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### Race Representatives: Why Black Members of Congress Matter

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#### Recommended Citation

McDonald, Shenika, "Race Representatives: Why Black Members of Congress Matter" (2016). *Honors Theses*. 140.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/honors/140/>

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program  
Andrews University

HONS 497  
Honors Thesis


Race Representatives: Why Black Members of Congress Matter

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March 28, 2016

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## Abstract

My research project consisted of examining 200 bills sponsored by six African American members of Congress during the Ninety-third Congress (1973-1975). These six members of Congress represented Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; or New York, New York – three metropolitan cities with significant African American populations. This research emphasizes the importance of Black members of Congress to African Americans nationwide by highlighting the Congressional Black Caucus' formation and mission, examining the bills' key terms and public policy issues for racial implications, and consulting a variety of secondary source material that underscores the need for descriptive representation in the Black community. The primary goal of this research is to use the concept of race representation (a term coined specifically for this research describing African Americans who are expected to advocate on behalf of the African American community because of their common descriptive characteristics – a combination of both descriptive and substantive representation in a representative democracy) to better understand the legislative behavior of Black members of Congress and to suggest that descriptive representation allows for Black inclusion in the political arena.

Black people have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies...just permanent interests.

—The Honorable Charles Diggs, Jr.

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My research asks the questions: Does descriptive representation lead to substantive representation within the Black community? Do Black members of Congress facilitate institutional attention to minority interests? Do Black members of Congress serve as race representatives for the Black community nationwide rather than just within the borders of their individual congressional districts?

The expressed preferences and legislators' descriptive characteristics are politically relevant in effective representation of African Americans. Because African Americans have shared experiences, once an African American enters the institution they are likely to advocate on behalf of those interests. An African American legislator has experienced the issues he or she is advocating, a valuable tool in understanding their role as representatives. With Black members themselves part of the African American community, they have personal motivations to advocate for Black interests. It is important to have this focus on African Americans because "this group has struggled to have its policy preferences realized in government decisions."<sup>1</sup>

In the field of political science, it is believed that substantive representation is more effective in a representative democracy than descriptive representation. Substantive representation is the tendency of elected officials to advocate on behalf of a certain group, while descriptive representation means that outward, physical appearance such as race, ethnicity, or gender of legislators should resemble that of his or her constituents. Substantive representative is the most basic role of a legislator – to represent the expressed preferences and interests of a group of people regardless of your descriptive

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Griffin and Michael Keane, "Are African Americans Effectively Represented in Congress?," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (March 2011): 145, accessed October 10, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/1065912909340894.

characteristics. A legislator's descriptive characteristics should in no way prevent them from advocating on behalf of a certain group. However, it is important to note, "Descriptive representatives, representatives who share politically salient physical characteristics like race or ethnicity with their electoral constituencies, are widely viewed as important to the representation of marginalized groups."<sup>2</sup>

Marginalized groups have a unique set of interests because of their shared experiences, especially in the political arena. In this research, particular interest given to marginalized groups because their interests often differ from those of more privileged backgrounds, whose voices have been historically marginalized and thus, interests ignored.

Members of marginalized groups, like African Americans and Latinos, are set apart politically from members of more privileged groups by shared experiences...Experiences with discrimination, or observations that policies affect group members in systematic ways, for example define and differentiate groups along politically salient dimensions.<sup>3</sup>

African Americans' history of slavery, disenfranchisement, segregation, and discrimination lead to creation of a demographic whose interests need to prudently advocated. Their unique interests call for representatives that understand their problems and are willing to find an effective solution.

The arrival of the first African American members of Congress on Capitol Hill in 1870 was monumental. Just a decade earlier slave owners held those congressional seats moreover, the U.S. Capitol, where these newest members of Congress came to work had

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<sup>2</sup> William Curtis Ellis and Walter Clark Wilson, "Minority Chairs and Congressional Attention to Minority Issues: The Effect of Descriptive Representation in Positions of Institutional Power," *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 5 (December 2013): 1207, accessed October 16, 2015, DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.12023.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1209.



been built by slave labor. A group of 17 Black Congressmen embodied the triumph of the Union and the determination of Radical Republicans to redesign the South's political makeup. In an attempt to improve the lives of African Americans, these Black members had three primary goals: "providing education, enforcing political rights, and extending opportunities to enable economic independence."<sup>4</sup> Their unified interests were the beginning of an African American presence in the institution of Congress.

