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African Americans and Their Representatives in Congress: Does Race Matter?

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While research on Congress and congressional elections represents a large and lively research domain in American politics, only scant attention has been paid to Black voters and their representatives in Congress. Despite the growth in surveys designed specifically to examine voter attitudes toward Congress, such as Michigan's landmark 1978 National Election Study and the survey work of John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (1995), no work has systematically examined the attitudes that Blacks have toward Congress and their representatives. What we know about Black voters and their attitudes about the national government through survey research is generally based on presidential politics (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Dawson 1994; Tate 1994).

Recently, scholars such as David Lublin (1997), Carol Swain (1993), and Kenny Whitby (1997) have begun to systematically examine the type of representation that Black voters have won in Congress since the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Their research implicitly and explicitly questions the continued value and necessity of Black elected officials. Specifically, are Black elected officials essential to the political representation of African Americans today? Using data from 1996 National Black Election Study, available through the Inter-Consortium for Political and Social Research, I address this issue from the vantage point of Blacks themselves. Do Blacks feel that they are better represented in the U.S. system of indirect democracy when their representative is Black? In addition, how does the race of the House representative impact on their political behavior and attitudes? In other words, does Black representation in Washington lead Blacks to become more informed about and more active in national politics? And does Black representation affect attitudes that Blacks have about Congress as an institution more broadly?

Is Race Still Important to Blacks?

Published originally in 1993, Carol Swain's Black Faces, Black Interests ignited a controversy in the fields of Black politics and legislative studies. Her book questioned the long-standing assumption that Black elected officials best represented the political interests of Blacks. While scholars in gender politics have sought to directly examine the issue of descriptive representation in the representation of women's interests (see Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Thomas 1994), Swain was the first to conclude, using empirical evidence, that the race of the representative was not essential for the representation of Black interests at the congressional level. White legislators, she argued, could equally and effectively represent Black voters as Black legislators.

Critics of Swain pointed out various methodological limitations of her award-winning study. For example, Swain defined representation fairly narrowly on the basis of summary measures of legislative votes and, in her case study of thirteen Black and White lawmakers, constituency service.

This problem is not exclusive to Swain. Amazingly, the literature offers very little in terms of a theory of or body of work on political representation. Since the eighteenth century theories of Edmund Burke, congressional scholars have long pointed out the two different styles of political representation, delegate versus trustee. Delegate representatives try to reflect in their representative role the views of their constituents, while those acting as trustees serve by relying on their best judgment of the issues. There, the scholarship on political representation pretty much ends until the publication of Hanna Pitkin's theoretical work in 1967.

Pitkin characterized political representation as consisting of two forms: descriptive and substantive. One is descriptively represented when the representative belongs to your social or demographic group. Representatives substantively represent their constituents through the realization of their political needs. Descriptive representation devoid of any substance impact was "symbolic." She concludes in the end that political representation is "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (1967:209).

The empirical work that emerged was consistent with her definition. Descriptive or symbolic representation was ignored in favor of a model of representation that was purely instrumental. Miller and Stokes' seminal article published in 1963 searched for "congruence" between constituents' beliefs and the legislator's voting behavior, and subsequent studies would interpret political representation as policy responsiveness or congruence. Heinz Eulau strongly objected this approach as too narrow¹, writing with Paul Karps:

By emphasizing only one component of responsiveness as a substantive concept, they reduced a complex phenomenon like representation to one of its components and substituted the component for the whole. But if responsiveness is limited to one component, it cannot capture the complexities of the real world of politics .. How else could one explain that representatives manage to stay in office in spite of the fact that they are *not* necessarily or always responsive to the represented.?" (Eulau and Karps 1978: 60-61).

For Eulau and Karps, there were other "targets of responsiveness" beyond policy responsiveness, including constituency service, service to the district generally through pork barrel legislation, and what he labeled "symbolic responsiveness." Constituents were symbolically represented through "public gestures of a sort that create a sense of trust and support in the relationship between the representative and the represented" (1978: 63). Eulau and Karps's theorizing moved the concept far beyond its purely instrumental meaning to include a role for descriptive representation.

