




# Race, Place, and Descriptive Representation: What Shapes Trust Toward Local Government?

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# Race, Place, and Descriptive Representation: What Shapes Trust Toward Local Government?

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## ABSTRACT

The question of how descriptive representation might affect political behaviour and attitudes is important when considering the role political attitudes play in facilitating a functioning democracy. What role, if any, does co-racial descriptive representation play in the relationship between citizens and local government? What factors underlie attitudes toward local government, generally? Employing a unique set of survey data collected across several dozen cities combined with city-level contextual data, the analysis offers a comprehensive picture of trust toward local governments. Overall, the findings support the hypothesis that descriptive representation has a positive effect on feelings of trust in local government. However, these effects are limited to mayoral representation. Increased levels of descriptive representation in less-visible city councils do not have the same effect.

## KEYWORDS

Race; representation; local politics

## Introduction

The way citizens orient themselves toward their government is important when considering the role political attitudes and behaviour play in determining systemic stability (Gilliam, 1996). Some suggest citizen trust in and support for representative institutions is related to citizen compliance (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001). If citizens do not trust their government, they are less likely to sacrifice for the common good, making the political benefit of institutional trust important (Hetherington, 1998). Trust also plays an important role in facilitating political participation, further illustrating its role as key for a functional democratic society (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Verba & Nie, 1972).

The role of co-racial descriptive representation when it comes to facilitating attitudes like political trust is often debated. Some scholars remain skeptical of the merits of descriptive representation relative to other forms of representation (Pitkin, 1967). Others find that descriptive representation can facilitate feelings of trust (ex. Rahn & Rudolph, 2005), efficacy (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990), and inclusion (Pantoja & Segura, 2003). However, the empirical findings are inconclusive (see discussion in Gay, 2002).

The disparate findings within the descriptive representation literature are the motivation behind the main question addressed in this paper. What role, if any, does descriptive racial representation play in citizen trust in local government? In order to contribute to a

more thorough understanding of the impact of descriptive representation, this paper isolates a single outcome – trust – and shifts the level of analysis to the local level where race remains one of the predominant divisions in the local politics arena (Hajnal & Trounstein, 2014).

This paper contributes to the broader understanding of both descriptive representation and public trust by utilising data from a unique, individual-level survey of 39 cities (40 city/year samples) across the United States. In doing so, its contribution is two-fold: reconcile disparate findings regarding the role of descriptive representation while at the same time shedding light on the factors that underlie attitudes toward local government and thus contributing to the broader understanding of public trust. While much research has explored the concept at the national (see for instance Hetherington, 1998) and state (e.g., Gay, 2002; Tate, 2001) level, little is understood about what influences attitudes and behaviours at the local level. The lack of a comprehensive body of knowledge concerning attitudes and behaviours at the lowest levels of government is problematic because unpacking broader issues of central interest to the discipline as a whole requires a deeper understanding of the contexts that determine participatory political behaviour (see discussion in Trounstein, 2009).

Employing a mixed-effects modelling strategy in a large-scale analysis of the role of descriptive representation in facilitating trust in local government, the results suggest that trust in local government is a function of both city-level and individual-level factors, including co-racial descriptive representation. Descriptively represented respondents are more likely to view local government as trustworthy. However, this effect is limited to co-racial mayors: Trust does not increase as collective levels of representation on city councils increase. Additional analyses also suggest electing legislators of colour has important effects for other minority groups as well. Black representation not only increases feelings of trust among Black citizens, but among Latinx respondents as well, suggesting the presence of a Black mayor has a positive, perhaps ‘symbolic’ effect for traditionally under-represented groups more generally. At the same time, Black representation has a detrimental effect on feelings of trust in local government among White respondents.

## Co-Ethnic and Co-Racial Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation occurs when an individual is represented by an elected official who shares the same ascriptive characteristics, which might include race, ethnicity, or gender (Pitkin, 1967). Increases in minority descriptive representation are linked to more positive affective feelings and increased political participation among minorities (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990), and descriptive representation is also linked to increases in political knowledge and efficacy (Banducci, Donovan, & Karp, 1999; Emig, Hesse, & Fisher, 1996). Studies also find White and Black respondents express higher levels of satisfaction with representatives of their own race (Box-Steffensmeier, Kimball, Meinke, & Tate, 2003; Gay, 2002).

Why does descriptive representation result in attitudinal or behavioural change? Some scholars contend that descriptive representation is the first step to substantive policy representation, which results in behavioural or attitudinal change. A number of scholars find that minority legislators are more likely than white legislators to advocate for minority interests by sponsoring and voting for social welfare and civil rights legislation (Canon, 1999; Lublin, 1997; Tate, 2003; Whitby, 1997). Similarly, minority legislators also obtain

more earmark projects for their districts (Grose, 2011) and tend to oversee the implementation of civil rights and social welfare policies (Minta, 2011).

What is not clear, however, is how much minority representation might be necessary to produce such an effect. Despite evidence that descriptive representation improves the substantive representation of minority groups, some scholars are sceptical as to whether this is the case. The concept of critical mass (Kanter, 1977), often invoked in studies of women's representation, suggests that only when a certain proportion of minorities are present in a political institutions will they be able to act on behalf of their respective constituencies because when women or minorities have token status in legislatures, marginalisation by their white (male) colleagues limits their influence in policymaking (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008; Kanter, 1977; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Without substantive policy representation, the effect of descriptive representation on attitudinal or behavioural outcomes is diminished (Marschall & Shah, 2007).