As the twentieth century approached local southern laws and Jim Crow segregation, combined with several other factors, resulted in fewer Black members elected to state and federal offices. Between 1887 and 1901, just five Blacks served in Congress. This was primarily the result of it being more difficult for Blacks to be elected.

Obstacles included violence, intimidation, and fraud by white supremacists; state and local disenfranchisement laws that denied increasing numbers of Blacks the right to vote; and contested election challenges in Congress. Moreover, the legislative focus shifted from the idealism of the postwar Radical Republicans to the business interests of a rapidly industrializing nation.<sup>5</sup>

Without a single Black member in Congress to advocate on behalf of the Black community, Congress refused to enact legislation to improve the conditions of African Americans faced after the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments.

The year 1929 saw the end to the African Americans' long hiatus from Congress with thirteen Black members elected during 1929-1970.<sup>6</sup> The New Deal resurrected Black political participation with its promises of fuller participation in American society.

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<sup>4</sup> Committee on House Administration of the U.S. House of Representatives, *Black Americans on Congress, 1870-2007* (Washington, DC: House Office of the Clerk, Office of History and Preservation, 2008), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

The 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was an apprenticeship for Black members of Congress, attaining more desirable committee assignments and accruing seniority to hold leadership positions. This apprenticeship coincided with the blossoming of the Civil Rights Movement. With advocacy groups and Black members interested in similar goals, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 were victories for both groups. As their numbers in Congress increased, so did their momentum.

The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) is the zenith of Black institutional power. Since its formation in 1971, CBC has been the leader in putting forth legislation to the benefit of the African American community. In the shadow of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its subsequent revisions, Black voters were free to participate in the political process. With a new Black political momentum, the formal group that made up the CBC “became a focal point for addressing important issues to Blacks nationally by acting as an advocacy group for African Americans within the institution and forming a potent bloc for pushing legislative items.” A formal group focusing on Black issues made these members of Congress the ideal representatives for the Black community. It is the CBC’s mission to “empower America’s neglected citizens and address their legislative concerns.”<sup>7</sup> The CBC’s dedication to those neglected citizens reveal their dedication to the Black communities’ most pressing issues.

In an attempt to show evidence to support the claims that African American members of Congress are race representatives, this research relied on a qualitative document analysis. To examine references to the existence of a particular theme in this set of documents, a content analysis was performed on sponsored bills. The sample for

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<sup>7</sup> G.K. Butterfield, “America’s Congressional Black Caucus,” accessed November 12, 2015, <https://cbc-butterfield.house.gov/about>.

this study consisted of 200 bills sponsored by six African American members of Congress found through Congress.gov, the official website for federal legislative information, which is provided through the Library of Congress, the research arm of Congress. Bill sponsorship was chosen as the sole indicator of legislative behavior because the primary sponsorship of bills “gives members an opportunity to identify themselves formally with a particular set of issues and build a reputation.”<sup>8</sup>

The date range selected for analysis is from January 3, 1973 to January 3, 1975. This period was the Ninety-third Congress, which saw a significant number of African Americans holding office. This time period was also chosen because no legislative information is available on Congress.gov prior to 1973. During the Ninety-third Congress, seventeen African American members served in the federal legislature. Six of these seventeen were chosen to be a part of this project’s analysis.

The legislators studied in this project came from states with large concentrations of African American populations; Illinois, Michigan, and New York provided the most African American legislators in the given time frame and contained three metropolitan cities with significant African American populations: Chicago, Detroit, and New York City. The six legislators from Chicago, Detroit, and New York City during the Ninety-third Congress included: Cardiss Collins (IL), Ralph Metcalfe (IL), John Conyers, Jr. (MI), Charles Diggs, Jr. (MI), Shirley Chisholm (NY), and Charles Rangel (NY).