Nancy Schwartz's notion of "constitutive representation" is consistent Eulau and Karps's concept of "symbolic representation." Concerned with the problem of single-member districts in the U.S. political system, Schwartz's definition of representation has the representative representing the "whole" or district and not just the individual. However, whether representing the whole or individual, representation includes "standing" for the dominant social group within the district. Representatives can be counted on to "echo certain group aspirations and metaphors" (1988: 134). Schwartz's model also addressed the Burkean dilemma of trustee versus delegate-style representation. Insofar as the representative acts in the interest of the district or nation as a whole, he or she is able to positively reconstruct the community and build political consensus. True political representation in practice, argues Schwartz, should empower citizens.

Descriptive representation, both in Eulau and Schwartz's formulations, is an important form of political representation. Political representation can also build public trust and promote political participation. The empirical work, nevertheless, begins and ends with the analytically limited and flawed policy responsiveness studies. The field lacks a full theoretical account of how members of Congress actually represent their constituents, the multiple forms that representation can take, and how representation then impacts upon voter attitudes and behavior.

Descriptive representation might also be itself a form of political representation. Simply having representatives of one's own race or ethnicity may positively impact upon the constituents' political attitudes and behavior. They may feel that members of their own group can better represent their interests. Previous survey work by Linda F. Williams (1989) found that Blacks and Whites believed candidates running for Congress of their own race were superior to other candidates belonging to the other race on a number of candidate trait dimensions.

The 1996 national telephone survey of African-Americans was designed to address the controversy provoked by the publication of Swain's book, albeit from a different vantage point. Leaving aside the question of whether Black faces are essential to the substantive representation of Black political interests, what do Blacks feel about the race of the representative and their political representation in Congress? All things being equal, do Blacks place greater premium on their representation from Black legislators than that they receive from White legislators?

Preliminary Findings: Race Matters

Preliminary analysis reveals that the race of the House representative is important to Blacks even when the political party of the legislator is taken into account. As shown in Table 1, even taking into account his or her political party, the race of the House member still has an impact. Black members of Congress, of whom all were Democrats in this sample, were more likely to earn higher ratings from their Black constituents than White Democrats and Republicans. Eighty-four percent of Blacks with Black representatives approved of their representative's job performance in contrast to 73 percent of Blacks whose representatives were White Democrats and 54 percent of Blacks whose representatives were White Republicans. Blacks with Black legislators also knew more about their legislators than those represented by Whites. Nearly one-quarter of the respondents having a Black member of Congress could identify him or her by name in contrast to only 8 to 10 percent of those represented by Whites. Blacks represented by Blacks also expressed greater interest in politics than those represented by Whites. They were also more likely to have said that they voted in the 1994 elections than those represented by Whites. Black representation, however, did not affect Black attitudes toward Congress. Blacks represented by Blacks were equally disapproving of Congress as those represented by Whites. Blacks in districts held by White Republicans, however, were somewhat more likely to support term limits for members of Congress than those in districts held by Democrats of either race.

Alternative explanations for race

Although preliminary research indicates that Blacks in districts that have Black representatives are more satisfied with their representative, more knowledgeable, and more interested in politics than those in districts that have White representatives, it is not clear that the reason is entirely due to the race of representative. Blacks may prefer Black representatives to White representatives because Black Democrats are still more liberal than are White Democrats.

