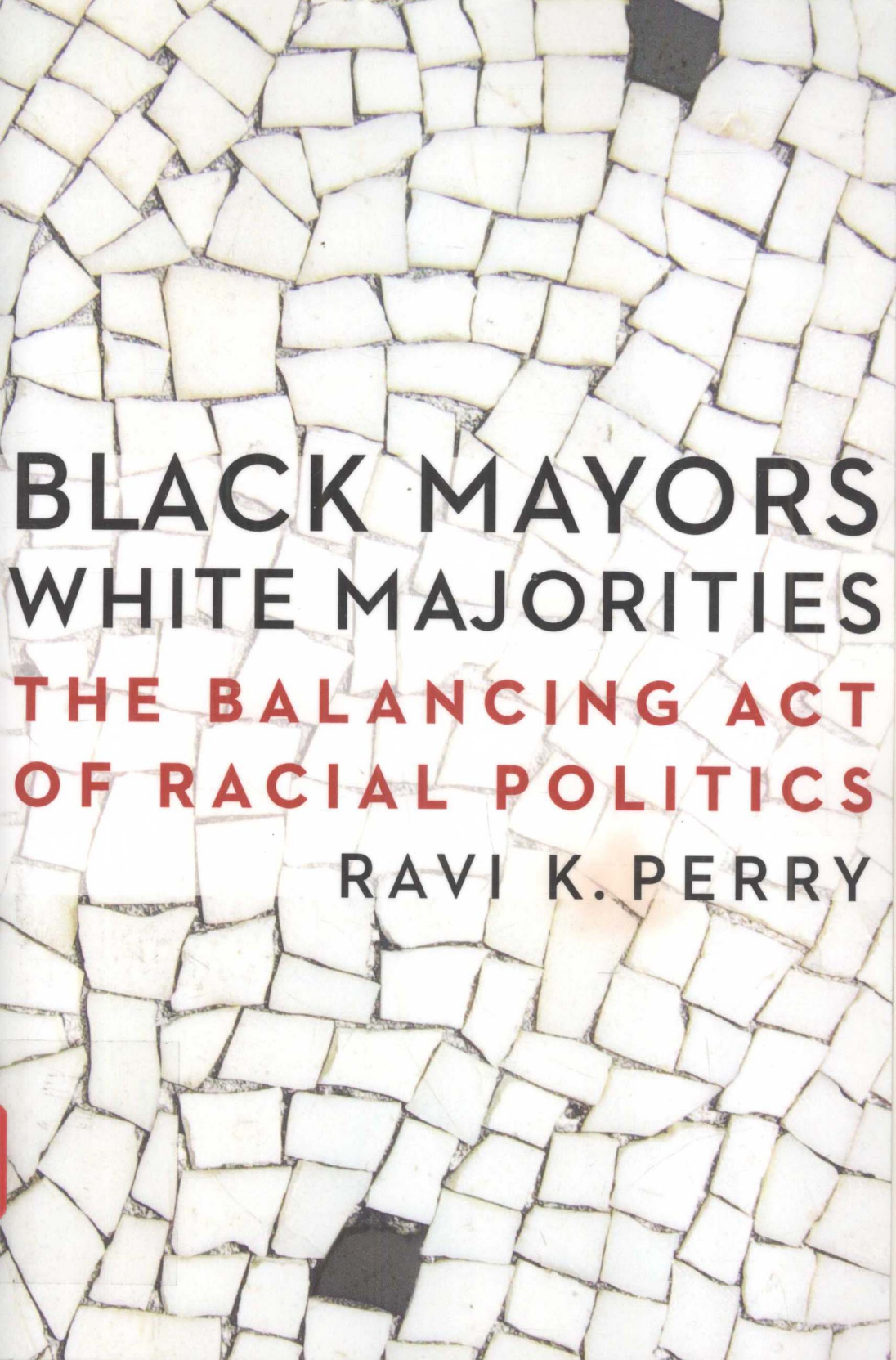
BLACK MAYORS
WHITE MAJORITIES
THE BALANCING ACT
OF RACIAL POLITICS
RAVI K. PERRY

BLACK MAYORS, WHITE MAJORITIES

The Balancing Act of Racial Politics

RAVI K. PERRY

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Set in Lyon Text and Neutraface by Laura Wellington.

Designed by A. Shahan.