Issues facing African American metropolitan populations included racial discrimination, employment and unemployment, crime, family unity, food stamps, food assistance, mass incarceration, poverty and assistance for low-income families, housing

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<sup>8</sup> Griffin and Keane, “Are African Americans Effectively Represented in Congress?,” 148.

and community development, urban economic development, and education for underprivileged students.<sup>9</sup> To examine these racial issues within the sponsored legislation, the preceding list of issues is used to create three dichotomous categories: civil rights issues, social welfare issues, and housing issues. These three categories have previously been used in academic research regarding descriptive representative and its attention to minority issues. Key terms and public policy issues with a racial nature falling in any of the preceding categories were classified as being in favor of African American interests. Those terms and public policy issues falling outside of these categories were excluded from this classification and the parameters of relevant data, but were still used as part of the larger pool of data.

These primary source documents were examined over a period of two months and resulted in a spreadsheet which delineated the following information from these bills:

- Name of member
- State
- Congressional District
- Bill Number
- Bill Name
- Committee(s)
- In-text references
- Issue area(s)
- Category

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<sup>9</sup> “Optimism About Black Progress Declines: Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class,” Pew Research Center’s Social and Demographic Trends Report, November 13, 2007, accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/Race-2007.pdf>.

An analysis of the bills revealed that Black members had some focus on racial issues important to the African American community. Of the 200 bills analyzed, 110 of them fell into the three categories. In the 1970s the Black population was at 22,539, 362 – 11.1% of the American population.<sup>10</sup> The content analysis revealed that 52% of the members' legislation dealt with issues germane to the Black community. Although the 52% may not seem as a significant number, it is important when looking at the bigger picture. At only 11.1% of the American population, Black Americans were receiving 52% of the legislative focus from these Black members. There was an interesting focus on such a small population. These results were telling of both the legislators' behavior and their role as race representatives.

The legislative behavior of these six Black members of Congress revealed the importance of descriptive representation and its association with substantive representation. "Scholars argue and present substantial empirical evidence that descriptive representation is associated with the substantive representation of minority groups."<sup>11</sup> If descriptive representation were to be politically relevant for a group, substantive representative would naturally follow. This project's results conclude that descriptive representation lead to descriptive representation. Members of Congress of Congress sharing descriptive characteristics with their constituents have a shared experience that allows them better understanding of the context of certain issues.

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1790 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States," U.S. Census Bureau, February 2005, accessed October 9, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.pdf> - Historical Census Statistics.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis and Wilson, "Minority Chairs," 1218.

The 110 bills falling within the three racial relevant categories were distributed at uneven rates – 6% civil rights, 34% social welfare, and 12% housing. While the reasoning behind the distribution is relevant, particularly because of its disproportionate dissemination, it is outside the scope of this research. However, a review of each members' legislative record that resulted in this 52% focus on racial issues is pertinent to understanding why Black members of Congress matter as race representatives.

Cardiss Collins, was a Democrat representing Illinois' seventh congressional district. Representing the predominantly Black west side of Chicago, Collins' was newly elected to Congress and serving her first term in 1973. This resulted in Collins only sponsoring eleven bills. However, of those eleven bills, seven of them fell into two of the three categories – six bills regarding social welfare issues and one bill regarding housing issues (see Table 1).

Ralph Metcalfe, was a Democrat representing Illinois' first congressional district and co-founder of the CBC. Six of his nineteen bills fit the categories of both social welfare and housing issues, ranging in topics such as poverty and assistance for low-income families, housing and community development, and urban economic development. Two of his sixteen bills were categorized as both civil rights and social welfare issues; two of his sixteen bills were categorized as civil rights issues; and six of his sixteen bills were categorized as social welfare issues.

Representative John Conyers was a Democrat representing Michigan's first district and co-founder of the CBC. One of his twenty-eight bills was categorized as both as social welfare and housing issues. Five of his twenty-eight bills were categorized as civil rights issues. Fourteen of his twenty-eight bills were categorized as social welfare

issues. Representative Charles Diggs was a democrat representing Michigan's thirteenth district, co-founder of the CBC, and the first chairman of the CBC. One of his fifty-seven bills was categorized as both social welfare and housing issues, two were categorized as civil rights issues, nine were categorized as social welfare issues, and one was categorized as housing.

