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Source: *American Journal of Political Science*, Oct., 2002, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Oct., 2002), pp. 717-732

Published by: Midwest Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3088429>

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Spirals of Trust? The Effect of Descriptive Representation on the Relationship Between Citizens and Their Government

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Research on black representation in Congress emphasizes the material gains associated with black office holding over the intangible goods associated with citizens' ability to identify racially with their legislators. This article considers the effect of descriptive representation on the relationships among citizens, legislators, and the Congress. With data from the 1980–1998 ANES, I show that whites and blacks differ in the value they place on descriptive representation. White constituents more favorably assess and are more likely to contact representatives with whom they racially identify. This tendency is partially explained by racial differences in legislators' ideological profiles, but also reflects extrapolicy and explicit racial concerns. Black constituents place less significance on descriptive representation, although they are more likely to contact black representatives. Although the relationships between legislators and their constituents are influenced by race, perceptions of Congress as an institution are not affected by constituents' ability to identify racially with their representatives.

For more than a decade, social scientists have debated the substantive merits of black congressional representation. Although scholarly consensus remains elusive, empirical research has shed light on the links among race, legislative behavior, and policy outcomes favorable to minority communities. We know comparatively little, however, about how constituents, both black and white, value black representation. What, if any, significance do constituents attribute to the race of their representatives and to the growing racial diversity of a legislative body traditionally dominated by whites? Prior research on minority political leadership at the local level suggests that descriptive representation can favorably affect attitudes towards public officials and institutions, with broad implications for the political dynamics within American cities. As early as 1968, the Kerner Commission identified the lack of black representation in city government as a force exacerbating the political alienation and distrust that contributed to the urban unrest of the 1960s (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968).

Here I address whether black representation in Congress affects citizens' political orientations. In particular, I ask: Does a constituent's ability to identify racially with her member of Congress (MC) affect her perceptions of that legislator and of Congress as an institution? To what extent does a constituent's response derive from nonracial considerations such as shared interests and policy priorities? Drawing on 18 years of survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES), I show that white and black constituents differ in the value they place on descriptive representation, in general, and black representation, in particular. White constituents more favorably assess and are more likely to contact representatives with whom they racially identify. This preference for white legislators is partially

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The author thanks Chris Afendulis, Jack Citrin, Simon Jackman, Jennifer Lawless, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Steve Voss, participants in the American Empirical Seminar at SIQSS and the anonymous reviewers for comments and assistance on earlier drafts. This research also benefited greatly from the comments of Fred Harris, Cathy Cohen, and the participants in the 2001 conference "Theorizing Black Communities: New Frontiers in the Study of African American Politics" at the University of Rochester.

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 46, No. 4, October 2002, Pp. 717–733

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ISSN 0092-5853

explained by racial differences in legislators' ideological profiles, but also reflects extrapolicy and, to a limited degree, explicitly racial considerations. By contrast, black constituents place less significance on black representation *per se*. More narrowly motivated by policy concerns, black constituents feel equally well represented by white or black legislators who share their policy preferences, although they are more likely to contact black representatives. While the relationships between elected representatives and their constituents can be influenced by race, perceptions of Congress are not affected by constituents' ability to identify racially with their representatives. In closing, I discuss the implications of these findings for empirical research on minority representation and argue for the need to widen the scope of inquiry to include more than the study of policy responsiveness.

Race as a Basis for Political Trust

Empirical research on black representation in Congress defines the political significance of race primarily in terms of legislators' behavior, focusing on policy responsiveness and constituency service (Lublin 1997; Canon 1999). This research overlooks the effect of descriptive representation on constituents' perceptions of their government. Scholars have not ignored altogether the potential symbolic value of descriptive representation but they have presented these "intangible goods" as matters of individual psychology without clear political implications. Yet, as Mansbridge argues, descriptive representation can "forge bonds of trust" between legislator and constituent, enhancing the "feeling of inclusion," which, in turn, makes "the polity democratically more legitimate in one's eyes" (1999, 641 and 651). In a representative democracy where perceptions of legitimacy are critical to systemic stability, the "spiral of trust" set in motion by descriptive representation may have real implications for political life (Williams 1998, 172).

Studies of minority office holding at the local level underscore the potential significance of a citizen's ability to identify racially with prominent political actors. Black control of the mayor's office can enhance political trust among African Americans, contributing to more favorable impressions of city government as a whole; and, conversely, the election of a black mayor may precipitate a decline in trust among whites, although the empirical findings remain inconclusive (Abney and Hutcheson 1981; Howell and Fagan 1988; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gilliam 1996).

