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Great, thanks so much Muna.

Good afternoon everyone.

Thanks so much for coming to the session, and I know we’re all disappointed to not be able to hear about the wonderful work that Hadi is doing, but thanks for coming anyway, and I will try my best to use my extra minutes well, but not too much.

My name is Iris Zhang, I am a 4th year PhD student at Stanford. Today, I’m really excited to share this work with you on municipal annexations in the US and how they changed after the landmark Supreme Court decision in 2013 called Shelby versus Holder.

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First, I’ll give a quick background on why we care about places, which is the Census geographic level corresponding to municipalities or cities, as a unit of analysis.

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A rich tradition of sociological scholarship reveals the many policies and practices like redlining, racism in housing markets, racial animosity among neighbors and so on that contribute to within-place racial segregation, which help explain why different racial groups live in different neighborhoods within the same city.

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In their 2015 paper, Lichter and colleagues draw our attention to the increase in between-place racial segregation–that is, different racial groups appear to be living in different cities altogether. Predominantly white cities are becoming whiter, whereas predominantly minority cities are becoming less white.

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They call our attention to places as a key dimension of racial inequality, compared to approaches that study Census tracts, and they argue that cities have a wide range of tools at their disposal to actively shape and influence the racial composition of their cities.

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For example, zoning and land-use regulations are found to effectively racially exclude Black and minority residents, even if the law obviously doesn’t state that as the intended purpose.

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One aspect about places that makes studying them challenging is that their boundaries are unstable. Unlike data for Census tracts, which have been harmonized by Logan and colleagues to different boundary years, city boundaries are changing frequently.

But this is not an accident or merely a product of refinements in cartographic software.

Lichter and Brown argue that “Municipal boundaries delineate special interests and therefore, they are the locality where political or economic battles are fought and where affluent or poor, white or minority, or immigrant or native groups are included or excluded from the community.”

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Previous studies focusing on the ways that municipalities use boundaries strategically have investigated the practice of municipal underbounding, which is when cities deliberately avoid growing into neighboring territory that has a higher proportion of non-white residents through the process of annexation.

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To give a better visualization of what this all means, here’s a map of Houston TX, which was identified in a 2021 study by Noah Durst and colleagues to be the city that underbounds the most, with the city in 2014 in white, and 2014 Census blocks that are unincorporated within a 400-meter radius shaded according to their % Black, and annexed blocks between 2014-2020 in red.

What some scholars of municipal underbounding have shown is that the red parts, that is, those are annexed, are likely to be lower in % Black or % Hispanic, though other studies have not found significant differences.

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While these studies are certainly important for helping us understand racial discrimination against communities, especially in light of multiple case studies where communities are rallying to be annexed into a city so that they can vote on issues that affect them, one key thing these studies haven’t addressed, I argue, is that

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They don’t tell us whether cities that underbound during annexations end up becoming more white.

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So in this paper, I ask, what are the consequences of how municipalities annex?

In the 1965 Voting Rights Act, there was a provision under Sections 4 and 5 that govern the main consequence under study here, which is whether minority population dilution occurs.

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These sections of the VRA said that if a jurisdiction enacts a law OR changes their electoral boundaries, they have to first get it precleared in a federal court, with the burden of proof on them that it doesn’t result in disadvantages for racial minorities in voting.

Annexations of majority-white territory that reduces the city population from say, 53% to 47% black, as in the city of Richmond’s attempted annexation in 1970, would then have to be precleared first.

This applied to a handful of jurisdictions with a demonstrated history of Black voter suppression, predominantly states in the South.

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This brings me to my second motivation that I’ll just briefly explain, in the interest of time, on what role regulations play in limiting racial exclusion and motivation.

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With regards to this preclearance requirement in Section 5, it was removed on June 25th, 2013, in a Supreme Court case called Shelby v. Holder.

And, it’s not really clear what we would expect happens when a regulation or method of oversight is removed.

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On the one hand, given previous studies, we might expect that removing these laws that attempt to limit or eradicate racial exclusion would result in a rise in this behavior

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On the other hand, from studies on gender discrimination, laws can become ingrained norms, such that we may expect removing them to not an effect, right? For example, it’s not clear that everyone in this room, I assume, wears seatbelts because it’s the law OR

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From the immigration context, we also know that sometimes laws can be ineffective, so we may expect that the removal of an ineffective law wouldn’t produce an effect.

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Hence, I ask these questions in my paper…

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First, I investigate whether cities covered by Section 5 become more likely to annex after *Shelby*, compared both to themselves prior to Shelby and to uncovered cities, since they’re no longer restricted by this preclearance requirement.

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Second, I investigate whether cities covered by Section 5 are annexing in ways that result in more racial minority population dilution after Shelby, and relatedly,

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motivated by theories of Black exceptionalism, I ask whether the extent of dilution is greater for Black residents than for other racial minority groups.

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I’m happy to talk in greater detail about the data in Q&A, but to give a broad overview,

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I have Census block- and place-level data from 2000 to 2020 with some interpolation for intercensal data years, and I also use data from LODES just to round out the block-level socioeconomic variables a little. Block-level data is harmonized to 2010 boundaries.

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I use block and place-level shapefiles for 2000, 2007, 2013, 2014, and 2020 to identify annexations, which I’ll talk more about in just a bit.

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I have 15,000 cities in my analytic sample, which are all cities in the contiguous US that are not in the northeastern states because there is not enough unincorporated land to annex in those states. Cities also had to be in continuous existence from 2000 to 2020 and had at least one populated annexable Census block.

