

LEADING IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

While there is much work on the Mississippi Delta, it is varied. There is a large literature base focusing on the Civil Rights Movement. There is also a large literature base focusing on the social and economic issues such as persistent poverty, access to health care, and educational attainment deficits. During the 1980's and 1990's work was conducted to better understand the changes in the Delta since the Civil Rights Movement. Since then there have been many firsts for women and African Americans in the region. For African American men, they were beginning to be elected into positions that were traditionally held by white men. Most notably, they were being elected in towns where black men had never served as mayor. Further, women were increasing their numbers in terms of elected leadership, particularly as mayors of small towns. These strides have yet to be captured in research. Therefore, this study is exploratory.

Using a life history approach, interviews were conducted with nineteen Delta mayors. Participants note how structures such as race, class and gender shape power relations. Findings show that race still structures relationships in the Mississippi Delta. The work also shows how gender in a rural area is a constraint for female leaders. The work also found ways in which social class enable and constrain mayors. Social institutions such as the church, family and community are also considered as participants noted the importance of these institutions in learning about leadership.