Members of Congress behave as if their personal at-

tributes play a critical role in securing the trust and electoral support of their constituents. Fenno reports on the lengths to which members go to stress their identification with constituents (1978, chapter 3). Recognizing that trust is built, in part, on public gestures that signal "I am one of you," a representative will adapt her language (e.g., "We in California") and even her attire (e.g., khakis at a Silicon Valley campaign stop) to establish a link between herself and her constituents. The objective: to win the general accolade "she's a good woman," what Fenno defines as the essence of trust.

Bianco (1994) attributes the premium constituents place on identification to their desire for representatives who share their values and interests. Personal attributes are assumed to signal policy concerns; constituents, behaving as policy-minded actors, reason from "I am one of you" to, as Fenno puts it, "I think the way you do and I care about the same things you do" (1978, 58). This belief about common interests may determine the level of trust established in the member-constituent relationship.

To secure favorable policy outcomes, constituents may give special weight to racial identification. Race as a cue is a low-cost alternative to more detailed information about a legislator's stands and, importantly, is virtually impossible to manipulate. Just as constituents might be expected to ignore attributes (e.g., hair color) that do not impart useful information about a representative's policy concerns, they also may discount actions that are the products of strategic political calculation (Bianco 1994, Chapter 3; Fenno 1978, Chapter 3). A constituent's ability to identify racially with her member of Congress may assume special significance because race is a "signal that speaks louder than words, or at least with more meaning" (Bianco 1994, 153). In research on black mayors, scholars have linked the response to black office holding in part to assumptions about likely responsiveness, to the tendency to define black elected officials as the "specialized representatives of black people" (Conyers and Wallace 1976, 115).

Constituents may also place a premium on racial identification because of cultural forces or other extrapolicy goals. Favorable assessment of elected officials and governmental institutions may turn on factors such as racial group consciousness or racial prejudice, which have been shown to influence political attitudes among whites and blacks (Dawson 1994; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Reeves 1997). Additionally, constituents may value more than policy responsiveness but also "accessibility" and the "assurance that two-way communication is possible" (Fenno 1978, 239–40). Descriptive representation—perhaps by circumventing the social and psychological barriers that impair interracial communication,

or perhaps as a result of legislators' personal outreach to groups perceived to be their "natural" constituency—may address such concerns. Thus, the ability to identify racially with an elected official may not trump the desire for favorable policy outcomes, but it may contribute to levels of trust that exceed expectations about the tangible policy gains associated with descriptive representation.

In sum, the shared experience "imperfectly captured" by descriptive representation can form the basis for greater trust in public officials and institutions (Mansbridge 1999, 641). This suggests that the political significance of black representation in Congress may extend beyond the process of representation itself. Assumptions about the likelihood of common interests, as well as extrapolicy and explicitly racial concerns, should lead constituents to favor representatives with whom they racially identify. In addition to feeling better represented by these legislators, I would expect descriptively represented constituents, more convinced of Congress's legitimacy, to more favorably assess the institution.

Data, Measures, and Methodological Issues

To test these propositions, I use data from a pooled sample of the ANES. The sample includes ten biennial election surveys conducted between 1980 and 1998. Pooling multiple surveys increases not only the number of black respondents but also the number of respondents represented by African-American House members. Nineteen hundred (1900) respondents self-identified as black; 13,028 as white. Using information available in annual political almanacs, I identified the 785 respondents (483 blacks, 302 whites) represented by black members of Congress at the time of the interview (November of the election year). All but 58 of these respondents lived in majority-minority congressional districts.

For each member of Congress whose constituents responded in the ANES, I assembled data on party affiliation and tenure. A total of 8941 respondents, *including all of the respondents with black representatives*, were represented by Democratic House members. Because I am interested primarily in the effect of a representative's race on constituents' attitudes, I analyze only the respondents represented by Democrats. Two black Republicans, Gary Franks of Connecticut (1991–1997) and J.C. Watts of Oklahoma (1995–present) served in the House between 1980 and 1998; none of the ANES respondents are drawn from either of these two districts. Tenure is measured as the number of consecutive years served by the respon-

dent's representative. For respondents represented by white Democrats, the median tenure was eight years; black Democrats, six years.

