From Political to Material Inequality: Race, Immigration, and Requests for Public Goods[1]

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Studies of political participation typically analyze voting, contentious collective action, or membership in voluntary associations. Few scholars investigate a more mundane—but highly consequential—form of neighborhood politics: requests for basic city services. We conceptualize city service requests as a direct, instrumental contact with local government that alters the geographical distribution of public goods. We hypothesize that rates of service requests vary with the ethnic and immigrant composition of neighborhoods, due to differences in these communities' expectations of local government. We test this hypothesis using administrative data from the City of Boston. We find neighborhoods with high concentrations of first-generation immigrants less likely to request services, relative to need. The concentration of African Americans, however, is associated with large increases in neighborhood service requests. We conclude with implications for the study of race, inequality, and political incorporation.

KEY WORDS: civic participation; community; inequality; neighborhoods; political incorporation; race.

INTRODUCTION

In the study of political participation, existing research typically focuses on acts of voting, contentious collective action, and membership in voluntary associations. Such behaviors—casting a ballot, mobilizing into a social movement, or joining an association—are the hallmark of civil society scholarship. Yet a more mundane political act has largely escaped sociological scrutiny: direct contact with government to request city services. Explaining variation in service requests has largely fallen to political scientists studying citizen-initiated government contacting (Jones et al. 1977; Mladenka 1981; Sharp 1984; Thomas 1982).

While understudied in the sociological literature, contacting for publicly provided services is an important dimension of political activity. Aside from voting, more Americans "initiate contacts with public officials than any other political act" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 55). It is one of the few mechanisms putting

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the governed in direct interaction with representatives of the state—a direct link between members of a civic community and formal government institutions. The resulting relationship is premised on a contract between claimants and providers: a fully democratic system requires both an active citizenry and a responsive government.

Variation in requests for public goods can also be a source of urban inequality. While service provision may seem like a minor form of inequality, the magnitude of public expenditures for city services is notable. In Boston, for example, individual requests influenced how $161.8 million of public services were distributed in fiscal year 2011. This figure represents 8.6% of the city's entire budget. The relationship between requests for and receipt of services is likely becoming stronger over time: American cities are increasingly structuring themselves as technocratic bureaucracies, responsive to citizen-generated requests (Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Serra 1995; Vedlitz and Dyer 1984).

This technocratic shift in city service provision carries with it consequences for racial inequality, due to well-documented patterns of racial segregation in American cities (Massey and Denton 1993). If the receipt of service requires a request for service, racial disparities will persist if neighborhoods vary in their propensity to request public goods, net of need. These initial racial disparities can compound through well-documented neighborhood-level processes. Because the services requested enhance public goods through the maintenance of public parks, sidewalks, and streets, the city's fulfillment of individual citizens' requests benefits entire neighborhoods and anyone that visits them. These service requests often target signs of physical disorder, like uncollected trash and broken streetlights. When left unmaintained, physical disorder in public space can serve as a social cue for future neighborhood crime and stigma (Sampson 2012).

In this article, we analyze neighborhood-level variation in city service requests, using a unique administrative data set from the City of Boston. Our data include the full universe of service requests from March 2010 to April 2011. Through a novel exploitation of weather, city geography, and an intimate knowledge of government operations, we are able to estimate neighborhoods' propensity to engage with government, net of need and service receipt. We find that residents of neighborhoods with high concentrations of first-generation immigrants are less likely to contact government for services, relative to need and standard demographic characteristics like socioeconomic status. The concentration of African Americans, however, is associated with large increases in neighborhood service requests. This finding is statistically significant and robust across all models. We propose two theoretically derived mechanisms to explain racial and ethnic variation in service requests: neighborhood-level expectations of appropriate government service and expectations of government discrimination.

Our results have important implications for the study of racial inequality as well as minority political incorporation. First, the negative relationship between immigrant neighborhoods and government contacting supports theories of limited immigrant political incorporation. By contrast, our results indicate strong linkages between residents of predominantly African American neighborhoods and local government. Racial inequality remains a dominant feature of American society, but

these results paint an optimistic picture of the civic capacity of African American neighborhoods.

CONCEPTUALIZING DIRECT CONTACTS FOR PUBLIC GOODS

In a nationally representative survey conducted in 1965, Verba and Nie (1972:31) report that 20% of respondents had ever contacted local government "about some issue or problem." That figure rose to 34% by 1990 (Verba et al. 1995:55). Contacting government for services is a common feature of neighborhood civic activity, but few scholars have provided a detailed theoretical treatment, particularly in relation to more commonly researched political behaviors.

Like many political behaviors, contacting is an attempt to exert influence over the distribution of scarce resources. Principally, it involves an *expectation* of the contacted official to intercede on behalf of the claimant to alter the existing distribution of city services. The behavior itself is a form of civic participation, and can be seen as a component of political incorporation—essentially an individual or group's relationship to politics and their ability to obtain material or symbolic resources from the state (Hochschild et al. 2013).

Unlike most forms of political participation, contacts for city services represent a direct relationship between constituents and government. The individual controls the timing and content of request, as well as which official to solicit. Unlike voting or campaign activities—in which individuals only indirectly engage with the state, and have no expectation of immediate response to their behavior—contacting is a direct form of political behavior and carries an expectation that requests will be answered *specifically* and in the immediate future. Contacting is also far more targeted than voting, with each individual contact typically focusing on a single issue. The behavior is instrumental, though it can simultaneously be for both personal and public good. It requires no conflict between individuals or groups, but could be driven by a contentious relationship with government. The key relationship is between the contactor and the government.

Aars and Strømsnes (2007) suggest that contacting indicates some level of trust in public institutions, though we do not believe contacting requires *generalized* trust. Instead, we argue that contacting simply requires that contactors trust that public institutions will respond in a positive way to their requests. Our thinking is in line with Thomas's (1982) theory of "clientele participation," which suggests that contacting is driven by an entitlement to service. Individuals, groups, or neighborhoods that contact at high rates believe they are entitled to a certain set of services that government should provide. Contacting therefore hinges on a "social contract" between government and its constituents: Constituents are expected to actively make claims on the state, while the state is expected to respond fairly and promptly. Any breakdown in the system—an interest group with barriers to political incorporation, or the government failing to respond to requests—challenges the integrity of the democratic ideal.