To my parents,
Drs. D. LaRouth Perry
and Robert L. Perry,
for their unconditional
love and support

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life.

James Baldwin

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PREFACE

The ideas expressed and researched in this book began as I was a high school student in Ohio. There, in Lucas County, I was actively involved in local and regional politics. A reliable volunteer for many candidates in my home county, I was infatuated with politics, so much so that the study of politics became my academic interest while I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. While at Michigan, my interest in wanting to know more about how the representation of black interests functioned in non-majority-black contexts blossomed under the direction of my recently deceased mentor, Professor Hanes Walton Jr. This research interest began as conversations in his office in Ann Arbor. His loss is still heavy and I expect it to always remain so, for this book and my career are a direct result of his encouragement.

This book offers a substantive critique of deracialization as applied to the black urban governing context in majority-white cities. Based in part on the normative argument that the election of black mayors in major cities *should* improve the quality of life for blacks in those cities, it explores how two such black mayors sought to advance black interests in their majority-white cities.

The "should" argument referenced above is based on the classic proposition that blacks expect so much from major-city black mayors.

Because blacks expect such a path, it warrants this book's claim that it is viable to examine how the election of black mayors impacts the material and non-material lives of blacks in those cities.

In so doing, though, the book provokes a question: why hasn't the increased political power of black mayors resulted in the vast im-

provement of blacks as a group? I am of the opinion that the question returns scholars of urban and black politics to the root of black political emergence in the twentieth century. For example, in reference to Carl Stokes's campaign for mayor of Cleveland in 1967, during the height of the civil rights movement, Stokes had to decide whether it was more important for the black community to elect black mayors to advance a just society or to win elections.[1] For Stokes a successful bid for election as Cleveland's first black mayor was more important than the continued use of civil rights tactics to improve the quality of life and potential outcomes for Cleveland's black residents. Stokes's stance, though, explains why this book is a great fit for the Justice and Social Inquiry series at the University of Nebraska. Stokes's reflections on the opportunity to bring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Cleveland while he was running for mayor positioned two styles of black mobility against each other—old-school civil rights tactics of civil disobedience and electoral advances said to benefit the black community. Now, more than forty years later, we still don't know which method has produced the most for African Americans.

According to Leonard N. Moore, Stokes ran because "he was driven by three overlapping purposes: to improve the lives of the black poor, to give blacks a voice in municipal government, and to prove to the nation that an African American could govern."[2] Yet, as Stokes's reflections on his 1967 campaign decision indicate, his electoral strategy was deracialized. Conclusively the trend toward deracialization and urban regime theories has undoubtedly changed the motives, or it has at least emphasized the alleged limited options available to contemporary black mayors. J. Philip Thompson, however, is pointing in a different direction. He concludes that black mayors suffer from a "lack of substance."[3] In this blunt recognition, he makes a call for a renewed thinking about how politics and community might work together to improve the quality of life of blacks. In the interim I contend Manning Marable is correct in his assertion that the effects of deracialized campaign strategies are "psychological triumphs."[4]

The U.S. census indicates that blacks have not made considerable improvements since the advent of deracialized politics. Thus the election of deracialized black mayors does not mean much for blacks in general. Hosea Williams's statement that "All these black politicians—they're black until they're elected"[5] highlights the long-standing tension between the politics of electability and respectability in blacks' urban campaigns and the perceived expectation that elections should result in significant improvements for blacks. Accordingly, for many, as long as black mayors implement policies that benefit minorities but that do not threaten whites, they are supposedly "representing" black interests.

If black mayors are increasingly being elected because they employ deracialized strategies, does this suggest multiethnic governing coalitions are needed to implement the policies that benefit minority groups? There is a down side to deracialized coalition-building in both electoral and governing contexts. As evidenced in the evolution toward an increasing number of analyses that extol the benefits of deracialization as a means of winning elections with African American candidates, post-analyses that consider the substantive benefits for the black community given a hypothetical black politician's election are lacking in the political science literature. The predominant focus on campaigns and elections without a significant study of the effects of the campaigns and elections, particularly as they concern African Americans, not surprisingly, returns many to reconsider the benefits to African American communities given prior racialism in electoral and governing approaches. In other words, despite sensing that a more direct racial policy approach may not result in many elections for black candidates, many black voters may have increasingly become more sophisticated in their analyses of who is the "right" black candidate. This sophistication is evident, perhaps, in the decreasing numbers of eligible black voters choosing to vote in municipal elections in the post-civil rights era, the bounty of evidence that suggests deracialized black candidates, once elected, produce few substantive benefits for their black communities, and the elec-

toral outcomes of black versus black contests that feature two styles of black leadership.