Table 1. Blacks' Congressional Attitudes and Behavior by the Race and Party of Their House Representative

| <i>Race and Party of Their Representative</i> | <i>Black Democrat</i> | <i>White Democrat</i> | <i>White/Otr. Republican</i> |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| AVERAGE FEELING THERMOMETER RATING FOR REPRESENTATIVE (STANDARD DEVIATIONS) | 72 (25) | 56 (24) | 45 (26) |
| APPROVE/DISAPPROVE OF REPRESENTATIVE'S JOB?*** | | | |
| Approve | 84 | 73 | 54 |
| Disapprove | 16 | 27 | 46 |
| CAN NAME HOUSE REPRESENTATIVE** | | | |
| Correct | 23 | 10 | 8 |
| Incorrect | 77 | 90 | 92 |
| CAN RATE HOUSE REP. ON FEELING THERMOMETER** | | | |
| Yes | 84 | 68 | 66.5 |
| No | 16 | 32 | 33.5 |
| CAN IDENTIFY HOUSE REP.'S POLITICAL PARTY** | | | |
| Correct | 57 | 37 | 33 |
| Incorrect | 43 | 63 | 67 |
| CAN IDENTIFY HOUSE REP.'S RACE** | | | |
| Correct | 79 | 65 | 57 |
| Incorrect | 21 | 35 | 43 |
| HAS SOME KNOWLEDGE ABOUT REPRESENTATIVE** | | | |
| Yes | 65 | 52 | 50 |
| No | 35 | 48 | 50 |
| CAMPAIGN INTEREST** | | | |
| Low | 21 | 30 | 26 |
| Moderate | 43 | 41.5 | 49 |
| High | 37 | 29 | 25 |
| CARE WHICH PARTY WINS?*** | | | |
| No | 10 | 19 | 19 |
| Yes | 90 | 81 | 81 |
| VOTE IN 1996 | | | |
| Yes | 72 | 63 | 69 |
| No | 28 | 37 | 31 |
| VOTE IN 1994* | | | |
| Yes | 52 | 40 | 43 |
| No | 48 | 60 | 57 |
| APPROVE/DISAPPROVE OF CONGRESS? | | | |
| Approve | 32 | 25 | 33 |
| Disapprove | 68 | 75 | 77 |
| FAVOR/OPPOSE TERM LIMITS?* | | | |
| Favor | 70.5 | 68 | 77 |
| Oppose | 29.5 | 32 | 23 |

Weighted data. *Chi-square sig. level (two-tailed) < .05 **Chi-square sig. level (two-tailed) < .01

Swain's own research establishes that on legislative votes Black Democrats in Congress are generally more liberal than White Democrats. It could also be, however, that Black Democrats have other political characteristics which make them better representatives of Blacks than White members of either party. It is important to consider the different forms political representation can take beyond descriptive representation.

Members of Congress serve their constituents generally through legislative and constituency caseload work. In U.S. legislative politics, party membership is not a perfect predictor of the legislator's voting record. An important criticism of Swain's study is that Black representation in Washington was consisted mostly of the legislator's voting record as summarized by votes on loosely related bills (Sinclair 1996). Bill sponsorship is another form of representation. Although few bills make it out of committee and actually become policy or law, voters may still value policy activism or the aggressive pursuit or at least articulation of tangible policy goals. But, in addition to determining how many bills in a given Congress does the member sponsor, how many of these bills make it out of committee and are voted on the floor? What proportion actually becomes law? Voters may also favor lawmakers who have been successful in the pursuit of their policy goals.

The types of bills that members sponsor may also be critically related to voters' attitudes about political representation. Another criticism of Swain's analysis that she failed to examine votes on specific key bills. Aggregate indicators of roll call votes can be poor measures of support for "Black interest" legislation. Votes on key bills are better measures of the legislator's support for Black interests (Whitby 1997). In this study, I consider votes of single bills as having the potential to impact upon the legislator's performance rating.

Typically, House members employ about 20 people on their personal staffs. Because casework is difficult and time consuming, the member's personal staff size might be a useful indicator of constituency service. Staff allowances are the same for all members in the U.S. House of Representatives. Because personal staff members also help with the member's legislative workload, a better measure would determine how many personal staff members are employed to work in the district as opposed to Washington.