For each member of Congress, I also include her Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) score as a measure of ideological position. The scores are inflation adjusted using the methodology developed in Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder (1999) to allow for comparisons across time. The median inflation-adjusted ADA score for respondents represented by white Democrats was 68.9; black Democrats, 90.4.¹

Scores of items on the ANES assess respondents' orientation toward public officials and institutions. I first consider the member-constituent relationship. How do constituents feel about the elected officials who serve them and the quality of the representation they provide? Of particular interest is the degree to which members succeed in securing the trust of the people they represent—an achievement with implications for subsequent electoral support and, as Bianco (1994) argues, for the amount of discretion legislators can exercise in their voting behavior. Although Bianco (1994) focuses on discrete trust decisions involving high-salience policy proposals, arguing that trust is "conditional and contextual," he concedes that some legislators may be trusted more often than others because they "hold a mix of actions or attributes that signals common interest across a wide range of policy areas" (1994, 152).² This more generalized sense of trust is of interest here.

Four survey items assess levels of trust: (1) If you had a problem that [your current MC] could do something about, do you think s/he would be very helpful, somewhat helpful, not very helpful, or does it depend? (2) Do you happen to remember anything special that [your current MC] has done for his/her district or for the people of his/her district while s/he has been in Congress? (3) Using the (Feeling) thermometer, how would you rate [your current MC]? (4) In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way [your current MC] has been handling his/her job?

Additionally, respondents were asked, "Have you (or anyone in your family living here) ever contacted [your

¹The racial difference in the median inflation-adjusted ADA score varies by region and is greatest in the South. The median ADA score for respondents represented by Southern white Democrats is 44.2; by Southern black Democrats, 92.6. Outside the South, the median scores for white and black Democrats are 78.8 and 90.4, respectively.

²As Bianco (1994) defines it, trust exists when a constituent evaluates, or is prepared to evaluate, a member of Congress favorably regardless of how that member votes on a given piece of legislation. In the absence of trust, a member receives favorable evaluations only if she acts as her constituents think best.

current MC] or anyone in his/her office?" This final item allows me to test Mansbridge's (1999) assertion that descriptive representation can facilitate vertical communication between legislators and constituents.

Secondly, I consider attitudes toward Congress as an institution. Does a constituent's ability to identify racially with her MC contribute to a more favorable assessment of the institution? Such public approval is critical to the perceived legitimacy of the institution, its legislative process, and its policy outputs. Research on black mayors suggests that descriptive representation and trust in governmental institutions are closely linked. However, scholars have also shown that public attitudes toward Congress are only weakly correlated with support for congressional incumbents (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Hibbing and Theiss-Moore 1995; Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997). As Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht observe, "members of Congress manage to remain popular and win reelection despite the low opinion the public has of Congress as a whole" (1997, 177). Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina speculate that this disparity in judgments may stem from the disparity in popular expectations about legislators and the legislature: "The institution is held up against programmatic standards more so than its members, who instead are judged according to their personal characteristics, accessibility, and solicitude for the concerns of constituents" (1987, 202).

One ANES item measures opinion in this area: Do you approve of the way the U.S. Congress is handling its job?

The ANES includes data on respondent's demographic characteristics and political predispositions, including gender, age, educational attainment, income, southern residence, party affiliation, and ideology. Prior research has documented the influence of such factors on congressional approval and electoral support for Democratic candidates. Furthermore, an analysis of the ANES revealed that the respondents represented by black Democrats differ systematically from those represented by white Democrats on some of these factors. The black respondents with black MCs are, on average, older (45 versus 42 years), less likely to live in the South (36 percent versus 67 percent), and more likely to self-identify as Democrats (89 percent versus 82 percent) and liberals (41 percent versus 33 percent) than are respondents represented by white Democrats. The white respondents with black MCs are younger (44 versus 45 years) and more likely to self-identify as Democrats (58 percent versus 51 percent) and liberals (33 percent versus 27 percent). Mean educational attainment and income are slightly higher among the black and white respondents represented by black members of Congress. Because

these demographic characteristics and political predispositions vary systematically with the race of the representative and are likely to affect citizens' political attitudes, they are incorporated in the subsequent analysis as control variables.

Finally, the analysis of public opinion often is hampered by the pervasive problem of incomplete data due to item nonresponse in surveys. This research is no exception; although per-item rates of missingness are low, only 50 percent of white and 48 percent of black ANES respondents provided answers on all of the survey items of interest. Political scientists typically have relied on listwise deletion when coping with the problem of missing data on both explanatory and dependent variables. However, statisticians and methodologists have demonstrated repeatedly that multiple imputation outperforms listwise deletion as a solution to the problem of item nonresponse (Schafer and Olsen 1998; King et al. 2001). Multiple imputation, which assumes that information in the observed data provides indirect evidence about the likely values of the unobserved data, can correct for the inefficiency and bias that result from listwise deletion. The method involves the imputation of m possible values for each missing item in the data matrix and the creation of m completed datasets, each of which can then be analyzed using standard complete-data statistical methods. The statistical results are combined across datasets using formulas that formally incorporate missing-data uncertainty.