Contacting is an individual act, but there is theoretical reason to believe that rates of contacting vary ecologically. Based on his study of civic participation in

Italy, Putnam (1993:101, italics in original) argues that particularized contacting "seems to depend less on *who* you are than on *where* you are." Sampson et al. (2005:711) similarly find an ecological concentration of collective civic events, refocusing civil society scholarship on collectivities "motivated by a particular issue to act together" in public space. Contacts for city services share elements of these forms of civic participation: the behavior is a *direct contact* of government requesting a *particular* public service.

Contacting is worth studying as a political act in its own right, but the behavior also has a direct link to material inequality. Basic service provision is squarely within the jurisdiction of most local governments. As such, "an important service that city government provides is responding to these…demands" for services such as trash pickup and park maintenance (Mladenka 1981:694). The rise of technocratic governance makes the linkage even stronger (Serra 1995). If neighborhoods with high levels of need for services do not compensate through higher-than-average levels of direct contacting, then public goods in these neighborhoods such as streets, sidewalks, and parks will suffer relative to those in other neighborhoods. Research in urban sociology suggests cues of public disorder—such as graffiti, broken streetlights, and trash on the street—may influence "migration patterns, investment by businesses, reputations of places, and thus overall neighborhood viability" (Sampson 2012:129). When requests for services do not align with need, disparities in contacting government for service can lead to the reproduction of urban inequality.

Our conceptualization of direct contacting also draws on the study of local political cultures. Almond and Verba (1989 [1963]) argue for the importance of studying political culture—the space connecting micro-level political attitudes with macro-level rates of behavior. They suggest rates of behavior stem from political learning, which "is not only cognitive in character, but also involves political feelings, expectations, and evaluations that result largely from political experiences" (p. 33). Taken in total, our conceptual discussion of direct contacting therefore suggests a general model of minority political incorporation driven by expectations and evaluations of neighborhood-level experiences with government service delivery.

We propose two sorts of expectations of government as mechanisms linking the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods to variation in the propensity of their residents to engage with government. The first concerns *expectations of discrimination*. When residents expect that their neighborhood will not receive its fair share of public goods, the propensity of those residents to contact local government may increase as they compensate for discriminatory neglect. The second is *expectations of government service*—that is, expectations about the quality and kinds of services that local governments could or should supply. If residents have limited expectations of the breadth and content of local goods provision, their propensity to request services may decrease.

We predict that these two expectations jointly drive the rate at which residents contact city government for service requests: When residents do not expect government to provide extensive city services, contacting rates will fall below average. When residents do expect the city to provide services, contacting rates will depend on the expectation that the city will be negligent in servicing certain neighborhoods due to discrimination. Where expectations of discrimination are high, contacting

rates will rise above average. Where these are low, we expect to see average rates of contacting. Table I provides a chart of our theoretical model of contacting, demonstrating how these types of expectations interact to form the hypotheses that we develop in the next section.

We do not include a corresponding hypothesis in the "low expectations of service, high expectations of discrimination" cell because our data cannot support an appropriate test. In the discussion, we note how future studies can leverage data from cities other than Boston to develop appropriate hypotheses and better assess our theory.

RACE, IMMIGRATION, AND CONTACTING FOR PUBLIC GOODS

The sociological literature on instrumental government contacts is sparse. The prevailing operationalization of civic participation in the literature has been involvement in social clubs or voluntary associations—often alongside traditional measures of voting (Baggetta 2009; Ellison and London 1992). Notably, only one sociological study examines racial variation in civic participation in the form of direct instrumental contacts. In Guterbock and London's (1983) comprehensive study of race and political participation, the authors find that only "distrustful" African Americans—those with low trust and high political efficacy—contact at rates higher than would be predicted by demographic characteristics alone. Yet blacks of other political orientations contact less than expected, and less than their white counterparts. However, as the authors admit (Guterbock and London 1983:442), their findings should be interpreted in their historical context: Their data were collected in 1967—perhaps the height of contentious black political activity in twentieth-century America—and their results may reflect the national political context of that era.

In the political science literature, the empirical relationship between race and contacts for public goods varies. Using administrative data, Jones et al. (1977) find African American neighborhoods in Detroit more likely to "complain" about environmental issues. Of course, these neighborhoods may have been afflicted by more severe environmental issues than comparable white neighborhoods. By contrast, Sharp (1980), in a three-city survey, finds individual African Americans less likely to contact government about police services, and more likely to contact a citizens

Table I. Two Expectations of Government as Theoretical Mechanisms of Contacting Behavior

	Low Expectation of Quality/Range of City Services	High Expectation of Quality/Range of City Services
Low Expectation of Government Discrimination	Below Average Rate of Contact (H_2)	Average Rate of Contact (H_3)
High Expectation of Government Discrimination	Below Average Rate of Contact	Above Average Rate of Contact (H_1)

group instead. Additional research finds mostly null associations between race and instrumental government contacting (Hirlinger 1992; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999). However, Coulter (1992) questions the existing use of survey methodology to capture contacting behavior, arguing that common survey prompts yield unreliable responses due to recall bias.

Based on our theoretical discussion of contacting behavior, we hypothesize that levels of direct contact with government reflect the level of service and welfare provision neighborhoods *expect* government to provide. African Americans have a long history of discrimination in American society, and a strong tradition of collective struggles for public goods. Importantly, the Civil Rights Movement featured community struggles for equal access to public goods, such as lunch counters, public buses, schools, and other public facilities (Morris 1984). It is possible for neighborhood-level demands for quality public services to be shaped by this history of discrimination in public institutions, especially with racial segregation as a defining feature of American cities (Massey and Denton 1993).