Representative Shirley Chisholm was a Democrat representing New York's twelfth congressional district and the first African American woman elected to Congress. As a relatively newly elected member of Congress, only one of Chisholm's eleven bills was categorized as social welfare and housing. Representative Charles Rangel was a Democrat representing New York's 19<sup>th</sup> congressional district and co-founder of the CBC. Three out of Rangel's seventy-five bills were categorized as social welfare and housing issues, two were categorized as civil rights issues, 23 were categorized as social welfare, and seven were categorized as housing issues.

The members' attention to Black issues varied and attributed to several factors. Sex, tenure, and regional location all played into the number of bills introduced and the category of each bill. It is always worthy to note that the Speaker of the House primarily determines floor action. Therefore, although not many bills within the project's sample became law, it was not because the members were not invested in Black issues.

Results revealed that over half of the legislation analyzed was focused on issues particularly important to the Black population. This leads to a discussion on the responsibility of Black members of Congress to represent not only their constituents, but also all of Black America. Since Black members are the create policy to benefit the Black

community they essentially represent the race within politics, specifically our nation's legislation branch. It is important to note that,

Scholars argue the experiences that define and differentiate minority groups make descriptive representatives better positioned to understand the needs and concerns of minorities and more likely to represent their interests or social perspectives, and that group consciousness makes descriptive representatives especially committed to acting on behalf of minorities.<sup>12</sup>

This argument allows Black members to be race representatives, a stance supported by previous research and this content analysis. Black members are thus champions of Black interests. This approach of descriptive representation may be most effective for bringing attention to Black issues, revealing,

A representing body is distinguished by an accurate correspondence or resemblance to what it represents, by reflecting without distortion.... True representation... requires that the legislature be so selected that its composition corresponds accurately to that of the whole nation; only then is it really a representative body.<sup>13</sup>

With the legislature as a representative portrait of the American population, Congress would be shaken up and given a more diverse face. It can then be assumed that this more accurate representation will result in policy that effectively targets the interests pertinent to minority groups.

Members such as Collins and Chisholm had a relatively smaller amount of bills introduced in the House. However, the social climate at the time did not allow for women to be seen as equals to men, especially Black women. "Black women have had to overcome invisibility in a country in a country that traditionally viewed African

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<sup>12</sup> Ellis and Wilson, "Minority Chairs," 1209.

<sup>13</sup> Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1967), 60.



American progress as male, and feminist progress as white.”<sup>14</sup> The first Black woman in Congress, Chisholm, took office a few years in 1969. Along with the social climate of the times, these two members were relatively new to Congress. Many members went on to embrace the cause of the CBC as their tenure increased. Members grappled with more issues within policy, as they served longer within Congress. “Legislators who have been in office longer are more likely to excel on a variety of effectiveness measures.”<sup>15</sup> In all, these members effectively advocated on behalf of Black interests as their political careers progressed but during the date under analysis for this research they had not been in office long enough to be the sole voice for Black America.

These members’ constituents have representatives advocating for solutions to issues that have long plagued the Black community. As a Black resident in a congressional district represented by a Black member of Congress, there may be an expectation for the members to advocate on behalf of the Black community. “Indeed, African Americans’ unique expectations of their representatives may be a legacy of lawmaking practice that have often ignored and worked against African Americans’ interests.”<sup>16</sup> It can be expected that Black constituents have high expectations for their Black members of Congress who share their descriptive characteristics and experience within America.

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<sup>14</sup> Dewey M. Clayton and Angela M. Stallings, “Black Women in Congress: Striking the Balance,” *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 4 (March 2000): 575, accessed September 15, 2015, DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12018.

<sup>15</sup> Griffin and Keane, “Are African Americans Effectively Represented in Congress?,” 146.

<sup>16</sup> Griffin and Keane, “Are African Americans Effectively Represented in Congress?,” 146.

