



# Racial Policy and Agenda Instability:

## Measuring Shifts in Legislative Attention to Race in Michigan's State Legislature

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### I. Background

#### Fast Facts

- **24%** of black Americans say they have no confidence at all in the local police force in their community, compared to **6%** of their white counterparts
- **16%** of black Americans report trusting in the federal government “most of the time,” compared to **26%** of their white counterparts
- Share of white Americans who demonstrate high trust in government entities (**27%**) is twice as high as the share of black and Hispanic adults

#### Purpose of the Research

These statistics illustrate a disconnect between confidence in government entities among white and nonwhite populations in America.

There are thousands of policy problems in any given political cycle. With so much ground to cover, many topics never make it to the legislative agenda—despite advocacy and other sources of pressure from constituents, which is especially true for groups who have been historically excluded from political participation and agenda setting spaces in the U.S.

However, little contemporary scholarship currently exists that examines variation in legislative attention to race across time. This research aims to address that gap.

### II. Research Questions

#### How has bill text in Michigan's state legislature changed over time with respect to legislative attention to race?

- The research utilizes “legislative attention to race” as it pertains to non-white populations
- Bill text was examined for all Michigan bills and resolutions from **2010-2020**

### IV. Methodology and Process

#### 1. Building racialized language tool

Advisor completed an intensive content analysis to compile 800+ target word list

Words range from implicit (“inner city”) to explicit (“Asian”) racial associations

#### 2. Running bills through R

With the use of R programming language, detection of the frequency of target words was possible

#### 3. Collecting results + analysis

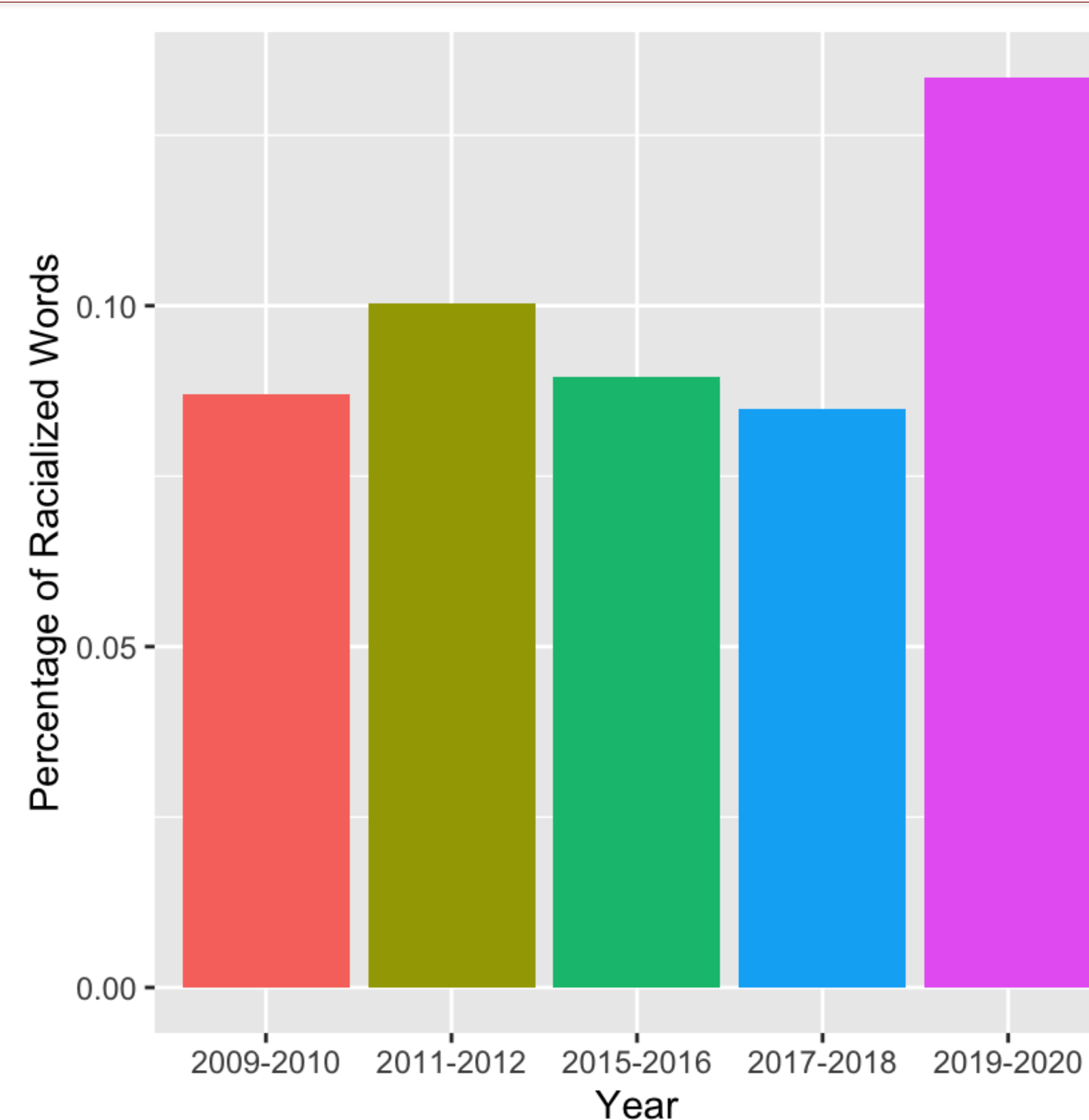
Compiled data of bill text scanning results from years 2010-2020 in Michigan