While some scholars contend that substantive policy representation is a necessary mechanism through which descriptive representation facilitates attitudinal and participatory behaviour, another line of research contends that 'good' representation is more than just policy representation, as descriptive representation remains potentially symbolic to traditionally underrepresented groups (Pitkin, 1967; Tate, 2001). The theory of symbolic representation suggests that the psychological orientations of minorities will change in response to the presence of minority members in government, which in turn manifests into behavioural change (Abramson, 1983; Pitkin, 1967). Given that it is the expectation of change that motivates behaviour, symbolic effects can occur without policy change by creating social meaning and legitimacy in contexts where discrimination occurred (Mansbridge, 1999). For example, the election of minority candidates beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s sent powerful symbolic cues to the public (Gilliam, 1996). Minority descriptive representation in government resulted in higher levels of positive affective feelings and political participation (Abney & Hutcheson, 1981; Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Emig et al., 1996; Howell & Fagan, 1988; Marschall & Ruhil, 2007; Marschall & Shah, 2007). Bobo and Gilliam (1990) find that black residents in areas governed by a black mayor are more active than black residents in low-empowerment areas or white counterparts of comparable socioeconomic status. The authors find descriptive representation influences black participation by contributing to higher levels of trust and efficacy and by increasing black attentiveness to political affairs. Similarly, Rahn and Rudolph (2005) find Black constituents represented by Black mayors are more trusting of local government. Examining the effects of co-ethnic representation among Latinos, Pantoja and Segura (2003) find descriptive representation decreases feelings of political alienation. While the ability to racially identify with an elected official may not trump the desire for preferred policy outcomes, the perception of shared experience that results from descriptive representation can form the basis for positive feelings toward government (Mansbridge, 1999).

This paper isolates a single outcome – trust in local government – in order to better understand the impact of descriptive representation in local contexts. While the literature surrounding minority representation suggests several potential mechanisms that facilitate positive attitudinal change, the premise of this paper is more simple than distinguishing the exact causal mechanism driving attitudes toward local government. It simply asks whether trust in government is related to descriptive representation after controlling for a number of individual and city-level factors shaping individual attitudes. I argue

descriptive representation can forge feelings of trust in local government, be it as a first step to substantive policy change or via symbolic effects.<sup>1</sup>

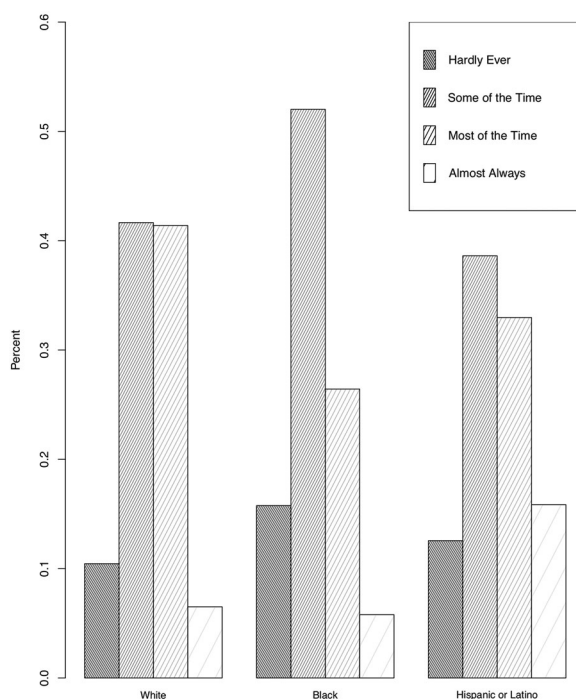
## Research Design

### Data

The data used in this analysis come from the Urban Mayoral Elections Study (UMES). UMES is a cross-sectional public opinion survey administered in 39 cities across the U.S. from 2007 to 2011 via telephone interview.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were selected using random digit dialling samples from each city, yielding an overall sample size of 6365 respondents, with an average of 159 respondents per city. The use of post-stratification weights brings sample closer to Census estimates of local racial composition.<sup>3</sup> One major advantage of using this data as a means to test for effects of descriptive representation is that it captures considerable variation in not only political arrangements, but also representative characteristics. The data include 26 cities represented by White mayors, 10 cities represented by Black mayors, and 4 cities represented by Latinx mayors.

### Measuring Trust in Local Government

The outcome of interest and dependent variable is trust in local government, which is derived from responses to a survey question asking how much of the time respondents felt they could trust the city government to do what is right.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the distribution across trust categories by race and reveals the racial gap between Black and



**Figure 1.** Distribution of responses.

White residents remains consistent. As expected, a higher percent of Black respondents have very little or only some trust in local government relative to Whites. The gap between White and Hispanic or Latino residents, however, is slightly ambiguous: The figure indicates that a higher proportion of Hispanic and Latino residents hardly ever trust local government, but a higher proportion also almost always trust local government.