This legacy of racial conflict is as salient in Boston as anywhere, having been crystallized by the busing desegregation crisis in the 1970s, which contributed to a perception of the city as particularly unfriendly to blacks (Lukas 1985). It is conceivable that past experiences with discrimination (or even knowledge that such discrimination had occurred) cause *all* residents of predominantly black neighborhoods to expect the city government to neglect their neighborhoods; frequent requests for service may be a response to expectations of discriminatory neglect. Such a relationship—rooted in the expectations of government service provision—offers a strong theoretical reason to suggest African American neighborhoods will exhibit higher rates of contacting, relative to nonblack areas. Thus:

> H_1: Higher proportions of African Americans will be associated with higher rates of public goods requests, net of need and receipt of service, and controlling for other demographic variables.

Studies of immigrant communities provide little evidence that these communities would expect high levels of discrimination from the government, especially as compared to the native-born black community (Waters 1999). Indeed, while immigrants lack representation in formal electoral politics, research suggests public bureaucracies are responsive to their interests (Jones-Correa 2008; Marrow 2009). In fact, Marrow's (2009) fieldwork suggests that service bureaucracies are the leading edge through which immigrants are incorporated into the political community.

However, previous studies of *immigrant-initiated* interactions with service bureaucracies suggest immigrants are less likely to make claims on the government. Ku (2009) finds immigrants underrepresented in the uptake of Medicaid and food stamps, which the author attributes to social factors outside of eligibility requirements. Junn (1999) finds foreign-born individuals less likely to engage in "systems-directed" political behaviors, such as voting, campaigning, and direct contact with a government official. Maxwell's (2008, 2010) research on immigrants to Western European countries suggests some first-generation immigrants have lowered expectations of their host societies, affecting their attitudes toward political institutions.

These studies, together with our conceptual discussion of contacting behavior, lead us to predict a lower rate of direct contacting by neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. This is because immigrants do not expect high levels of government service, nor is there reason to expect that the city will neglect their neighborhood when distributing public goods. Thus:

H_2: Higher proportions of foreign-born residents will be associated with lower rates of public goods requests, net of need and receipt of service, and controlling for other demographic variables.

Finally, we consider the experiences of Hispanic and Asian communities in Boston. Today, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans represent the largest Latino ethnic groups in the city. Asians in Boston primarily descend from Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. These communities contain numerous native-born residents who (1) are fully accustomed to the American city-services regime and (2) may expect less discrimination from city government than black Bostonians.[4] On the first point, Hispanics first migrated to the Boston region in large numbers as labor recruits in the 1960s and 1970s, becoming "the mainstay of the remaining non-durable manufacturing sector in the Greater Boston region" by the 1990s (Bluestone and Stevenson 2000:36). The Vietnamese emigrated in large waves following immigration reform in 1965 and political turmoil in 1979. On the second point, these communities lack the same history of discrimination in Boston as black communities. As Bluestone and Stevenson (2000:30) argue, "Latinos and Asians have experienced an easier time integrating neighborhoods in the city of Boston" than their black counterparts. Consequently, we expect that higher proportions of native-born, nonblack minority groups should have little to no impact on neighborhood service requests. Thus:

H_3: Neither the proportion of Hispanics nor the proportion of Asian residents in a neighborhood will be associated with the rate of service requests, net of need and receipt of service, and controlling for other demographic variables (including the proportion of foreign-born residents).

Our unique data allow us to test these hypotheses in novel ways. To date, few studies of race and civic participation measure actual (as opposed to reported) rates of direct instrumental contacting. Existing research has also failed to control for *differential need for service* when modeling contact rates. As such, these studies typically confound recall bias and neighborhood-level material inequalities with differences in levels of political incorporation. In contrast, we not only control for need, but also analyze actual neighborhood-level service requests.

DATA AND METHODS

We use an administrative data set of city service requests from the City of Boston. Since November 2009, the City of Boston's Constituent Relationship Management System (CRM) has recorded all requests for basic city services, including all

[4] While Hispanic and Asian communities do contain a higher proportion of immigrants than do other ethnic groups, this correlation is not so high as to prevent the simultaneous testing of Hypotheses 2 and 3. See footnote 8 for more on the sensitivity of our models to the inclusion/exclusion of combinations of these three variables.

responsibilities of the Public Works, Transportation, Parks and Recreation, and Inspectional Services departments. Boston's system is similar to "311" systems in place in other cities, but includes its own designated phone number and a 24-hour call center. Each caller speaks directly with a city employee. A Spanish speaker is always available, and speakers of other languages are available during normal business hours. Additionally, requests can be made online through the city's Web site, as well as through a widely available smartphone application. In-person requests are recorded but incredibly rare. All calls regarding service made to any department in City Hall are transferred to the call center, thus making it the repository of the full universe of request data.

Our analytic strategy is to control for both need and receipt of service through our choice of dependent variables. For most of this article, we focus on requests for snowplows in order to control for possible variation in neighborhood-level need for services. Because snowstorms are entirely exogenous to urban politics and neighborhood demographics, they generate equal levels of objective need across the city. Other service request types are limited by the endogeneity of need for services to urban processes. Requests for rodent control, for example, are endogenous to the prevalence of rodents; rodents are most common in Downtown, neighborhoods inhabited by college students, and the North End, a densely populated neighborhood filled with restaurants (and overflowing trash containers). Tree maintenance requests after a storm are, similarly, endogenous to the age, size, and number of trees in a given neighborhood. Requests for streetlight repairs are endogenous to the type of light used (mercury vapor, sodium, or LED) and date of most recent replacement, both of which are unevenly distributed throughout the city. Requests for bulk item pickup are endogenous to socioeconomic status and consumption patterns. These problems are spread unevenly across the city, presenting different baselines for neighborhood-level service needs. After a snowstorm, however, every neighborhood in the city has need for snow removal.