Committee work is another way legislators attempt to represent their district. First, like chairmanships, the number of committees a member of Congress serves may enhance his or her legislative influence in Congress. Most members of the House of Representatives serve on two committees, but some serve on only one and others serve on three. Secondly, the type of committee the member serves on may affect the type of policies he or she can claim credit for, and hence, may impact on his or her standing in the district. Christopher Deering and Steven Smith (1997) identified congressional committees that were either (1) policy oriented, (2) constituency service oriented, (3) prestigious, and/or (4) undesirable. The type of committee a member belonged to was examined to see if it affected their ratings. Like committee chairmanships, the legislator's seniority and party leadership posts can enhance his or her influence in Congress.

In addition to legislative and committee work and constituency service members of Congress devote considerable time to re-election activities. Highly rated members of Congress might be the most effective campaigners, especially since name recognition and approval ratings are strongly correlated. Campaign activity can include campaign expenditures and margin of victory in the last election. Those who win by high margins might be better known and better liked than those who win narrowly. Similarly, incumbents who spent the most on their last campaigns might also be better known, although it is not clear that they are also the best liked.

Thus in addition to a member's race, Black attitudes toward their representatives are likely to be affected by:

- 1) The legislator's political party;
- 2) His or her voting record;
- 3) His or her legislative record, namely bill sponsorship and bill content;
- 4) His or her committee work, including the number of committees, chairmanship, or type of committee service;
- 5) His or her legislative position, such as seniority and party leadership;
- 6) Staff size;
- 7) The legislator's campaign activity, their margin of victory and campaign expenditures.

Data corresponding to these seven factors for the legislators whose districts fell into the 1996 NBES sample were collected by the author and appended to the data set. The party of the representative was matched to the party of the respondent. Respondents who identified themselves as independents or non-partisan and did not "lean" toward either major party were excluded from the analysis.

A number of roll call voting summaries for the 252 legislators whose districts were in the sample were collected and analyzed as well. Most of these summaries were taken from Congressional Quarterly publications and include interest group ratings, measures of presidential support and opposition in 1994, and Poole and Rosenthal's indices. None of these roll call summaries, each analyzed separately because of high multicollinearity, significantly impacted upon the evaluations of legislators by Blacks. As a result, they were subsequently dropped from the analysis. These measures likely failed because they were not matched to the respondent's own ideological preferences. While the vast majority of Blacks support liberal policies, a minority does not. Unfortunately, because the 1996 data set contained only a few legislatively relevant policy questions, only a single policy congruence measure could be analyzed here. Black attitudes toward welfare reform were matched to their legislator's vote on the final welfare bill that passed the House. Democrats were divided over the welfare reform, as, actually, were Blacks. But a slight majority of Blacks endorsed the five-year lifetime limit to welfare benefits for poor families in the survey.

In addition, the author purchased bill sponsorship data from LEGI-SLATE, a legislative and regulatory data archival firm in Washington, D.C. Two types of measures were examined. The total number of bills sponsored by the legislators and the total number of bills sponsored by the legislator that became law. The average number of bills sponsored by the member in the 105th Congress was 7. These include co-sponsored and personal bills. By contrast, the average number of bills that became law for the average legislator was less than one.

While Deering and Smith identify four types of House committees, constituency-service, desirable and undesirable, and policy-oriented, none affected Black attitudes toward their representatives or impacted upon their campaign interest and voting behavior. These measures were dropped from the analysis. What is presented below is the total number committees the member serves on and whether or not the member served as a chair of either the committee or the committee's subcommittee. Related to committee chairmanship is party leadership. Members of Congress were identified as leaders if they held a party leadership post. Seniority was measured as the number of years the member has served in the House since first elected.

The legislator's total staff size and number of staff members working in the district (as opposed to the Capitol) turned out to be highly correlated. Thus, these measures would have to be analyzed separately. Since my hypothesis is that the home district's staff size affects the

quality and quantity of the member's constituency service, the effect of this measure on Black attitudes toward their legislators and their behavior will be reported.

In addition, two measures related to the member's campaign activities were analyzed. First, the member's margin of victory in the preceding House elections of 1994 was appended to the data set and analyzed. The actual dollar amount of money spent in the 1994 campaign was also examined. Campaign expenditures, however, were collapsed into three categories: low, moderate, and high. High constituted expenditures over \$600,000 in 1994.