Figure 2 illustrates substantial cross-city variation in levels of trust, suggesting there are a number of institutional and contextual differences that must be taken into account of

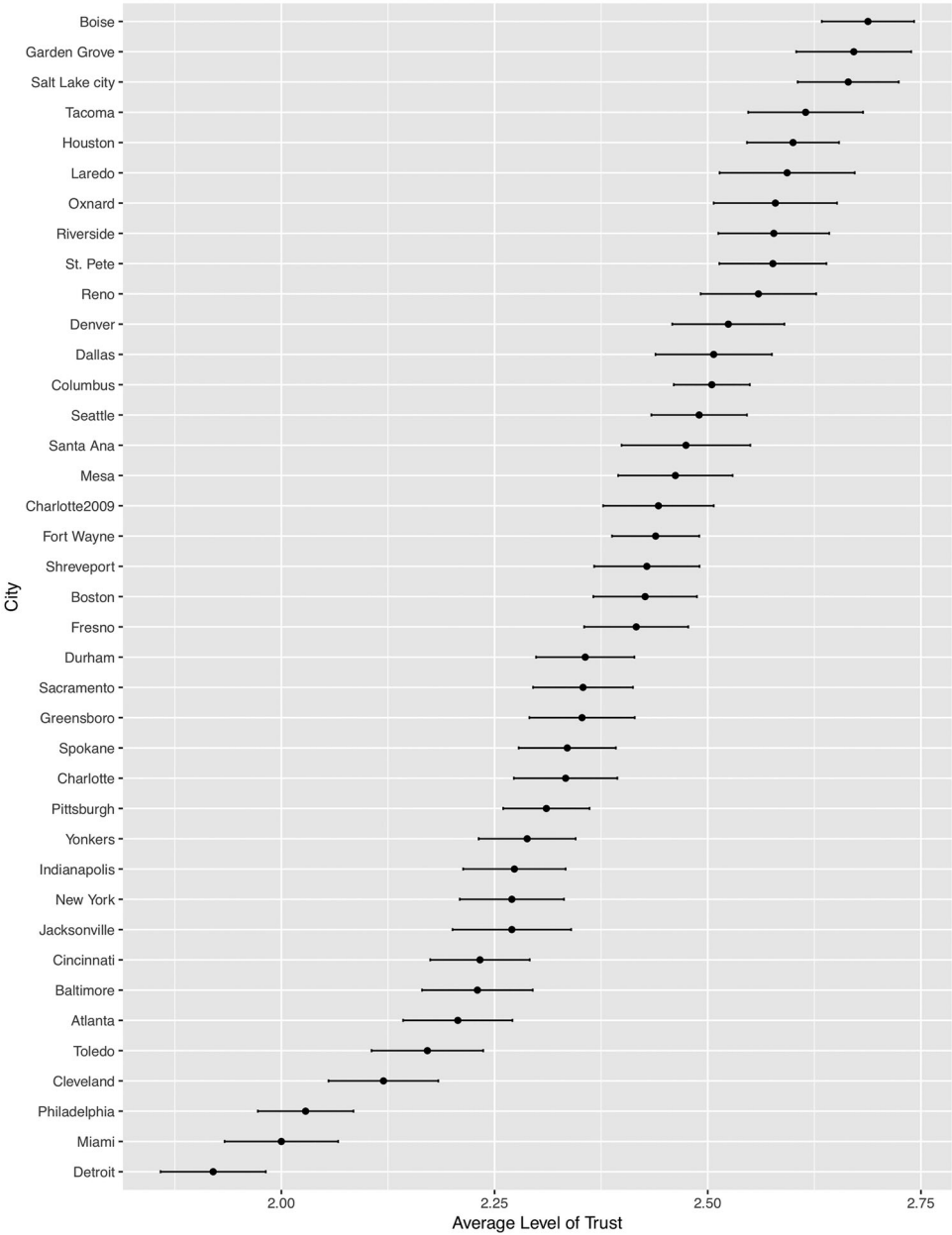


Figure 2. Average trust in UMES cities.

political attitudes at the local level. The most ‘trusting’ city is Boise, Idaho, a city with a relatively homogeneous population (86% white) and about 200,000 residents. Boise has a mayor-council form of government, with nonpartisan elections and a district system of representation. On the opposite end, the least trusting city is Detroit, Michigan. While four times the size of Boise, Detroit also has a relatively homogeneous population (about 83% black) and a mayor-council system of government with nonpartisan elections. However, Detroit has an at-large system of representation as opposed to a district or ward system. Unlike research focused on citizen attitudes toward national government, a comparative cross-city analysis must take into account the variation that occurs across a number of institutional and environmental elements. The stark cross-city contextual differences have the potential to influence important individual-level characteristics in different ways.

### ***Measuring Descriptive Representation***

As indicated by the literature discussed earlier, co-racial descriptive representation plays a key role in facilitating attitudes. When represented by officials of the same race, minorities have higher levels of trust and positive evaluations of government. In order to more fully capture this relationship, I incorporate descriptive representation in both the office of the mayor and the city council. While much of the literature is focused solely on dyadic relationships between those represented by a mayor of the same race and those not represented by a mayor of the same race, there is strong reason to believe that collective descriptive representation of city councils matters as well, given the evidence that increases in descriptive representation lead to increased substantive representation, and thus, more positive attitudes toward government (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Gilliam, 1996).

In order to capture the possible effects of descriptive representation in the office of the mayor, I create a variable that indicates whether a respondent is represented by a mayor of the same race. Due to the relatively small number of cities with Latinx mayors, this measurement has the benefit of allowing Latinx respondents to be included in the sample, as they are otherwise dropped from the regression model due to too few cases in which cities have Latinx mayors.