To further control for possible variation in initial need for the service, we consider a version of the model that only includes snowplow requests made during snowstorms, when the entire city is covered by at least 6 inches of snow. We also consider versions of the dependent variable that include only snowplow requests from "nonemergency" routes and dead-ends—both of which we know are left unplowed during official "storm emergencies." During snowstorms, Boston's Public Works Department divides the city into quadrants and assembles a team of city-owned plows and independent contractors.[5] Each plow driver is instructed to plow City-designated "emergency routes" until asphalt is visible, followed by secondary streets, and last, alleys and side streets. Dead-ends and public alleys do not systematically receive service during storms because special equipment is required to plow narrow spaces. This is a critical feature of plow operations that is directly relevant for our analysis: Residents living on dead-ends in Boston are systematically underserved on the day of a snowstorm due to the city's geography and plow operations. Any variation in the dead-end variable, then, comes either from variation in the

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[5] Only private companies with snowplow fleets are contracted. The city hands out assignments, so plow drivers are not necessarily assigned to their own neighborhood. In fact, private snowplow contractors are not necessarily Boston residents.

propensity to request services or statistical noise, because receipt of service is nonexistent in the dead-ends of all tracts during storm emergencies.

We therefore focus our analysis on four different outcome variables: (1) Total snowplow requests for the winter; (2) Requests during storm emergencies;[6] (3) Requests during storm emergencies from nonemergency streets; and (4) Requests during storm emergencies from dead-ends and alleys. We consequently fit four negative binomial regressions predicting counts of snowplow requests at the neighborhood level.[7] We use Hubert-White robust standard errors in all models.

Our analytic strategy leverages weather conditions and components of service operations—namely, snowstorms and snowplow operations—to produce a succession of tests in pursuit of a pure "demand" model of service requests, net of variation in need for services. We have strong reasons to believe overt discrimination against neighborhoods is not operating in our data,[8] and so we attribute variation in snowplow requests to each neighborhood's level of political incorporation.

Our data and analysis depart from the survey techniques of previous studies. First, our data contain the full universe of actual behaviors, as compared to surveys that capture a sample of respondent recollections. However, an important limitation is that our data do not contain individual-level demographic information. Fortunately, we have strong theoretical reasons to believe civic engagement and civic capacity cluster at the neighborhood level (Putnam 1993; Sampson et al. 2005). As such, we remain agnostic about the demographic characteristics of "contactors" themselves. In the discussion of our hypotheses, we consider mechanisms by which neighborhood demographics might affect the propensity of *any* resident to contact the city government, alongside more commonly studied individual factors.

Dependent Variables

Our primary models include requests for snowplows during winter 2010–2011. In the raw CRM data, each request includes a modest description of the case circumstances, allowing us to remove any nonresident-generated requests (e.g., calls from a police officer, or local shop owner concerned about parking). Between December 20, 2010 and March 9, 2011, 9,918 snowplow requests were recorded. We coded each case description, providing a data set of 8,978 resident-generated snowplow requests. Within this data set, 8.7% of requests were submitted online, 3.2% via smartphone application, and the remaining 88.1% were called in through the 24-hour hotline.

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[6] Snowfall data were retrieved from the National Weather Service. Data are recorded at Logan Airport, which is located to the extreme east of the city. Snowstorms are days in which more than 6 inches of snow fell, as recorded at Logan Airport. We confirmed the specific dates of storms with the Department of Public Works.

[7] Because some tracts have very few dead-ends, we considered a zero-inflated negative binomial model for the count of requests from dead-ends and alleys. However, the estimated coefficients did not differ appreciably.

[8] One of the article's authors was employed by the City of Boston for 7 months to analyze service request data. The author attended biweekly Basic City Service Cabinet meetings in which service departments reviewed performance statistics, and the author observed each department's desire to respond quickly and efficiently to all requests, regardless of neighborhood.

We geo-coded each service request to its corresponding Census tract. Within our snowplow request data set, only 8,915 cases included X/Y coordinates. We geo-coded 25 additional cases listed without X/Y coordinates, but with identifiable addresses in the case's description. Only 0.4% of relevant cases were unable to be geo-coded, including nine requests falling outside the city's boundaries. The analysis is therefore based on a data set of 8,931 resident-generated snowplow requests, matched to Boston's 156 Census tracts.

Perhaps snowplow requests represent an idiosyncratic contact for public goods. As a check for the generalizability of our findings, we model requests for 22 other services, such as streetlight outages and sidewalk repairs.[9] We use 1 full year of data (March 1, 2010 to April 30, 2011), which includes 60,710 service requests. We do not code the request descriptions. Unlike snow removal, the initial distribution of need for these other services is likely endogenous to the city's unique geography and neighborhood-level demographics. We are therefore more confident in our models for snowplow requests, but use this model to show the generalizability of our findings.

The City of Boston also keeps data that allow us to calculate how long it takes for city departments to fulfill service requests. We use this data to construct an "average time to complete requests" variable. We drop any request that had not been completed when we downloaded the data from the City of Boston's server, which left us with 57,868 requests geo-coded and matched to Census tracts.[10] For each request, we calculated the "time-to-complete," rounded to the nearest minute. We then collapsed the mean time-to-complete by tract, providing an average time to complete for the 22 service types (rounded to the nearest minute), for each tract. We predict tract-level time-to-complete service requests in a separate model. Our concern here is to test if city departments do, for example, fix potholes as quickly in African American neighborhoods as they do in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Independent Variables

We use demographic variables from the 2005–2009 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. We include covariates at the tract level for percent African American, percent Hispanic, percent Asian, and percent foreign born. We include standard controls for total tract population, median household income, median age, percent with a college degree or higher, the unemployment rate, and percent living in the same neighborhood the previous year. We also control for percent currently enrolled in college, because college students inhabit significant portions of

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[9] The services include Graffiti Removal, Illegal Dumping, Improper Storage of Trash (Barrels), Maintenance – Homeowner, Maintenance Complaint – Residential, Missed Trash/Recycling/Yard Waste/Bulk Item, Missing Sign, New Sign, Crosswalk or Pavement Marking, Parking Enforcement, Pick Up Dead Animal, Request for Pothole Repair, Request for Recycling Cart, Requests for Street Cleaning, Schedule a Bulk Item Pickup, Sidewalk Repair, Sidewalk Repair (Make Safe), Sign Repair, Streetlight Knock Downs, Streetlight Outages, Traffic Signal Repair, Trash on Vacant Lot, and Tree Maintenance Requests.