Finally, because the dependent measures are attitudinally and behaviorally linked to key social characteristics of the respondent, such as age, gender, and educational attainment, additional variables were included as controls. These variables were the number of years the respondent had lived in his or her community, age, education, and gender.

Tables 2 through 4 present the results of a regression analysis of seven dependent measures: (1) the representative's approval rating, (2) the representative's feeling thermometer rating, (3) political knowledge scale,² (4) campaign interest scale, (5) congressional voter participation index, (6) approval rating of Congress, and (7) support for term limits. The general pattern found is that the race and political party of the legislators had a greater impact on the attitudes and behavior of their Black constituents than their ideological performance and professional activities.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Member's Evaluations by Blacks in 1996

| | Member's Approval Rating | | | Member's Thermometer Rating | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------|---------|-----------------------------|------------|---------|
| | B | Std. Error | t-ratio | B | Std. Error | t-ratio |
| Constant | 2.402 | .487 | 4.936 | 30.860 | 7.930 | 3.892 |
| Member's race | .225 | .148 | 1.520 | 8.748 | 2.389 | 3.622 |
| Party Match | .907 | .158 | 5.752 | 15.539 | 2.527 | 6.148 |
| Welfare vote match | .119 | .134 | .890 | 1.571 | 2.195 | .716 |
| Party leader | -.185 | .149 | -1.246 | -3.572 | 2.419 | -1.476 |
| Seniority | -.001 | .008 | -.969 | -.203 | .130 | -1.563 |
| Home staff | .004 | .027 | 1.514 | .540 | .450 | 1.201 |
| Bills Law | .032 | .045 | .716 | .935 | .791 | 1.183 |
| Campaign spending | -.167 | .094 | -1.775 | -3.626 | 1.477 | -2.455 |
| R's residency | .000 | .002 | 1.066 | .042 | .034 | 1.215 |
| R's age | .001 | .005 | 1.841 | .152 | .074 | 2.060 |
| R's education | .046 | .039 | 1.185 | .923 | .649 | 1.422 |
| R's gender | -.127 | .132 | -.963 | .542 | 2.186 | .248 |
| N | 446 | | | 538 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | .134 | | | .178 | | |

In terms of the relative weight of race and party affiliation on Black attitudes toward their representatives, political party overshadowed race. As shown in Table 2, Blacks who had Blacks representing in Congress were no more approving of their performance than Blacks represented by Whites. The race of member of Congress did, however, have an impact on his or her feeling thermometer rating. Black members of Congress earned ratings about nine degrees higher from their Black constituents than White members of Congress. Political party, nevertheless, carried a much larger impact than race. Legislators whose party matched their Black constituent's received ratings about 15.5 degrees higher than members who belonged to rival parties. Political party also had a significant impact on the member's approval rating as well.

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Blacks' Knowledge and Voting Behavior in 1996

| | R's Knowledge Scale | | | R's Campaign Interest | | | R's Voting Participation | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|------------|---------|-----------------------|------------|---------|--------------------------|------------|---------|
| | B | Std. Error | t-ratio | B | Std. Error | t-ratio | B | Std. Error | t-ratio |
| Constant | -.036 | .389 | -.091 | 4.311 | .632 | 6.820 | -.275 | .214 | -1.287 |
| Member's race | .378 | .118 | 3.217 | -.022 | .191 | -.115 | .026 | .064 | .398 |
| Party match | .470 | .123 | 3.810 | .853 | .201 | 4.248 | .107 | .068 | 1.573 |
| Welfare vote match | -.034 | .110 | -.304 | .328 | .180 | 1.824 | .066 | .060 | 1.100 |
| Party leader | -.161 | .121 | -1.330 | -.017 | .198 | -.086 | -.000 | .066 | -.005 |
| Seniority | -.000 | .007 | -.475 | -.000 | .011 | -.031 | -.002 | .004 | -.713 |
| Home staff | .001 | .023 | -.222 | .018 | .038 | .486 | -.004 | .013 | -.322 |
| Bills Law | -.013 | .038 | -.338 | .106 | .061 | 1.743 | .012 | .020 | .611 |
| Campaign spending | -.001 | .074 | -.125 | -.174 | .121 | -1.442 | -.026 | .040 | -.648 |
| R's residency | .001 | .002 | 4.915 | -.000 | .003 | -.104 | .003 | .001 | 3.159 |
| R's age | .017 | .004 | 4.535 | .044 | .006 | 7.218 | .019 | .002 | 9.149 |
| R's education | .222 | .033 | 6.834 | .251 | .053 | 4.723 | .141 | .018 | 7.963 |
| R's gender | .208 | .110 | 1.895 | .045 | .179 | .249 | -.052 | .059 | -.878 |
| N | 719 | | | 704 | | | 625 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | .161 | | | .116 | | | .197 | | |

