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Research Statement

My research interests include political behavior, American public policy, racial and ethnic politics, political geography, and urban politics and policy. In particular, my work focuses on the causes and consequence of electoral and policy polarization in American politics.

Race, Metropolitan Political Geography, and Polarized Policy

Growing up in racially and politically polarized Milwaukee, WI helped spur my interest in how racial geography shapes political outcomes. This passion has guided my dissertation (and future book project), “Divided Regions: Race, Political Segregation, and the Polarization of Metropolitan America,” which explores the causes and consequences of metropolitan political polarization. Since the 1980s, the American federal government has devolved a wide array of crucial policy decisions to the state and local levels. With a decrease in federal aid and an increase in the number of tools available to lower tiers of government, scholars of American politics have suggested that cooperation among metropolitan municipalities could help address critical local political and policy challenges. Metropolitan political polarization, however, is a serious obstacle to these partnerships and an issue that remains poorly understood. Defining metropolitan polarization as political segregation, I identify three potential causes: race (including both black and Hispanic demographic variables), income inequality, and institutional fragmentation. I then explore the political and policy consequences of these metropolitan variations, using quantitative and qualitative outcome metrics from original data sources that include municipal and legislative district political extremism as well as policy-making on mass transportation and affordable housing.

I discover that, at the metropolitan level, racial demographics—particularly whether the region has a high concentration of blacks—almost exclusively explain variations in political polarization, with more black metropolises exhibiting greater polarization. These divisions, in turn, have a potent effect on local government policy: more polarized regions exhibit more politically extreme jurisdictions and more fragmented policy outcomes. These findings have a disturbing implication: those regions with concentrated pockets of black poverty—places most in need of metropolitan cooperation in the contemporary, heavily localized political climate—are the least able to forge partnerships around shared local policy goals. In addition to the book project, a paper that includes material from several of my dissertation chapters, “Divided Regions: Race, Polarized Voting, and Policy Fragmentation in Metropolitan America,” is presently under review at a peer-reviewed journal.

A separate working paper “Public Opinion on Local Government Spending: The Roles of Racial Context and Current Spending Levels” also explores how racial environments foment political divisions surrounding local issues, like urban aid and mass transportation. I investigate how racial context, along with local government spending levels, shapes support for urban expenditures. While previous research suggests a negative relationship between metropolitan diversity and support for local spending, these studies do not differentiate between black and Latino environments or take into account prior expenditures. Using geocoded data from the 2004 and 2006 General Social Survey, the 2000 Decennial Census, and the 2002 Census of Governments, this paper evaluates how the presence of Latinos and blacks in respondents’ neighborhoods and metropolitan spending
levels affect support for expenditures on an array of local government spending items. My preliminary findings suggest that the percentage of a community that is Latino and the percentage black are both positively linked with support for greater local government spending, with the strength of the effect contingent upon the policy. With the racial analysis for this paper complete, I am presently collecting government spending data from the U.S. Census.

Facts in Politics

My interest in the political consequences of public polarization helped inform a second set of research projects (co-authored with Jennifer Hochschild): how citizen use of factual information shapes the ability of democratically-elected officials to come together on difficult policy questions. A book manuscript and a draft article both explore this question.

The book manuscript, *Facts in Politics*, is presently in preparation for the University of Oklahoma Press. It investigates the implications of two uses (or misuses) of factual information for democratic governance. First, we explore instances in which citizens fail to apply correct information when forging their political preferences. Second, we examine moments when individuals actively use misinformation in shaping their views. We reveal through a series of case studies that while the first poses some challenges to the democratic process, the second proves damaging to democratic governance.

Our working paper “Politicians’ Provision of Factual Knowledge to Americans” explores the role of facts in politics from a slightly different angle: we examine whether politicians care about creating or maintaining a knowledgeable citizenry. Using members of Congress' constituent newsletters and the most visible speeches from presidential nominees and presidents, we assess how much and when elected officials convey factual information to constituents. We show that factual information about the society or polity does not rank high among elected officials’ communication priorities. We are presently expanding our congressional sample from 2004 and 2006 congressmen to include representatives from 2008 and 2010.

Public Opinion and Political Geography

In the realms of public opinion and political geography, I have also published scholarship with Shauna Shames and Didi Kuo exploring the role of religion in shaping preferences for same-sex marriage. This book chapter, “Culture War? A Closer Look at the Role of Religion, Denomination, and Religiosity in U.S. Public Opinion on Multiple Sexualities,” uses both standard individual-level data and geographic information about the passage of same-sex marriage legislation. We find that more religiosity corresponds with greater opposition to same-sex marriage, and, at the state level, a greater likelihood of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

Future Research: Changing Racial Demographics and The Spatial Distribution of Local Government Policy

My future research agenda continues my interests in political geography, racial and ethnic politics, public policy, and the political consequences of opinion polarization by quantitatively exploring how changing racial demographics and the constrained American
fiscal environment shape where major state and local government initiatives are spatially located. While most previous studies of local policy have been aspatial, I plan to use Geographic Information Systems methods to describe the spatial allocation of salient local policies like Tax Increment Financing districts (tax incentives used to encourage major commercial developments), transportation initiatives, and public housing projects in major metropolitan areas. Using publicly available data from local planning organizations, state government agencies, and voter files, this line of scholarship will answer a series of questions about the connections between race, political participation, and the allocation of scarce local government resources: Do politicians respond to changing demographics by targeting particular minority groups when placing salient local initiatives?; Does minority political participation (i.e., higher turnout rates, voting as a unified bloc) affect the likelihood of receiving local development dollars?; Do politicians gain political support by targeting groups with local policy initiatives?; and; How are the answers to all of the above questions conditioned by an uncertain state and local fiscal climate?