Ironically, then, the bifurcated goals of Stokes's 1967 campaign remain alive in the twenty-first century. The question still remains: is it more important to win elections or to complete a just sociopolitical agenda? Given this tension, for many the necessity of the return to movement-based, racially inclusive politics is imperative. In this book, the mayors studied suggest that a return to black political power, as understood by the black power activists of the 1960s, is perhaps blacks' best available option. Malcolm X summed up the approach eloquently in "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech at a Cleveland rally sponsored by the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in 1964: "The political philosophy of black nationalism means that the black man should control the politics and politicians in his own community more; the black man in the black community has to be reeducated into the science of politics so he will know what politics is supposed to bring him in return." According to Malcolm X, blacks needed to be reeducated about the purpose of the science of politics for their quality of life to improve in the United States. Presumably this reeducation does not allow much room for deracialization, urban regime theory, or any other theory or practical electoral and governing strategy where blacks are arguably circumscribed by white power interests. If we factor in "targeted universalism," a new governing approach by which black mayors can actively pursue black interests while maintaining reasonable white electoral and governing support, then they also get to avoid Williams's lamentation, all while they're able to seek the improvement of the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life of black residents—what some have characterized as the ability to "stay black." Thus in an increasingly diverse society, the effort to advance the interests of particular groups may involve a return to the past, as evidenced by Malcolm X's suggestion. Should we follow that path, the representation of black interests may be subject to increased scrutiny as voters measure one's "blackness" by the outcomes produced for their black constituencies, as opposed to one's self-professed black identity. As X's speech sug-

gests, black voters might fare better by making voting preferences that account for pride in black identity and proven demonstrations of one's black consciousness as well—whether or not those black candidates are running for office in majority-black jurisdictions. This book explores how two mayors effectively used a new strategy to win election and govern while being inclusive of black interests in majority-white contexts. By strategically (and usually rhetorically) linking the needs of African Americans with the interests of whites, these mayors demonstrated that it was no longer political suicide to advocate for black interests. Like Olympic gymnasts successfully navigating the terrains of a balance beam, these mayors are strong examples for others who seek to advance the interests of minority populations even in political jurisdictions where those minority groups do not comprise a majority of the population. Seemingly, at least in some communities, deracialization has lost its balance.

This book was completed at Mississippi State University. Thanks are due to my colleagues in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration who provided the collegial and supportive environment necessary to complete this task. Throughout my various movements from undergraduate studies to graduate school and through two institutions, the support of my adviser, Marion Orr, has been invaluable. Marion has been and remains an inspiration and a really humble human being. A great adviser, he guides his students with a patterned simplicity that is warm and contagious. I can only hope, as I move through the profession, that I pick up some of his spirit.

Over the course of many years I have had the opportunity to interview dozens of stakeholders throughout Ohio. Without the giving of their time and offering of their trust to me, this project would not have been possible. Many interviewees, particularly both mayors for this project, welcomed me into their homes and indulged me greatly as I sought to describe their experiences as mayors of rust-belt cities in the Midwest.

Working with the University of Nebraska Press has been wonderful. Bridget Barry, Sabrina Ehmke Sergeant, Joeth Zucco, and Bojana Ristich have each been delightful stewards in bringing this book to fruition. Because of them, this process has been enjoyable and productive. Of course, without the invaluable support of series editors Jeremy I. Levitt and Matthew C. Whitaker, this book would not have been possible. The Justice and Social Inquiry series is a great fit for this project given the mayors' views on actively representing black interests even in their majority-white communities.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My husband, Paris F. Prince, was a continual firm and steady presence throughout every phase of this project. It is largely due to his patience that it is now finished. To my brother and sister, Bayé K. Perry and Kai M. Perry, I offer thanks for their support. My parents, D. LaRouth Perry and Robert L. Perry, have been my strongest supporters. In life they've been cheering for me loudly and proudly (literally) since day one! Their loving embrace has always inspired me to do better. For their unconditional love, it is to them that I dedicated this book.