[10] We downloaded the data on May 11, 2011. Departments' response to requests are therefore current only up to that date; any request made in this time period that was completed after May 11, 2011 did not have a "Closed Date" in our data.

Boston neighborhoods. We account for percent employed by government to control for preferential treatment. We also include three controls specific to modeling snow-plow requests: percent of workers commuting to work by automobile (as a control for the relative "nuisance" of unplowed streets) and two street-length controls (measured in meters): total street length and length of dead-ends (because demand for plows should be associated with the length of street requiring plow service).

The literature on political behavior broadly points to two additional variables that may account for racial variation in service request behavior. First, we provide an additional control for percent homeowners as an indicator of neighborhood stake-holding (Sharp 1984). We also include a variable for percent receiving public assistance to account for policy feedback effects—that is, how policies like welfare affect political activity (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Soss 2000).

To check for alternative explanations of our findings with respect to neighborhood racial composition, we also include seven social process variables from the Boston Neighborhood Survey (BNS) (Azrael et al. 2009). Data were collected in 2010 from a representative phone survey of 1,718 Boston adults. Each variable we investigate is based on a 5-point Likert scale, which we convert to a tract-level mean score in our analysis. We include these variables to test if our race coefficients retain statistical significance after controlling for the self-reported civic capacity of neighborhoods.

The first concern that we address with BNS data is neighborhood interactions with police. Calling the state for assistance may become habitual due to the preponderance of violence in minority neighborhoods and persistent policing (Wacquant 2001). We capture this dynamic with a survey question asking respondents if they have had any contact with the police in the past 12 months. Neighborhoods vary in their institutional infrastructure, and involvement with community-based organizations may impact neighborhood political incorporation (LeRoux 2007). We therefore include variables on knowledge of, and attendance at, community meetings or organizations.

Finally, we include potential confounders related to neighborhood social organization: perceived neighbor trustworthiness and the perceived capacity of residents to work together to solve community problems. Low trust in neighbors and low capacity to self-govern may increase the likelihood of seeking assistance from formal political institutions (Shingles 1981; Simpson, McGrimmon, and Irwin 2007). We measure capacity to work together with a particularly relevant survey question: It presents respondents with the hypothetical closing of a local fire station (due to municipal budget cuts), and asks how likely they would be to organize with their neighbors to keep it open. These questions capture the social organization of urban neighborhoods, and represent alternative mechanisms explaining racial variation in service requests.

Spatial Dependence

Spatial autocorrelation is a concern in models using geographic areas as units of analysis, as variables of interest may be systematically related to geographic location. In each of our models, we include a spatial lag variable to account for spatial

autocorrelation. Spatial lag covariates account for both (1) spatially correlated omitted covariates and (2) spatial "spillover," in which events in one place affect the existence of events in an adjacent place. For our purposes, we are most concerned with spatially correlated errors resulting from city geography and aspects of the built environment. We present models using spatial lag covariates based on Rook contiguity matrices. We borrow the technique from previous research accounting for spatial autocorrelation in negative binomial models (Baller et al. 2001).

RESULTS

We have selected four of our models for display in Table II. As the models move from left (Model I) to right (Model IV), we are more confident that "receipt

Table II. Negative Binomial Regressions of Count of Snowplow Requests on Tract-level Demographics, Winter 2010–2011

	(I) Total Requests	(II) During Storm Emergencies	(III) During Storms From Nonemergency Routes	(IV) During Storms From Dead-Ends
% Black	1.78***	1.51***	1.65***	2.60***
	(0.32)	(0.33)	(0.34)	(0.64)
% Hispanic	0.72	0.39	0.37	1.64
	(0.61)	(0.68)	(0.69)	(1.04)
% Asian	0.30	-0.01	0.11	3.30*
	(0.70)	(0.81)	(0.83)	(1.46)
% Foreign Born	–1.73*	–2.25**	–2.22*	–2.79*
	(0.71)	(0.84)	(0.87)	(1.36)
Median Income	–0.03	–0.01	–0.02	0.01
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.10)
Median Age	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)
% Owner-Occupied Housing	1.25*	1.14	1.23	0.93
	(0.59)	(0.67)	(0.68)	(1.08)
% on Public Assistance	–3.28**	–4.34**	–4.87**	–4.02
	(1.22)	(1.44)	(1.53)	(2.40)
Unemployment Rate	–1.42	–1.56	–1.33	–3.43
	(1.12)	(1.34)	(1.36)	(2.14)
% College Students	–1.12	–1.15	–1.24	–3.55*
	(0.61)	(0.69)	(0.78)	(1.58)
% Higher Degree	0.38	–0.75	–0.63	–0.04
	(0.52)	(0.63)	(0.65)	(0.99)
% Commute via Auto	–0.14	0.11	0.16	0.55
	(0.44)	(0.49)	(0.50)	(0.83)
% Tenure 1 Yr +	0.15	0.23	0.12	0.46
	(0.71)	(0.81)	(0.84)	(1.52)
% City Employee	–1.18	–2.52	–2.68	–1.91
	(1.23)	(1.64)	(1.68)	(2.34)
Ln(alpha)	–1.34***	–1.06***	–1.00***	–0.07
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)
N (tracts)	156	156	156	151
Pseudo R-sq	0.101	0.105	0.105	0.085

Notes: Coefficients not displayed: Spatial lags, Tract Population, Street Length, Dead-End Length, Constant
Income measured in $10,000.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

of service" is evenly distributed across tracts, independent of demographic characteristics. Model IV therefore represents the purest "propensity to contact government" model. As discussed, this model predicts snowplow requests from dead-ends during storms, meaning that it predicts service requests coming from streets that we know are in need of service (due to the storm) but have not received plow service (due to city guidelines for snow removal). Although we favor Model IV, we also value consistency across the models. As Table II reveals, the coefficients across models are fairly robust in terms of direction and magnitude, with a few exceptions.