Including the composition of the city council taps into the concept of collective descriptive representation. The variable ‘Descriptive Council’ denotes the proportion of the city council that is made up of an individual’s race. If a given city council is made up of 70% white council members, white respondents receive a value of 0.70. If the council is made up of 30% black council members, black respondents receive a value of 0.30. Higher levels of descriptive representation on city councils should lead to higher levels of trust in local government.

### ***Additional Covariates of Political Trust***

Previous studies of government trust using cross-city data indicate trust should be modelled as a function of both city-level factors and individual-level characteristics and attitudes that can be expected to explain individual differences in perceptions of trust in local government (ex. Marschall & Shah, 2007; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). Is the effect of



descriptive representation effectively ‘washed out’ once other predictors of trust are built into the model? In order to address this question, a number of individual factors associated with trust are also included in the model.

One important factor that should be accounted for in any analysis of individual perceptions of government or government performance is the impact of partisan bias. Research at the national level suggests people respond to questions in a way that is favourable to their preferred party, and their responses reflect what makes them comfortable given their partisan views (Bartels, 2002; Weinschenk, 2012). When it comes to trust more specifically, Citrin and Luks (2001) find trust attitudes reflect partisan bias. With these findings in mind, I construct a variable called ‘party congruence’ that indicates whether or not a respondent is represented by a mayor of with the same party ID.<sup>5</sup> Given the findings at the national level, I expect party identification congruence between residents and the mayor to positively affect levels of trust in local government.

Additional individual-level influences considered in this analysis include a set of variables capturing a number of demographic and behavioural co-variables of trust. Internal attitudes like feelings of efficacy are related to attitudes toward government: Citizens with greater feelings of efficacy participate more often, and feel more satisfied with outputs as a result of having an impact on political outcomes (Finkel, 1985; Pollack, 1983; Rahn & Rudolph, 2001). In addition to efficacy, respondent ideology may also affect trust predispositions: Studies examining the effect of psychological and behavioural predispositions on levels of trust in institutions suggest liberals are more likely to support government given their ideological beliefs (Marschall & Shah, 2007). To account for ideological predispositions, a variable measuring the ideology of the respondent is also included, ranging from 1 (strong conservative) to 5 (strong liberal).

Local conditions are also factors that shape attitudes toward government. Negative perceptions of economic performance promote distrust among citizens (Citrin & Green, 1986). Additionally, perceptions of crime in a jurisdiction also influence attitudes like trust (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000). Therefore, variables indicating respondents’ retrospective evaluations of the city’s economic performance and respondents’ perception of the level of crime in the city are included in the analysis.

Extant research suggests that citizens who are more connected to the political system are more likely to believe it works well, which results in higher levels of satisfaction (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Hill & Matsubayashi, 2005; Marschall & Shah, 2007; Serra, 1995). Local stakeholders are those who are involved in civic organisations or groups, those with a higher socioeconomic status, longer length of residency, and who own homes. In order to capture stakeholder effects, variables for length of residence in the city, civic engagement, education<sup>6</sup>, and income.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in order to limit potential omitted variable bias, trust in the national government is also included in the model, as it may be argued that local and national political trust are both functions of an underlying construct of political trust (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). As such, I include it in the model to ensure I am only modelling the local dimension of political trust.

In addition to individual-level factors associated with trust in government, the model also includes several variables capturing variation in institutional context across cities. Institutional features have the potential to influence the relationship between citizens and their government by shaping the governing process and potential for constituent



responsiveness (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). For instance, while directly-elected mayors are directly accountable to constituents, thus promoting accountability and trust, some suggest this type of system is more prone to gridlock and institutional conflict (Svara, 1999). Further, ward-based representatives are seen as more attentive to constituent concerns, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and efficacy (Welch & Bledsoe, 1988). Additionally, nonpartisan elections tend to reduce voter turnout and the overall competitiveness of a race (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003). Without competition, the incentive for incumbent officeholders to be responsive to constituent demands is reduced, resulting in lower trust among citizens. Institutional features included in the model are government type (council-manager or mayor-council), system of representation (ward, mixed, or at-large), and whether or not the city uses partisan elections.

Finally, variation in population size and income inequality also have the potential to shape attitudes toward local government and should be accounted for when analysing differences in individual trust. Controlling for city population is important because population size indirectly affects institutional performance: Smaller, more homogenous communities decrease the likelihood of conflict in government, portraying an image of a more efficient, trustworthy government (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Matsubayashi, 2007), and political interest, effectiveness, and participation are lower in large places (Oliver, 2000). Additionally, high levels of income inequality may negatively affect citizens' perceptions of government fairness, which can contribute to negative attitudes toward city government (Rahn & Rudolph, 2001, 2005).

## Results

In order to examine the effect of co-racial descriptive representation on trust toward local government, I employ a mixed effect regression strategy. Mixed effect models take into account the fact that individual-level survey respondents are nested in a particular city and survey year. Before fitting the mixed effect model, I assess the relative importance of each level of analysis by calculating the ratio of each variance component to the total variance in the dependent variable. As expected, my calculations indicate that the proportion of variance explained by the city-level variance component is about 5%: much smaller than the proportion of variance explained by the individual-level variance component (about 95%). After confirming variation in the dependent variable at both levels of analysis, the next step is to move to a multivariate analysis of trust in local government (Table 1).