Legislation concerned with race is not exclusively set-aside for members a part of a minority group. Substantive representation allows for members to advocate on behalf of the expressed preferences of their constituents – a duty not unique to race. However, the three cities chosen in this study – Chicago, New York, and Detroit – are unique in that they are densely populated African American metropolitan areas. The combination of a city with a high concentration of African Americans and a Black member of Congress is critical to this research. Black members who “represent large African American populations are more likely to advance legislation explicitly or implicitly concerned with race.”<sup>17</sup> This combination is not unique throughout our country and within the political institution. “African American [members] tend to represent districts with larger African American populations.”<sup>18</sup> This can be seen as a way for residents of a congressional district to elect a representative that truly reflects who they are. Previous research gives Black residents within congressional districts represented by Black members confidence that their interests are given congressional attention. “African American citizens may be pleased to know that when they are represented by African Americans their [members] tend to sit on ‘black interest’ committees rather than prestige committees and that these African American [members] are more likely to sponsor race-related bills and make race-related speeches.”<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which members are motivated to advance interests germane to the Black community can be revealed within the legislation they sponsor. Previous research shows that “politicians are reliably more likely to advance the interests of those who

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<sup>17</sup> Griffin and Keane, “Are African Americans Effectively Represented in Congress?,” 147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 153.

share their personal characteristics, including their gender, race, profession, class, and sexual orientation.”<sup>20</sup> The results of this project’s study falls in line with previous research affirming the effectiveness and importance of descriptive representation and Black members of Congress. Intrinsic motivation to advance Black interests could possibly be a result of shared descriptive characteristics and experience between constituents and the member. “Black legislators thus appear to be significantly more likely than their counterparts to work to advance blacks’ interests.”<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not the concentration on Black interests by Black members of Congress is fair is another discussion. However, it is important to note that “In the United States...the idealized form of political representation is the instructed-delegate version, where representatives are not independent but constrained by elections to strictly submit to the will of their constituents.”<sup>22</sup> This is exactly what descriptive representation allows for and what Black members of Congress accomplish. Members naturally make decisions that pertain to their particular goals, but because they share descriptive characteristics, those personal decisions in turn benefit the community. This project’s findings point to a new direction in which further research might be redirected. A much more focused observation of Black state legislators and local politicians along with their impact on racial issues is needed within scholarship because of the bottom-up politics that impacts many lives.

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<sup>20</sup> David E. Broockman, “Black Politicians Are More Intrinsically Motivated to Advance Blacks’ Interests: A Field Experiment Manipulating Political Incentives,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (July 2013): 521, accessed September 17, 2015, DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12018.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Tate, “The Political Representation of Blacks in Congress: Does Race Matter?,” *Comparative Legislative Research Center* 26, no. 4 (November 2001): 624, accessed January 24, 2016, DOI: 10.2307/440272.

Why Black members of Congress matter is evident. Their work on behalf of the Black community is vital in getting legislative attention to minority issues. The expressed preferences and legislators' descriptive characteristics are politically relevant in effective representation of African Americans – revealed in the results of the content analysis. Not only are these members representing districts with large African American populations, but they are also creating legislation for all of Black America. Civil rights, social welfare, and housing issues are not exclusive to an African American congressional district – this policy is done on behalf of the masses. This leaves Black members of Congress in an interesting position; they are privileged with speaking for such a worthy cause that has been long overdue and they also have the weight of Black America on their shoulders as race representatives within the political arena. However, they view their roles, Black members of Congress matter and as descriptive representatives, they allow for Black political inclusion.

Table 1

	Civil Rights	Social Welfare	Housing	Social Welfare, Housing	Civil Rights, Social Welfare
<b>Cardiss Collins</b>		6	1		
<b>Ralph Metcalfe</b>	2	6		6	2
<b>John Conyers</b>	5	14		1	
<b>Charles Diggs</b>	2	9	1	1	
<b>Shirley Chisholm</b>				1	
<b>Charles Rangel</b>	2	23	7	3	

SOURCE: DATA COMPILED FROM AUTHOR'S RESEARCH

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