The most notable finding here is the coefficient associated with *percent African American,* which is large and highly significant across each of our models. This is in contrast to the coefficient for *percent foreign born*, whose large negative coefficient is also significant across models. The results for *percent Hispanic* and *percent Asian American* are more ambiguous. The coefficient for *percent Hispanic* is consistently positive, ranging from a quarter to a half of the size as the *percent African American* coefficient. Nonetheless, it never reaches significance. The *percent Asian American* coefficient is close to zero in all models except Model IV, where it is large and significant. Although Model IV is in many ways our preferred model, we view this estimate with skepticism.[11]

The only other variable that shows a consistent story across models is *percent on public assistance*. The coefficient here is estimated to be negative and two to three times as large in magnitude as the *percent African American* coefficient. The coefficients for *percent currently in college, percent unemployed,* and *percent employed by the city* are consistently negative, yet only *percent college students* ever reaches statistical significance. The coefficients of *percent with a college degree, percent with tract tenure over 1 year,* and *percent commute to work by automobile* are each estimated to be close to zero, and none ever reaches significance.

Incident rate ratios (IRRs) for each of these variables can be obtained by exponentiation of the above coefficients. For example, the IRR associated with the *percent African American* coefficient from Model I is 5.92, which means that (holding all else constant) the model predicts an entirely African American tract to generate nearly six times as many snowplow requests as a tract without any African Americans. While neither of these extremes exists in Boston, the IRR nonetheless shows

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[11] We believe that the large coefficient for *percent Asian American* estimated in the dead-ends model is an artifact of this particular model. The bivariate correlation between these variables is weakly negative (–0.17), and analysis of the bivariate scatterplot between them does not suggest that this is due to any outliers or high-leverage cases.

The presence of large numbers of immigrants in the densest Asian American community (Boston's Chinatown) may influence our estimation of the coefficient for *percent Asian American*. This is a general concern with our models, due to the large number of immigrants within some parts of the Hispanic and Asian communities. To address possible concerns over multicollinearity, we estimate Models I–IV in Table II under six different specifications. The first three specifications involve omitting either *foreign born*, *percent Hispanic*, or *percent Asian*. The final three specifications involve including only one of these three. This process leaves us with 24 estimates of the coefficient for *percent black* and 12 estimates each for *percent Asian, percent Hispanic,* and *percent foreign born*.

We find that the coefficient for *percent black* attains significance in all 24 of these estimates, while *percent Hispanic* and *percent Asian* attain significance in none. *Percent foreign born* attains significance in 9/12 of these estimates. In the three models where *foreign born* fails to attain significance, the estimate nonetheless remains large and negative. These results allay concerns that multicollinearity undermines the strong support found for our hypotheses in the models already presented.

that our models have estimated coefficients for these demographic variables that are not only statistically significant, but of social significance as well.

Check for Generalizability of Findings Across Services

It is possible that residents of African American neighborhoods are idiosyncratically concerned with plow service, and our findings reflect something about neighborhood racial composition and specific concerns about snow. In Table III we display results from a single negative binomial regression predicting 22 additional types of service requests. In this model we cannot control for the endogeneity of need and receipt of services to city geography and demographics, and we do not code the data to include only resident-generated requests. Accordingly, we are more confident in our results predicting snowplow requests. Nonetheless, we consider the resemblance of our findings in the "total requests" model to those of the "snowplow requests" model to be strong evidence that our findings are not unique to snow removal, but are indicative of the propensity for neighborhoods to engage with city government.

As Table III shows, the results mostly align with our findings pertaining to snowplow requests, particularly with respect to the coefficient for *percent African American*. The estimated coefficient for *percent foreign born* is again large and negative, but due to the large standard error this estimate does not achieve significance.

Testing for Alternative Mechanisms

Do frequent requests for service simply reflect government neglect of certain tracts? If local government systematically responds more slowly to service requests from predominantly African American neighborhoods, our positive coefficients in Table II and Table III may be the product of inadequate service delivery, not

Table III. Negative Binomial Regression of 22 Endogenous Service Requests, March 1, 2010–April 30, 2011

	(I) Endogenous Requests
% Black	0.392*
	(0.163)
% Hispanic	−0.384
	(0.269)
% Asian	−0.161
	(0.390)
% Foreign Born	−0.473
	(0.362)
Ln(alpha)	−2.232***
	(0.198)
N (tracts)	156
Pseudo R-sq	0.08

Notes: Coefficients not displayed: Median Income, Median Age, Percent Owner Occupied, Percent Receiving Public Assistance, Unemployment Rate, Percent Enrolled in College, Percent With Higher Degree, Percent Employed by City Government, Percent Living in Neighborhood Previous Year, Spatial Lags, Tract Population, Constant.
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

heightened political incorporation. In Table IV, we display results from an ordinary least squares regression predicting the average time to fulfill service requests by neighborhood. None of our coefficients included in Table II reach statistical significance in this model. These findings are entirely consistent with the first author's observation (see footnote 5) that services in Boston are provided by an impartial and technocratic bureaucracy.