As explained earlier, the voting records of the 252 NBES legislators were not statistically related to Black attitudes about their legislators or electoral behavior. Even when the voting behavior of the legislator directly corresponded to the position of the constituent (in the case, the votes on welfare reform), policy did not affect Black attitudes toward their representatives. Bill sponsorship and successful bill sponsorship did not affect Black attitudes toward members. Similarly, party leadership, seniority, and staff size were unrelated to the approval ratings of legislators. Campaign spending, however, did significantly impact upon Blacks' evaluations of

their representatives. High-spending legislators received slightly lower evaluations than those spending less, but the effect of campaign money on the approval measures is rather small.

In general, the same patterns were found in the analysis of Blacks' level of knowledge about Congress, their interest in the campaign, and voting participation. Neither the legislative record of members of Congress, their political stature, nor campaign behavior had an impact on any of the three measures as shown in Table 3. Black constituents represented by Blacks, however, displayed significantly more knowledge about their representatives. Here, the impact of race is about equal to that of political party, as constituents having representatives from their political party also knew more about their legislators. The legislator's race, however, was unrelated to the level of interest their constituents displayed in the 1996 campaigns as well as to their level of political participation. Political party was important. Those represented by members from their political party were more interested in campaigns and were more likely to have voted in the 1994 and 1996 elections.

In Table 4, neither the race nor party of the member affected the attitudes that Blacks had about Congress or their support for term limits for members of Congress. Very little, in fact, was significantly related to these two measures.

Beyond the member's political party and race, variables introduced in the regression models as controls were perhaps the most important determinants of Blacks' level of knowledge about their legislators and political interest and participation. Predictably, the longer one lived in the community, the more one knew about one's representative in Congress and the more likely one was to have voted. Older and better educated Blacks were more likely to know more about their legislators and participate in politics.

Table 4. Regression Analysis of Congress's Approval Rating and Support for Term Limits

| | Congress's Approval Rating | | | Support for Term Limits | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------|---------|-------------------------|------------|---------|
| | B | Std. Error | t-ratio | B | Std. Error | t-ratio |
| Constant | 2.875 | .422 | 6.809 | .744 | .121 | 6.149 |
| Member's race | -.009 | .124 | -.076 | .034 | .035 | .972 |
| Party match | .008 | .136 | .060 | -.017 | .038 | -.439 |
| Welfare vote match | .104 | .123 | .839 | .074 | .035 | 2.138 |
| Party leader | -.054 | .137 | -.395 | -.023 | .039 | -.590 |
| Seniority | -.005 | .007 | -.027 | -.001 | .002 | -.568 |
| Home staff | .001 | .025 | .038 | -.017 | .007 | -2.301 |
| Bills Law | -.015 | .047 | -.314 | .014 | .013 | 1.074 |
| Campaign spending | -.020 | .081 | -.242 | .001 | .023 | .242 |
| R's residency | .001 | .002 | .708 | -.000 | .001 | -.597 |
| R's age | -.001 | .004 | -1.480 | .000 | .001 | 2.060 |
| R's education | -.053 | .036 | -.060 | .923 | .649 | 1.422 |
| R's gender | -.217 | .121 | -.072 | .542 | 2.186 | .248 |
| N | 638 | | | 538 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | -.004 | | | .178 | | |

Conclusion

Does race matter to Blacks in terms of their political representation? The results presented here indicate that the answer is yes. Blacks showed greater satisfaction with the representatives belonging to their race than with those belonging to other racial groups. This finding persisted even when controlling for many factors related to the political representation of Blacks, such as legislator's party affiliation and voting record as well as seniority and type of committee service.