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2, where I use ordered logit to estimate the effects of the individual and city-level factors on feelings of trust in local government.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the model results corroborate a number of the expected relationships outlined

**Table 1.** Analysis of variance.

Parameter	Estimate
Fixed Effects (intercept)	2.396 (0.029)
Variance Components	
City-Level	0.030
Individual-Level	0.601

Note: Table entries are multilevel estimates of trust in local government.

**Table 2.** Determinants of trust in local government.

	Baseline (b/s.e.)	Model 1 (b/s.e.)	Model 2 (b/s.e.)	Model 3 (b/s.e.)
Descriptive Mayor		<b>0.25</b> (0.07)		<b>0.23</b> (0.09)
Descriptive Council			<b>0.39</b> (0.15)	0.06 (0.20)
<i>Individual level</i>				
Black	<b>-0.36</b> (0.08)	<b>-0.30</b> (0.08)	<b>-0.24</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.29</b> (0.09)
Latinx	-0.01 (0.11)	0.11 (0.12)	0.15 (0.13)	0.12 (0.13)
Party ID Congruence	<b>0.24</b> (0.06)	<b>0.22</b> (0.06)	<b>0.23</b> (0.06)	<b>0.22</b> (0.06)
Income	<b>0.08</b> (0.02)	<b>0.08</b> (0.02)	<b>0.08</b> (0.02)	<b>0.08</b> (0.02)
Education	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Civic Engagement	<b>0.16</b> (0.07)	<b>0.16</b> (0.07)	<b>0.16</b> (0.07)	<b>0.16</b> (0.07)
Ideology	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Age	<b>0.01</b> (0.00)	<b>0.01</b> (0.00)	<b>0.01</b> (0.00)	<b>0.01</b> (0.00)
Male	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)
Years in City	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Trust Nat'l Gov't	<b>1.19</b> (0.04)	<b>1.20</b> (0.04)	<b>1.19</b> (0.04)	<b>1.20</b> (0.04)
Crime a Serious Problem	<b>-0.34</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.32</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.32</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.32</b> (0.09)
Economy Same	<b>-0.34</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.35</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.35</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.35</b> (0.09)
Economy Worse	<b>-0.67</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.68</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.67</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.68</b> (0.09)
Rent	0.00 (0.08)	0.00 (0.08)	0.00 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Internal Efficacy	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
<i>City—Level</i>				
Population	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)
% Black	<b>-1.65</b> (0.36)	<b>-1.64</b> (0.37)	<b>-1.63</b> (0.38)	<b>-1.64</b> (0.37)
% Latinx	<b>-1.08</b> (0.37)	<b>-1.17</b> (0.38)	<b>-1.12</b> (0.38)	<b>-1.16</b> (0.38)
Income Inequality	0.19 (0.44)	0.32 (0.45)	0.30 (0.46)	0.33 (0.45)
Partisan Elections	-0.12 (0.13)	-0.15 (0.14)	-0.12 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.14)
Mixed Districts	-0.12 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.14)	-0.13 (0.14)	-0.13 (0.14)
At-large Districts	-0.05 (0.19)	-0.04 (0.20)	-0.05 (0.20)	-0.04 (0.20)
Council Manager	<b>0.42</b> (0.13)	<b>0.42</b> (0.13)	<b>0.43</b> (0.13)	<b>0.42</b> (0.13)
Observations	4420	4420	4420	4420
Log Likelihood	-4505.34	-4498.95	-4501.95	-4498.92
AIC	9066.67	9055.91	9061.90	9057.83

Note: Bold entries,  $p < 0.05$ .

previously, and suggest trust is a function of both institutional and individual level factors that either inspire or inhibit positive feelings toward municipal government. Column 1, the baseline model, illustrates the results of only ‘controls’, and does not include variables for descriptive representation. Model 1 (column 2) includes a variable for mayoral descriptive representation and Model 2 contains the council representation measure. Model 3 includes all measures of descriptive representation.

Turning first to the impact of co-racial representation, the results in [Table 2](#) suggest that descriptive representation at the municipal level influences feelings of trust in local government. In order to assess the impact of mayoral descriptive representation, I begin by estimating a model independent of council representation. The results are presented in the second column of [Table 2](#), and suggest that co-racial mayors are related to positive feelings of trust. When examining the effect of collective levels of descriptive representation on city councils, presented in column 3, the results indicate that higher proportions of co-racial representation on city councils have a positive and significant impact on the likelihood that a respondent feels local government is trustworthy. However, when both the mayor and council descriptive representation variables are included in the same model, only co-racial representation by a mayor has a positive and significant effect. This suggests that descriptive representation in the more visible office of the mayor plays a more important role in facilitating trust in local government.

Ultimately, the results in [Table 2](#) suggest descriptive representation plays a role in facilitating feelings of trust in local government. While the implications of the model are implicit in the parameters, the effect of the variable of interest – descriptive representation – on the probability of respondents falling into a particular category are important for understanding the substantive impact. All else equal, the probability of a respondent trusting government ‘hardly ever’ is approximately 0.23 when represented by a mayor of a different race. This drops to 0.19 when represented by a mayor of the same race. When considering the probability of trusting government ‘most of the time’, for respondents represented by a mayor of a different race, the probability is 0.42. When represented by a mayor of the same race, it increases to 0.46, for an overall net effect of 0.04.