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To identify annexations, unfortunately there is no official source of annexations with enough completion.

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The Census Bureau’s Boundary Annexation Survey is highly incomplete and also doesn’t identify the Census blocks that were annexed.

You’ll see entries in the 2020 survey, for example, where an annexation that happened in 1983 is recorded for the first time.

So there’s a huge lag in when annexations are recorded. Therefore, I follow the work of what others studying municipal boundaries have done and manually identify them through shapefile analysis, but

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Because I use shapefiles across census year boundaries, for example, 2007 uses 2000 boundaries but 2013 uses 2010 boundaries, there can be additional errors.

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This is the figure for Roberta City, Georgia, which did not annex at all, with their surrounding, annexable blocks in the gradient.

So you can see Census block boundaries changing, especially between the last two figures. Again, happy to talk more in Q & A, but I wrestled with this and came up with a solution, so my method is sensitive to these issues.

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And, just in case, I compared the annexations I identified with what’s recorded in the BAS. This table shows comparisons between what I identify and what’s in the BAS. What’s important about this table is that:

1. CLICK I don’t miss any annexations that were in the BAS and
2. CLICK The high, 95% validation rate with the BAS for the 2000-2007 period gives me strong confidence that I’m just identifying annexations that haven’t yet been recorded, but my results are robust to limiting the sample just to the BAS-validated annexations.

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I leverage the timing of the 2013 Shelby v. Holder decision to use a difference-in-differences design, allowing me to compare trends prior to the decision and after, depending on whether the city was covered by Section 5 of the VRA.

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So my first model addresses that first question of whether cities are now more likely to annex, since they have the freedom to do so.

I use a linear probability model to regress annexation on the difference-in-differences estimator.

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Next, I address the question of whether annexations are now more likely to reduce Black and minority population share.

Using OLS regression, I regress the city’s population composition at the end of the period on a three-way interaction term between annexation and the difference in differences estimator.

I follow the so-called “canonical” two-period DID set up here with 2007 to 2013 as the pre-period, and 2014 to 2020 as the post-period. All models use city and state fixed effects with clustered-robust standard errors.

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but I also have data from 2000 to 2007 to test pre-trends. While the parallel trends assumption holds, I just want to stress here that lots of aspects of the data make this challenging for causal interpretation.

My aim here is not to make causal identification, but I nevertheless rely on the DID set up because it’s a useful way of thinking about the data, even if only descriptively.

I also include time-varying covariates in these models, but the use of these is contentious due to potential for confounding. I run models with and without them, and results do not change substantively.

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On to my first set of results.

First, I find that cities are significantly less likely to annex after Shelby. And this matches with the descriptive trends, shown on the right here,

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with proportions on the left panel and number on the right, which shows that across Section V coverage, there are less annexations over time. One reason this could be the case is just that land available for annexation could be decreasing over time.

So next, I see whether annexations are associated with population composition in ways that dilute minority populations.

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This is the model with a threeway interaction term between annexation and the difference-in-differences indicator, which I use to better understand whether removal of Section 5 requirements after Shelby moderates the relationship between annexation and racial composition.

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Contrary to expectations, I find that annexations are not significantly negatively associated with Black or non-Black minority composition after Shelby in Section 5 cities, and not in non-Section 5 cities either.

Instead, it is significantly, negatively associated with white composition.

So, to help understand the 3-way interaction term, I ran the model with each level of the interactions as the reference category to help isolate the effect of annexation for that combination.

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Here, I show the coefficients where post-Shelby, and Section 5 coverage are the reference categories.

All continuous variables are z-standardized, so what this table shows is that annexation in the 2014-2020 is associated with a 4% lower standard deviation in the percent white at the end of the period

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but no such associations exist for other groups.

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One reason I think this could be the case is that Section 5 might not have been working before Shelby.

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If you look at the before-trends, we see a significantly negative association with percent Black but a positive one with percent white.

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Annexation is associated with about a 3.5% lower standard deviation in percent Black at the end of the period and about a

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2.6% higher standard deviation in percent white.

This also shows some preliminary support for the black exceptionalism hypothesis, at least in the pre-period, since no such association exists for non-Black minority residents.

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Finally, I’ll add that one potential explanation could be that cities were anticipating this decision leading up to Shelby, so really ramped up their activity in the 2007-2013 period.

Therefore, what we’re seeing is just an artifact of the time period, but results also hold when comparing 2000-2007 with 2014-2020, so it this finding that Section 5 appears to be ineffective pre-Shelby isn’t just unique to the 2007-2013 period.

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There are still a few other things I’d like to look at, but for now, the takeaways from my presentation are that

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One, we should still be thinking hard about federal oversight on local autonomy to racially exclude, particularly in the realm of city boundaries because of their implications for minority civil rights.

Even though removing it didn’t result in immediate exacerbation of racially discriminatory processes, that needs to be contextualized by the finding that it didn’t seem effective even when federal oversight existed. In the post-Shelby era, the main form of racial exclusion could instead manifest as a refusal to annex at all, and I’m happy to show a few additional descriptive data to help make that argument in the Q &A.

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However, one main limitation of my study is lack of access to political variables to fully make connections between population composition and electoral representation, and I’m happy to discuss this more

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Second, we should continue to pay attention to dynamics underlying why Black residents face heightened exclusion in these processes,

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but one limitation of this paper is that I don’t speak to intentionality, which is a rich source of future qualitative research

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That’s it for my time, thank you so much for having me, and I’m really looking forward to your comments and suggestions, thanks!