The impact of race on Black attitudes and behavior, however, was fairly circumscribed. Blacks are more satisfied with the representation they perceive coming from Black legislators than White legislators, even White Democratic legislators, but this satisfaction does not impact on their attitudes toward Congress as an institution. And while Blacks having Black representatives are more knowledgeable, they are no more likely to turn out and vote than those Blacks represented by Whites. This runs counter to Larry Bobo's and Frank Gilliam's Black empowerment thesis (1990), that Black representation makes Black voters feel more politically effective and helps in their mobilization. However, it also runs counter to the popular perception that safe majority-Black districts depress Black voter participation. Claudine Gay's (1997) dissertation work, in fact, found that the low turnout in majority-Black districts is actually a product of *White*, and not Black, defection from politics. The behavioral consequences of Black representation in Congress, therefore, may not as great as that for Black mayors, because as Gay points out, "Black mayors of Congress are not executives; black members of Congress do not have the power to directly impact the daily lives of constituents" (p. 176).

Finally, the descriptive representation of Blacks did not have its own impact on the attitudes that Blacks had about Congress as an institution. Indeed, while the demographic disparity between the American population and the physical makeup of Congress can be seen as violating the norm of political equality, it does not appear to have that effect on the attitudes of Blacks. Admittedly, Black opinion of Congress is no different from that of the public-at-large as it is uniformly low. However, Black attitudes about Congress are not derived on the basis of their numerical underrepresentation in Congress.

Even as while political scientists will continue to debate whether the descriptive underrepresentation of Blacks and of other groups, such as women, is politically important, race continues to matter to Blacks. The subjective significance that race retains for Blacks, however, is not that great. As Carol Swain (1993) asserts, political party is more important in the representation of Black interests, and even among Blacks, political party was generally more important than race in how they evaluated the performance of their representatives.

But even if scholars could agree that the differences between Black and White legislators in how they represented Black interests are not significant it is unlikely that descriptive representation would lose its subjective value to Blacks. This is an indirect democracy. Americans participate in government by selecting policymakers who make decisions for them. The founding fathers sought to ensure representation by granting only two-year terms to those elected to the House of Representatives. Legislators in the House could be quickly replaced if they failed to adequately represent their constituents. But elected officials can also be trusted to represent the people because they are, in fact, from the people, presumably possessing the same social characteristics, beliefs, and interests as their constituents. On this fundamental premise, Americans want, expect, and value descriptive representation. And in expressing greater

satisfaction with representatives belonging to their own social group, Blacks are by no means unique.

Endnotes

1. There were other problems with the policy congruence studies, according to Eulau, including the fact that they assumed too much about the political capacities of the represented.
 2. The ability to correctly identify the race of the House representative is included in this political knowledge scale. However, the results reported here are the same when the race identification item was dropped from the scale.
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Appendix A

SCALE ITEMS

Political knowledge Scale (0 to 5): Additive index of correct responses to (1) the identity of House majority party; (2) the identity of Senate majority party; and respondent(3) can correctly recall the names of their Senators (0=both incorrect or don't know, 1=1 correct, 2=both correct) and (4) can recall the name of their House representative; (5) can correctly identify race of House representative.

Campaign interest Scale (2 to 10): "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns so far this year?" -- 0=not interested, 1=somewhat interested, 2=very interested.

Congressional voter participation scale (0 to 2): 2 if respondent voted in the 1994 and 1996 congressional elections; 1 if respondent voted in either the 1994 or 1996 election; 0 if respondent voted in neither.

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