It should also be noted that the results in [Table 2](#) indicate that in addition to descriptive representation, a number of additional factors also affect citizen perceptions of trust in local government. Turning first to the effects of city-level features – institutional arrangements and contextual factors – the results in [Table 2](#) indicate that residents in cities with council-manager governments are more likely to view government as trustworthy than those in mayor-council systems. This lends some credence to the idea that increased professionalisation of city government and its insulation from electoral politics results in more positive feelings of trust among residents. I also find that higher proportions of Black and Latinx populations are associated with respondents feeling less trusting toward local governments.

Across the models presented in [Table 2](#), a number of individual attributes and perceptions of city conditions also affect feelings of trust in local government. One interesting finding is the impact of party ID congruence. Much work at the local level suggests partisanship is not an important factor in local politics. Instead, city politics is primarily concerned with housekeeping items, and policy decisions are constrained by forces outside of elected officials’ control (e.g., Peterson, 1981). The results presented in [Table 2](#) indicate that partisanship is a significant predictor of trust in local government, contrary to the expectations in the literature.

Additionally, the effect of race comports with expectations: Black respondents are less trusting than White respondents. Trust in local government is also related to civic engagement: Respondents involved in at least one civic organisation or group are significantly more likely to see government as trustworthy than those not involved in any civic organisations or community groups. This lends some support to the idea that stronger community ties are related to positive feelings toward local government.

Finally, individual perceptions of crime levels and the state of the city economy are significant predictors of trust in local government. Respondents who perceived the local state economy as better-off were significantly more likely to view government as trustworthy than those who felt the economy was worse-off, or even the same. Respondents who felt crime was a serious problem in their city were also less likely to express positive feelings about government trustworthiness, and – as expected – respondent trust in national government is also related to trust in local government. Contrary to expectations, internal efficacy is not related to trust in local government.

### ***Differential Effects of Minority Representation***

Overall, the findings presented in Table 2 suggest that trust in local government is in part a function of co-racial descriptive representation. However, it is plausible that citizens of different races might place different values on the importance of descriptive representation. For instance, Gay (2002) finds that White citizens place a higher value on co-racial representation than their Black counterparts (Gay, 2002). Further, there is reason to suspect that the effect of a non-co-racial representative has differential effects across groups. For example, increases in minority representation have been linked to lower levels of trust among white electorates (Bobo, 1983; Williams, 1990).

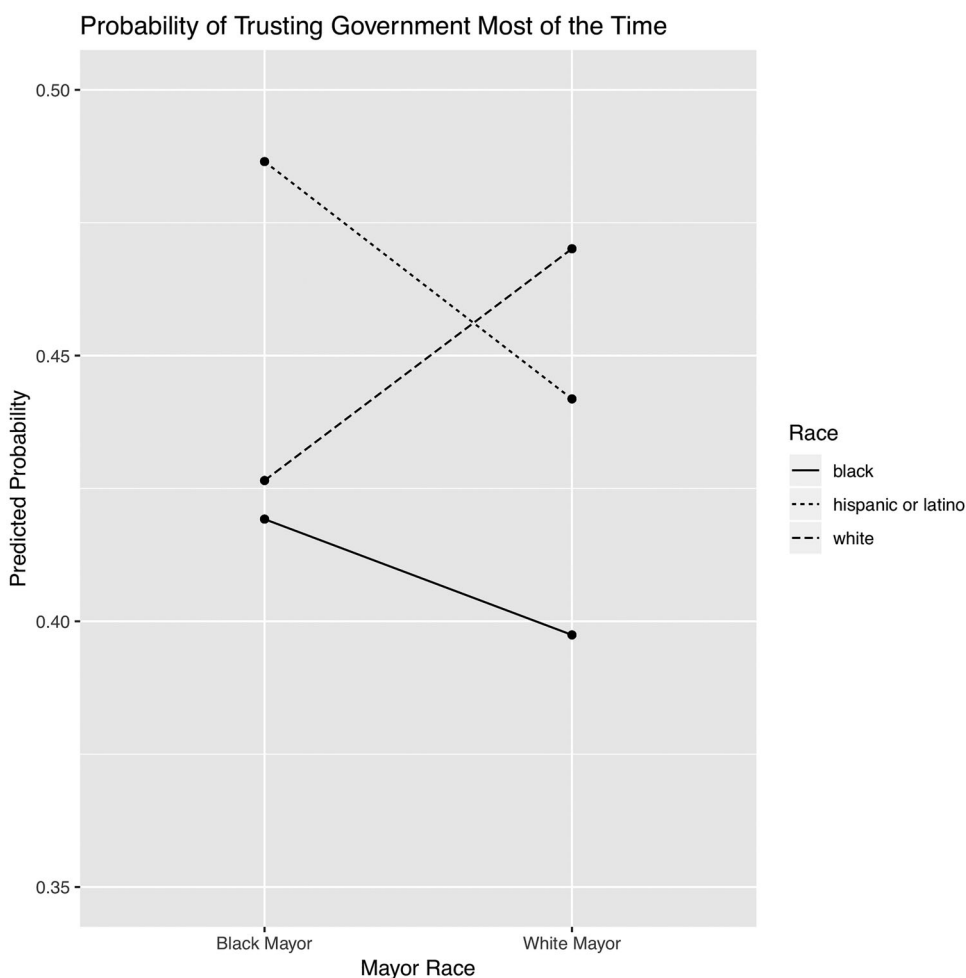
The second part of the analysis examines the way descriptive representation affects trust across racial categories. Due to sample constraints, the analysis is limited to analysing the effect of a Black or White mayor on feelings of trust among Black, White, and Latinx respondents. Is the effect of Black representation strongest among Black respondents, as the theory of descriptive representation suggests? Do the effects of Black representation extend to Latinx residents as well? Or, does the threat of resource redistribution make the effect of Black representation strongest among White respondents?