Finally, other social processes may affect the relationship between neighborhood racial composition and requests for public goods. In Table V, we display results from four negative binomial regressions including the demographic variables listed above, plus self-reported measures of neighborhood-level civic activity as independent variables. Consistent with our hypotheses and previous results, the coefficients for *percent African American* and *percent foreign born* remain large and statistically significant. Similar to our results in Table II, the coefficient for *percent on public assistance* is negative and statistically significant. The results for *percent Hispanic* and *percent Asian* are again ambiguous, but the coefficients are statistically

Table IV. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Average "Time-to-Close" in Minutes for 22 Endogenous Service Requests, March 1, 2010–April 30, 2011

	(I) Time-to-Close
% Black	−5,662.0
	(2,564.4)
% Hispanic	5,142.2
	(5,297.7)
% Asian	69.19
	(6,491.6)
% Foreign Born	−8,539.0
	(6,840.5)
% Owner-Occupied Housing	−2,514.9
	(5,323.0)
% on Public Assistance	−1,5071.7
	(13,865.7)
Unemployment Rate	1,753.2
	(10,204.1)
% College Students	7,820.0
	(5,338.7)
% Higher Degree	307.1
	(4,528.9)
% Tenure 1 Yr +	12,363.9
	(7,170.8)
% City Employees	−15,655.6
	(11,271.0)
Population	−0.144
	(0.289)
Median Income	0.007
	(0.067)
Median Age	−43.05
	(137.9)
Constant	10,505.4
	(6,788.8)
N	156
R-sq	0.1498

Notes: Income measured in $10,000.
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table V.   Negative Binomial Regression of Count of Snowplow Requests on Tract-Level Demographics and Social Processes Variables, Winter 2010–2011

	(I) Total Requests	(II) During Storm Emergencies	(III) During Storms From Nonemergency Routes	(IV) During Storms From Dead-Ends
% Black	1.915***	1.633***	1.790***	2.993***
	(0.29)	(0.34)	(0.35)	(0.67)
% Hispanic	1.207	0.760	0.704	2.466*
	(0.62)	(0.72)	(0.74)	(1.14)
% Asian	0.629	0.391	0.490	4.448**
	(0.65)	(0.81)	(0.83)	(1.40)
% Foreign Born	–2.220**	–2.674**	–2.633**	–3.684**
	(0.68)	(0.82)	(0.85)	(1.39)
Informed About Activities and Organizations	0.385*	0.485*	0.559*	0.073
	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.24)	(0.37)
Contact With Police in Last 12 Months	0.615*	0.744**	0.771**	1.603**
	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.49)
Attended Community Meeting	–0.039	0.328	0.324	–0.037
	(0.32)	(0.36)	(0.38)	(0.56)
Visited Community Resource	0.380	0.333	0.329	0.311
	(0.30)	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.56)
Neighbors Are Trustworthy	–0.053	–0.009	–0.052	–0.246
	(0.16)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.33)
Neighbors Meet and Work on Community Problems	0.0375	–0.0586	–0.111	–0.138
	(0.18)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.40)
Neighbors Would Work to Keep Fire Service	0.124	0.151	0.163	0.445
	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.29)
% on Public Assistance	–3.925**	–4.462**	–4.994***	–3.975
	(1.24)	(1.38)	(1.44)	(2.52)
Ln(alpha)	–1.419***	–1.134***	–1.068***	–0.154
	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.16)
N (tracts)	154	154	154	150
Pseudo R-sq	0.107	0.111	0.112	0.096

Notes: Coefficients not displayed: Median Income, Median Age, Percent Owner-Occupied Housing, Unemployment Rate, Spatial Lags, Tract Population, Street Length, Dead-End Length, Constant.
$*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001$.

significant only in Model IV. As in Table II, we value consistency across models over any one model.

   Two of our civic activity variables show statistically significant relationships with public service requests, when controlling for other covariates. First, contact with police is positively associated with government contacting. The coefficient is large and statistically significant across all models. Second, neighborhoods with greater knowledge of local activities and organizations are more likely to contact local government for public services. The remaining civic activity variables are not associated with government contacting.

DISCUSSION

   The preceding analysis links the racial and ethnic composition of urban neighborhoods to variation in requests for city services. Consistent with H_1, we find requests for basic city services, net of objective need, increase alongside the

proportion of African American residents. The proportion of foreign-born residents, however, is associated with a decreased propensity to request services, as proposed in H_2. The percentage of Hispanics and Asians is not associated with variation in service requests, consistent with H_3. We also find somewhat consistent evidence for three additional predictors of service requests. First, higher proportions of residents receiving public assistance are associated with lower rates of contacting, as predicted by policy feedback scholars (Bruch et al. 2010; Soss 2000). Second, rates of service requests increase alongside increased interaction with police. Finally, neighborhoods in which residents are more informed about community activities and organizations request services at higher rates. Importantly, our findings on race are noticeably stable, even after controlling for these alternative mechanisms, as well as others related to trust, collective action, and the organizational infrastructure of urban neighborhoods.

Our empirical findings are consistent with a theoretical model of minority political incorporation driven by expectations of government service delivery. The results suggest two sorts of expectations of government—expectations of discrimination and expectations of appropriate government service provision—as mechanisms linking the racial and ethnic composition of urban neighborhoods to variation in the propensity to engage with government.

African American communities in Boston have a long and well-known history of collective struggles for public goods. These struggles may therefore give rise to a collective cynicism regarding the treatment of historically black neighborhoods by local government. When coupled with residents' high expectations for the quality of goods that the government *should* provide, we theorize that these expectations increase residents' propensity to request public goods from local government. These expectations hold even for nonblack residents of black neighborhoods: If the *place* has been historically discriminated against, residents of all races might respond accordingly. For the residents of predominantly immigrant neighborhoods, lowered expectations of government discrimination and limited expectations of the quality of city services theoretically reduce the propensity to request public goods. Finally, native-born residents of Hispanic and Asian neighborhoods have the same expectations of the quality of city services as do residents of black neighborhoods, but have less reason to expect discriminatory neglect by city government.