Introduction

Theorizing the Representation of Urban Blacks in "White" Cities

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We need to be universal in our goals but not in our process. This is what fairness requires.

john a. powell, "Obama's Universal Approach Leaves Many Excluded"

As you read this, somewhere history is being made. Somewhere, right now, in the United States, an African American is considering running for mayor in a city wherein his or her constituents are mostly white. Somewhere else in the country, perhaps, another black politician—an elected mayor—is making a calculated decision about an important issue in his or her city and is weighing how the decision might impact different constituencies—that is, white and black voters. Those realities have been made possible by a host of elected black leadership—namely mayors—in prior decades. By most indications, forty years ago such statements would have been impossible to write, if not laughable in their audacity. However, because of many trailblazers and demographic shifts in population and political attitudes, it is not difficult to imagine those scenarios. The result: an ever-increasing number of blacks seeking elected office as mayors in majority white cities. This book is about two such mayors: Jack Ford of Toledo, Ohio, and Rhine McLin of Dayton, Ohio.

What makes the scenarios mentioned above so very interesting is the projected impact of black mayors. Pundits and scholars alike may call such an impact pandering, but it is also a question of representation, electability, governance, and—of course—one's legacy. It is also

a complex question of how to define urban interests. In the national context many Americans are familiar with the concept of national interest. Presidents have regularly referred to the country's involvements as characterized by what is in the national interest of the country. Scholars have long used national polls to identify the interests of groups of Americans across a range of issues. In the state context Kerry L. Haynie became one of the first scholars to define "black" interests at the state level.[1] However, in the urban municipal context, those interests are much less easily ascertainable. Yet they are at least as important as state- or national-level definitions of interests.

Interests matter because the representation of our interests is of paramount importance in a representative democratic republic. Therein politicians are said to represent our interests on our behalf. However, if those interests are not easily discernible, such as in the urban context generally, how does representation function? Should those interests change as a result of demographic shifts in the electorate, how might representation be expected to develop?

I attempt to take up such questions and examine under what conditions black mayors of majority white cities can and do represent black interests. In other words, what do black mayors do for blacks if it is assumed that every eligible white voter supports their candidacy and they could win election without a single black vote? If we find that they have represented black interests, to what extent have they done so and at what political costs? Theoretically the questions presume that black mayors seek to represent black interests because blacks are a part of their constituency. Moreover, the questions are unique in that they ask if it is electorally possible and politically expedient to actively seek to represent black interests in majority white cities and still maintain critical white support.

Utilizing the sole term of Mayor Ford in Toledo (2002–2006) and the two terms of Mayor McLin in Dayton (2002–2010) and race and representation as my linchpins, I seek to shed light on the question of black representation in the municipal context. With these two cases I explore questions of political responsiveness, effectiveness, and accomplishment as governance issues. Long cited as one of the most

favored methods in urban political research, case studies have been, and continue to be, the building blocks for social science generally and urban politics in particular.[2] As Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba observe, "Case studies are essential for description, and are, therefore, fundamental to social science. It is pointless to seek to explain what we have not described with a reasonable degree of precision."[3]

I begin to interrogate that precision with theory building concerning the normative expectation that black mayors Ford and McLin will be found to represent black interests even in the majority white cities of Toledo and Dayton.[4] Additionally, I have assumed that these black mayors should represent black interests because blacks are their constituents, too. Particularly given the long history of varied voter turnout in municipal elections, seeking to represent the interests of the minority black community (of which one is a member) may result in significant benefits electorally. Scholars have found this to be true in terms of state and national politics and have labeled such efforts as those of a politician's shared racial experience.[5]

Beyond Deracialization: Toward Targeted Universalism

The first and second decades of the twenty-first century have seen more and more of that shared racial experience wherein African Americans are increasingly being elected to political offices in communities where the majority of the constituents are not black.[6] During the same period, scholars have turned their attention to the way in which these elected officials represent their black constituents' interests—and how the concept of the "black politician" has begun to change.[7] Whereas in the past scholars tended to characterize black politicians' efforts to represent their black constituents' interests as either "deracialized" or "racialized"—that is, either as focusing on politics that transcend race or as making black issues central to their agenda—the changing demographic environment and the greater acceptance of African American politicians in high-profile positions of power have exhausted the utility of that polarization.[8] Increasingly they can point to examples of black politicians who no longer find