The results of this additional analysis are presented in Table 3. According to expectations, Black respondents are more likely to view local government as trustworthy when represented by a Black mayor. Interestingly, Black representation also produces a positive, statistically significant effect among Latinx residents as well. This finding suggests that the presence of a Black mayor has a positive symbolic effect for traditionally under-represented groups more generally. Figure 3 illustrates the impact of Black and White mayoral representation on the probability of trusting government most of the time. For Latinx respondents, the probability of trusting government most of the time when represented by a white mayor is 0.44, but when represented by a Black mayor increases to 0.49. The effect of Black representation for Black respondents is much weaker: For Black respondents represented by a Black mayor, the probability of trusting government most of the time is 0.42, compared to 0.40 when represented by a white mayor.

**Table 3.** Effect of mayor race on trust in local government.

	Model (b/s.e.)
Black Mayor	−0.33 (0.20)
Black Mayor*Black	<b>0.47</b> (0.16)
Black Mayor*Latinx	<b>0.68</b> (0.33)
<i>Individual level</i>	
Black	− <b>0.52</b> (0.10)
Latinx	−0.22 (0.14)
Party ID Congruence	<b>0.23</b> (0.07)
Income	<b>0.08</b> (0.02)
Education	0.04 (0.02)
Civic Engagement	<b>0.14</b> (0.07)
Ideology	−0.00 (0.03)
Age	<b>0.01</b> (0.00)
Male	−0.06 (0.06)
Years in City	0.00 (0.00)
Trust Nat'l Gov't	<b>1.22</b> (0.05)
Crime a Serious Problem	− <b>0.33</b> (0.10)
Economy Same	− <b>0.32</b> (0.10)
Economy Worse	− <b>0.62</b> (0.10)
Rent	−0.01 (0.08)
Internal Efficacy	−0.01 (0.03)
<i>City-Level</i>	
Population	−0.11 (0.08)
% Black	− <b>1.23</b> (0.49)
% Latinx	−0.14 (0.50)
Income Inequality	0.33 (0.50)
Partisan Elections	−0.10 (0.14)
Mixed Districts	−0.17 (0.14)
At-large Districts	−0.03 (0.19)
Council Manager	<b>0.33</b> (0.13)
Observations	4036
Log Likelihood	−4062.22
AIC	8186.44

Note: Bold entries,  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 3.** Effect of mayor race on probability of trusting government most of the time.

In addition to the effects for Black and Latinx respondents, [Figure 3](#) also illustrates the effect of mayor race for White respondents. The results indicate that Black mayoral representation lowers trust among White respondents. The probability of trusting government most of the time is 0.47 when represented by a White mayor, but drops to 0.43 when Whites are represented by a Black mayor. Interestingly, even when represented by a mayor of the same race, Black respondents are no more likely to trust government than White respondents represented by a Black mayor. The effect of co-racial representation appears to be much stronger for Whites.

**Summary of Findings**

To reiterate, the primary interest of this analysis is in how co-racial representation affects trust in local government. Building upon previous research that examines attitudes towards local government, the findings presented in this paper provide some new insights into the role of descriptive representation in these contexts. First, the results of my analysis

show that co-racial representation has a positive and significant effect on respondent trust in local government. However, this effect is limited to co-racial mayors, as trust does not increase as collective levels of representation on city councils increase.

The second contribution made by this study concerns the differential effects of co-racial descriptive representation. The findings indicate that the presence of a Black mayor positively impacts trust among Black and Latinx residents. This finding suggests that electing legislators of colour has important effects for members of minority groups more generally. However, this effect is weaker for Black residents. The effect of co-racial representation is much stronger for White respondents.

A final contribution made by my analysis concerns the impact of institutional arrangements when it comes to shaping trust towards local government. A consistent finding that emerges in the analysis is the impact of council-manager systems. Respondents are significantly more likely to feel that the government is trustworthy in council-manager systems than in mayor-council systems. This finding confirms that variation in the structure of city government is an important factor that should be accounted for when developing models of political attitudes at the local level.

## Conclusion

Extant literature finds mixed results when it comes to the role of descriptive representation in shaping attitudes toward government. In its consideration of a number of determinants of trust in local government, this study's primary focus was on a test of the role of co-racial descriptive representation in both the mayor's office and collectively on city councils in fostering feelings of trust in local government. Leveraging a unique data set, I perform a large-n, cross-city analysis of the impact of descriptive representation in facilitating trust in government, the results of which suggest that trust in local government stems from multiple sources, including co-racial descriptive representation. Descriptively represented respondents are more likely to view local government as trustworthy. However, this effect is limited to co-racial mayors. Collective increases on city councils do not appear to yield any significant effects on citizen trust.