Examined contents of bills with over 2% total text of racialized language

### III. Literature Review

- Two distinct models of agenda setting in political theory:
  - The elite model: a small faction of individuals, typically white males with ample financial resources, determine and carry out a political agenda.
  - The pluralist model: a system of power distribution among opposing interest groups.
- Scholars of BIPOC policy have long debated that either model actually ensures greater access to policy and agenda to marginalized racial and ethnic groups
- Author Richard Rothstein argues that BIPOC mistrust of government entities in America comes from legislators’ active decision making
- In the past twenty years, new wave racial equity movements push for the creation and promotion of affordable housing units, addressing gentrification, and teaching critical race theory in public schools to be prioritized in agenda setting spaces

### V. Results



- Most frequent use of radicalized words in Michigan's bill text occurred in **2019-2020**
- This timeframe also marked the greatest uptick in language associated with the Black Lives Matter movement

### VI. Analysis

#### 2019-2020 Uptick in Racialized Language in Michigan Policy

- Cannot establish direct causation to explain this spike in the data
- Worthy to note that spike occurred during the time frame of several racial justice movements gaining traction within communities and mass media cycles
  - protests following the murder of George Floyd
  - push to teach critical race theory in public schools
- This illustrates a kind of effectiveness on behalf of demonstrations and organizing, indicating that legislators are paying attention to racial justice movements

#### Bills Containing More than 2% Racialized Language

- Found that in many of these bills, solutions to racialized issues that new wave racial equity activists are pushing for (such as creation and promotion of affordable housing units, addressing gentrification, and teaching critical race theory in public schools across the state) are **not** being frequently addressed in these policies
- Instead, many of these bills focused on policymaking focusing on logistical happenings in Michigan public schools, such as:
  - Senate Bill No. 215: created a commission on Spanish-speaking affairs but took little other action to uplift Latinx communities in the state
  - House Bill No. 4269: defined how students could fulfill secondary language requirements in Michigan state public schools

### VII. Key Takeaways

- In Virginia, Congress, and South Carolina, noticeable upticks in racialized language use in bill text were far less drastic than in Michigan, if present at all
  - Creates questions of reasoning behind this finding to support further research
- There may need to be more testing for 2% racialized language in bill text as the cutoff for determining proposals to be most relevant as it pertains to racialized language contents

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