites. Increasing the proportion of public employees that are black from the minimum to the maximum value (from 0.007 to 0.466) decreases white approval of government by about 9 percentage points and increases black approval by about 14 percentage points. Similarly, local government spending patterns seem to influence views. Localities that spend more on redistribution and less on development are viewed more highly by blacks and more negatively by whites. The model suggests that compared with a city that spends very little on development (3% of the budget), in those that spend the maximum (28% of the budget), whites are about 2 percentage points more approving, while blacks are about 3 percentage points less approving. Although the difference between black and white approval of government does not meet traditional significance standards at high levels of social service spending, the overall pattern is clear. At the lowest levels of social service spending, whites are more supportive of government than are blacks. This relationship reverses as social spending increases; in cities that spend a large share of their budget on programs like welfare, health, and housing, blacks appear to be more supportive of city government than do whites.<sup>25</sup> Blacks perceive greater responsiveness when governments begin to favor blacks, and whites perceive less responsiveness when resources shift to the black community. This has two clear implications. First, all this reinforces existing concerns about bias in American democracy. Perceptions of racial inequality in local government responsiveness appear to be systematic. Blacks in most cities feel underserved by their local governments, and those perceptions appear to follow reality. Second, what a government does matters. When local governments spend money on the policy areas that blacks tend

to favor and when local governments shift resources to the black community, black residents begin to feel like local government is responsive. In a few cases, albeit a small fraction of our cities, blacks are relatively happier than whites with local government. Moreover, we have identified a specific set of policies that help to overcome these racial disparities in perceived responsiveness. In particular, redistributive spending and affirmative action are two policies that appear to make a real difference to members of the black community.

## Conclusion

In sum, we find substantial evidence that poor, minority, and liberal residents feel less satisfied with their local governments than more privileged residents. They have lower levels of approval and more negative evaluations of basic city services. These gaps in evaluation persist even when controlling for trust and efficacy. We also find evidence that satisfaction with municipal policy appears to be explained by concrete experiences. Approval of city government is driven by evaluations of city services and concrete measures of local policy making. These results indicate that when constituents feel that the government is not providing the quality or range of services that they want, they judge their elected officials negatively. While the gap in satisfaction along racial lines for race appears to be the most severe, perceptions of responsiveness also differ along class and ideological lines. Those who are white, well-off financially, and more conservative, are the most likely to feel well represented in the local democratic arena.

Understanding the mechanisms that lead to dissatisfaction among different social groups is an important research agenda for scholars of local politics and representation more generally. The results in the final section of our article contribute to this project. We find that when cities hire more diverse workforces and spend money on redistributive programs, the gap in government approval decreases. But even as one group becomes more satisfied with government outcomes, others become less so. In the end, we can offer no easy solutions. What we can offer is evidence that policy change may be able to ameliorate perceptions of unequal representation in American cities.

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## Notes

1. An extensive literature focuses on presidential and Congressional approval, but these studies focus almost exclusively on overall approval and its relationship to economic conditions.
2. Van Ryzin also shows that respondents' expectations play a role in determining satisfaction.
3. Outside of the local arena, studies show that vote choice and presidential approval are often closely tied to economic performance and objective events (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989).
4. Sharp (1986) shows that class affects service expectations in Kansas City, and Brown and Coulter (1983) find higher income respondents are more likely to report satisfaction with police.
5. The data are available at <http://www.cpanda.org/data/profiles/ci99.html>.
6. All appendices are included in the supplemental materials associated with this article available at <http://prq.sagepub.com>.
7. The first asked, "At any time in the last 12 months, have you and your family had a time when you could not pay for basic living costs such as food, rent, or heating or electric bills?" The second asked, "Approximately what is your total family income before taxes—just tell me when I get to the right category?" If the respondent refused to answer, she was then asked, "Would you mind telling me if in 2001 your total family income from all sources, before taxes, was under US\$20,000 or US\$20,000 or more?" Our income stress variable is coded 1 if the answer to the first question was yes, and/or the respondent's income was less than US\$20,000. Replacing the variable with dummy indicators for income categories does not change our conclusions.
8. Whether we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as we do in the tables or ordered probit as we do in alternate tests makes no difference to the substantive conclusions.
9. We include the national sample as a baseline for our results so that we compare responses in each city relative to a national average. Excluding the national sample does not affect the results.
10. In our data, the between-city variance is significant and large (although not as large as the within-city variance). Running the models without city fixed effects increases the strength of all of our findings. Results are available upon request from the authors.
11. Respondents are asked, "Please rate how much you think you can believe each of the following news organizations . . . Local TV news programs [local newspapers]."
12. Respondents rate the "tension between different racial and ethnic groups" in the community.
13. Diminished responsiveness to minorities could be due to their more limited access to and participation in the local electoral arena. In alternate tests, we also include a variable that measures whether the respondent is registered to vote. Although registration is linked to satisfaction, its inclusion does not reduce the impact of race on perceived responsiveness.
14. This is true if we combine the different service evaluations into one index as we do in Table 2 or if we analyze views on each city service separately.
15. Evaluations of local services are only modestly correlated, but they load onto a single factor. Replacing individual evaluations with an index of all service evaluations yields similar results.
16. In each case, respondents were asked, "Thinking about the (CITY) area . . . I'm going to read a list of problems some communities face. For each one, please tell me if it is a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem in the community where you live."
17. The question is, "In general, how safe would you say you and your family are from crime at each of the following locations? (How about) at home at night?"
18. These measures of local problems are themselves a function of concrete problems at the neighborhood level. Respondents' evaluations of their own neighborhood—including assessment of how safe they feel in their homes or walking around at night—have a powerful effect on perceptions of problems in the broader community. A negative evaluation of the safety of one's neighborhood leads to greater recognition of crime as a problem in the city as a whole. This is likely one way in which racial differences in overall evaluations of the city emerge—differential responsiveness across neighborhoods leads to differential assessments of city government.
19. The only racial difference that remains suggests that Asian Americans are, all else equal, more approving of local government. Given the small number of Asian American respondents (2% of our respondents), we advise caution in interpreting this and other findings relating to Asian Americans. It could be that as a predominantly immigrant group, Asian Americans have lower expectations about government services than others, but our results could also be an artifact of the small size of the Asian American sample.
20. The data on the racial makeup of the municipal workforce come from the 2000 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Police employment data are from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000 and 2003, available at <http://bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=248>). Missing data reduced the total number of city-years to thirty-four.
21. Data on expenditures come from the 1997 and 2002 Census of Governments. Values for 1999 are interpolated.
22. These data are from the 1987 Census of Governments—the most recent census that provides this information. Replacing this variable with a dummy indicator for the type of government (council manager vs. mayor council) yields very similar results.
23. In alternate tests, we replace this variable with the proportion of the county that voted for the Democratic presidential candidate in the most recent election. The results do not change.
24. Marginal effects and standard errors generated using the "margin" command in Stata 12.1 following the regression presented in Appendix Table 4.
25. Increasing social service spending lowers government approval among all respondents, but the rate of this decline is much slower among black respondents than among whites.

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