Accordingly, the empirical relationship between race and requests for city services may look different in contexts other than Boston—cities with distinct ethnoracial histories, like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. In cities where municipal discrimination is still prevalent, predominantly African American neighborhoods may use alternative political behaviors—such as contentious collective action—to obtain their fair share of public goods. In cities with histories of progressive race relations, residents of African American neighborhoods may not expect discrimination, and therefore request services on par with nonblack neighborhoods. In some cities, historical contestations over public goods affected racial groups other than African Americans, such as Hispanics or Asians. Accordingly, expectations of discrimination in Hispanic or Asian neighborhoods may be higher in such cities, and therefore their residents would exhibit a greater propensity to request public goods. Finally, in cities where mass mobilization efforts target the

political incorporation of immigrants by successfully raising expectations of local service delivery, immigrants may contact local government at higher rates than we observed in Boston. In these different urban contexts, our proposed mechanisms would generate different patterns of contacting across ethnic communities.

Additional data could expand our general theoretical model. First, we do not directly measure expectations in our models, though the act of contacting theoretically requires expectations—residents wouldn't contact the city if they didn't expect the city to respond. Additional survey evidence can directly explore the relative impact of expectations across racial and immigrant groups. Second, the City of Boston does not provide the opportunity to test "low expectations of service, high expectations of discrimination" in our general theoretical model. Immigrant groups that expect discrimination from the city would fit this category. For example, Muslim immigrants in post–9/11 American cities may have limited expectations of basic service delivery, but also have heightened expectations of discrimination. Alternate research sites that include similar groups—such as Muslim immigrants in Detroit, or Mexican immigrants in some parts of the Southwest—would allow for the testing of further implications of our expectations-based theory.

Additional data would also allow us to distinguish between our expectations-based theory and other possible mechanisms. Political knowledge may account for the positive association between African American neighborhoods and direct contact with government (Stoll 2001). Alternatively, greater contact with government may result from feelings of racial empowerment in black neighborhoods (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). However, most theories attribute empowerment to local electoral representation, and gerrymandering has created electoral districts in Boston that do not map onto neighborhoods. The predominantly black area of Mattapan, for example, is split between City Council Districts 4 and 5—represented, at the time of this study, by an Italian American and an African American, respectively. In addition to nine city council districts, Boston residents also elect four at-large city councilors: at the time of this study, two were white men, one was a Latino man, and one was an African American woman. As a result, descriptive representation does not precisely correspond with neighborhood ethnic composition, because electoral districts encompass diverse neighborhoods.

Language barriers, perceived or real, may explain underrepresentation of first-generation immigrant neighborhoods—despite the presence of translators in Boston's CRM call center. Yet perceived language barriers are compatible with our "expectations of service" mechanism: the failure to contact the city still derives from the expectation that the city does not provide a certain service—though in this case the service is a linguistic one, provided by the multilingual employees of the call center. Documentation and citizenship status could also explain the hesitance of some immigrants to engage directly with local government. Future studies using comparative or survey research designs might tease out these alternative mechanisms.

While our results are consistent with an expectations-based theory, we cannot rule out two alternative explanations. Previous research links organizational density to some forms of political participation, and the density of local ethnic organizations may drive rates of contacting for services (Sampson et al. 2005). Another alternative theory links histories of neighborhood-level ethnic mobilization with

government contacting. We do not present data bearing on either of these theories, and so our results cannot distinguish between these alternative explanations and the one proposed in this article. Although our results are consistent with our theory of expectations, that theory is only one of many that can explain the same results.[12]

Finally, future studies can also expand the study of service requests beyond the ecological level. While our ecological data allow us to draw conclusions about neighborhood-level political and material inequality, we would need multilevel panel data to estimate the relative influence of individual and neighborhood-level factors through use of hierarchical linear modeling or cross-level interactions. When interpreting our results, readers should be aware that each model's coefficients reflect both individual and neighborhood-level influences. This is an important limitation of our analysis that can be addressed with additional data.

Nevertheless, the data and empirical analysis presented in this article are consistent with our theoretical understanding of minority political incorporation. Having established an empirical relationship between race, immigration, and neighborhood-level service requests in Boston, future research should continue the empirical and theoretical work necessary to better understand this consequential social phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Unlike other political behaviors or forms of civic engagement—participation in a voluntary association, mobilization into a social movement, attendance at a collective action event, or even voting—the propensity to contact government for basic services *directly* translates into neighborhood-level service provision and resource allocation under a technocratic service regime. Underengagement with local government means underprovision of services. As such, a diminished propensity to engage with government reduces not only the political voice of neighborhoods, but also the ability to affect the distribution of city resources and the quality of a neighborhood's public goods.

Our findings have two implications for scholars of political sociology and inequality. First, we provide strong evidence of racial variation in neighborhood political incorporation. While we illustrate a political disconnect between neighborhoods with high concentrations of foreign-born residents, we show a robust propensity for African American neighborhoods to make claims on local government for service, net of objective need. Racial inequality persists in multiple domains—including political arenas—but this finding adds an important dimension to how we should view the political incorporation of contemporary black neighborhoods. African Americans' relationship to the state is clearly changing, evidenced by increasing voter turnout in nearly every presidential election since the passage of the Voting Rights Act (Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009). Our finding with respect to black neighborhoods in Boston adds additional context to this research, presenting a guardedly optimistic view of contemporary African American political participation.

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[12] We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these alternative explanations and helping us articulate our theoretical contribution.

Second, by virtue of the political act in question, there is a direct link between neighborhood political participation and unequal service provision. Insofar as scarce resources are bureaucratically distributed, racial disparities in requests for services fundamentally alter public goods provision. Our findings on the underrepresentation of immigrant neighborhoods in direct government contacting suggests their incomplete political incorporation—a form of political inequality. At the same time, this underrepresentation leads to the underprovision of public goods to these neighborhoods—a form of material inequality. Future research in political sociology should consider contacts for service alongside more traditional political behaviors, as contacting behavior is one of the few instances where politics and material inequality correspond directly. We hope that future researchers further the study of this political behavior through use of other methods, multilevel data, or by examining the relationship between race and political incorporation in other cities, regions, and contexts.

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