Additionally, this paper uncovers differential effects of co-racial descriptive representation among Black, Latinx, and White respondents. For Black respondents, co-racial representation has a marginal effect when it comes to the likelihood of trusting government. The effect of co-racial representation among Whites is much stronger, and suggests two possible explanations. The first is that Whites are particularly sensitive to the symbolic benefits of co-racial representation. The second possibility is that Whites are particularly averse to the idea of losing their in-group status. Group threat hypothesis suggests that when resources are scarce or perceived as zero-sum, the potential for group conflict is enhanced, and competing groups will unite around their respective interests (Bobo, 1983; Kaufmann, 2004). Even when uncertainty about Black representation has been reduced through years of experience with Black representation, there is little to no change in White perceptions of racial group conflict (Hajnal, 2001). Future work should tap into the underlying mechanism that is driving these results.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on co-racial representation and attitudes toward local government by uncovering a number of factors that shape trust toward government in these contexts. However, more questions remain to be answered. For instance,



in order to understand why increases in descriptive representation on city councils do not have a significant impact on feelings of trust, future research should seek to disentangle the effect of substantive policy changes that might affect perceptions of trustworthiness (see Marshall & Shah, 2007). It might be the case that collective increases in co-racial representation on city councils fail to impact attitudes toward government if there are no policy changes.

## Notes

1. Another limitation of any study using cross-sectional data is the ability to address concerns regarding the direction of the hypothesised relationship. Studies using pseudo experimental designs and/or panel data are better suited to assess the direction of causality. For example, Gleason and Stout (2014) apply genetic matching in order to assess the causality of descriptive representation and changes in political attitudes. While the authors focus on efficacy as the main outcome of interest, their results provide strong evidence that attitudes are the *result* of descriptive representation rather than the cause of it.
2. The cases (Atlanta, GA, 2009; Baltimore, MD, 2007; Boise, ID, 2007; Boston, MA, 2009; Charlotte, NC, 2007 and 2009; Cincinnati, OH, 2009; Cleveland, OH, 2009; Columbus, OH, 2007; Columbus, GA, 2010; Dallas, TX, 2011; Denver, CO, 2011; Detroit, MI, 2009; Durham, NC, 2007; Ft. Wayne IN, 2007; Fresno, CA, 2008; Garden Grove, CA, 2010; Greensboro, NC, 2007; Houston, TX, 2009; Indianapolis, IN, 2007; Jacksonville, FL, 2011; Laredo, TX, 2010; Mesa, AZ, 2008; Miami, FL, 2009; Philadelphia, PA, 2007; Pittsburgh, PA, 2007; Reno, NV, 2010; Riverside, CA, 2009; Sacramento, CA, 2008; Salt Lake City, UT, 2007; Santa Ana, CA, 2010; Seattle, WA, 2009; Shreveport, LA, 2010; Spokane, WA, 2007; St. Petersburg, FL, 2009; Tacoma, WA, 2009; Toledo OH, 2009; and Yonkers, NY, 2007) selected for this study are drawn from among the 125 largest cities in the U.S. There are forty separate samples drawn, but just 39 cities, since Charlotte, NC, was surveyed in both 2007 and 2009.
3. Once missing values on key covariates used in my analysis are removed, the sample size is reduced to 4420 observations, with an average of 111 responses per city. The maximum number of responses in a city is 142 while the minimum number of responses is 85. Complete descriptive statistics are available in the appendix.
4. The distribution of responses is as follows: Trust government hardly ever (12%), trust government some of the time (44%), trust government most of the time (37%), trust government almost always (7%).
5. Even in cities with nonpartisan elections, the party identification of the mayor is often identifiable from new sources, endorsements, or partisanship in a previously held office.
6. Survey responses range from less than a high school diploma to completed post-graduate or professional school.
7. Eight categories, with the lowest indicating respondent's annual income is less than 10k, and the highest category indicating respondent income greater than 100k annually. This variable is treated as continuous in the statistical models.
8. Threshold and random effects available in Appendix.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Trust in City Government	4420	1.409	0.769	0	3
Perception of Crime as a Problem	4420	0.861	0.346	0	1
Party ID Congruence	4420	0.409	0.492	0	1
Income	4420	5.195	2.123	1	8
Civic Engagement	4420	0.280	0.449	0	1
Ideology	4420	2.945	1.170	1	5
Age	4420	52.337	16.184	17	107
Education	4420	3.921	1.622	0	6
Years lived in city	4420	29.754	20.302	0	98
Co-Racial Mayor Representation	4420	0.650	0.477	0	1
% Co-Racial Council	4420	0.599	0.281	0	1
% Pop. Latinx	4420	0.202	0.222	0.018	0.942
% Pop. Black	4420	0.247	0.196	0.002	0.827
Population (log)	4420	12.941	0.783	12.011	15.929
Trust National Government	4420	2.074	0.793	1	4
Own Home (0 = rent, 1 = own)	4420	0.739	0.439	0	1
Internal Efficacy	4420	2.193	1.102	1	4
Male	4420	0.525	0.499	0	1

Table A2. Threshold and random effects (Table 2).

	Base	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Random Effects					
City (var)	0.08 (0.28)	0.08 (0.29)	0.09 (0.30)	0.09 (0.29)	0.07 (0.27)
Number of Groups: City 40					
Threshold Coefficients					
Hardly Ever-Some of the Time	−0.50	0.16	0.28	0.23	−0.96
Some of the Time-Most of the Time	2.36	3.04	3.15	3.10	1.97
Most of the Time-Almost Always	5.20	5.89	6.00	5.95	4.88

Table A3. Threshold and random effects (Table 3).

	Model
Random Effects	
City (var)	0.07 (0.27)
Number of Groups: City 36	
Threshold Coefficients	
Hardly Ever-Some of the Time	−0.96
Some of the Time-Most of the Time	1.97
Most of the Time-Almost Always	4.88