After verifying that my data met the conditions under which multiple imputation would be preferable to listwise deletion—namely, it is possible to predict that a cell in the data matrix is missing—I used King et al.'s (2001) *EMis* algorithm (and accompanying software, *AMELIA*) to implement multiple imputation.³ Each im-

³King et al. (2001) identify four conditions, *all* of which must hold, in order for listwise deletion to be preferable to multiple imputation: (1) The analysis model is conditional on X (i.e., explanatory variables containing missing data), and the functional form is known to be correctly specified; (2) There is *nonignorable* (NI) missingness (i.e., the probability that a cell is missing depends on the *unobserved* value of the missing response) in X , and there are no other variables available that could be used in the imputation model to predict X ; (3) Missingness in X is not a function of Y (i.e., the dependent variable containing missing data) and unobserved omitted variables that affect Y do not exist; (4) The number of observations left after listwise deletion should be so large that the efficiency loss from listwise deletion does not counterbalance the biases induced by the other conditions.

Although my analysis model is conditional on X , my data did not meet the other conditions necessary in order to justify the use of listwise deletion. In a series of regressions, I tested to see whether missingness in each of the survey items of interest could be predicted. Among the patterns I observed: Missingness on ideology, the explanatory variable with the highest rate of missing data (16.85 percent), could be predicted by partisan identification, gender, age, education, income, and level of political knowledge.

putation model uses a broad array of variables (including all of the variables to be used in the subsequent statistical analysis) to predict the pattern of missingness and to generate five complete datasets.⁴ Each dataset then was analyzed using the appropriate statistical model. The results listed in the proceeding tables are the combined results across datasets, calculated using the formulas developed in Rubin (1987). The goodness of fit measures included in the tables are computed by averaging across the datasets.

Descriptive Representation and the Member-Constituent Relationship

On average, constituents more favorably assess representatives with whom they are able to identify racially. Table 1 reports mean evaluations of Democratic legislators, grouped by the race and party affiliation of respondents. While partisanship clearly exerts a strong influence on the member-constituent relationship, with self-identified Democrats feeling better represented by Democratic legislators than do self-identified Republicans, descriptive

representation consistently is associated with higher approval ratings, greater familiarity with a legislator's record of service to the district, and more confidence in the quality of a legislator's constituency service. For example, less than one-third of self-identified black Democrats expect that a white Democratic legislator would be "very helpful" in the resolution of a problem, compared to 40 percent of the African American constituents represented by black Democrats. For whites and African Americans, descriptive representation increases the number of constituents who can recall any particulars about their member's record from one-in-six to more than one-in-four. Furthermore, whites and African Americans are 48 to 79 percent more likely, respectively, to contact legislators who share their racial group identification.

Thus, a simple crosstabulation suggests that descriptive representation favorably affects the member-constituent relationship. Table 1 also reveals that the effect may be more pronounced among whites than among blacks; with the exception of the "recall" and contacting measures, the differences between the evaluations of white and black legislators are larger for white constituents than they are for African Americans. In fact, African-Americans more favorably assess white Democratic legislators than white constituents assess black Democratic legislators. As a result, attitudes towards black Democratic legislators appear more sharply polarized along racial lines than do attitudes towards white Democrats.

What accounts for the fact that descriptively-represented constituents seem more satisfied with their representatives than do constituents who can not identify racially with their MC? Bianco (1994) attributes voters' desire to be represented by someone like them to a "rational" calculus aimed at securing favorable policy outcomes. The relationship in Table 1 between shared party affiliation and favorable evaluations is consistent with such an explanation. That constituents continue to favor legislators of the same race even after taking party into account suggests that partisanship alone may not allow for sharp inferences about a member's policy concerns. As noted earlier, there are substantial racial differences in the mean ADA scores of Democratic legislators, with black Democrats considerably more liberal than white Democrats.⁵ Some researchers have argued that black

Missingness on the dependent measures of interest typically was greatest among ideological conservatives, Republicans, the young, those with low incomes, and those represented by members of Congress who are black, have served many years, and have liberal voting records. (These "predictions" do *not* imply a causal relationship.) And while it is possible that there is NI missingness in at least one of the explanatory variables, income (9.86 percent missing), I identified other variables (e.g., gender, age, education, employment status, party identification) available in the ANES that can be used to predict these values. (Thus, the second condition is not met.) I used the results from these series of regressions to empirically verify that the data were not *missing completely at random* (MCAR) and to construct the imputation models.

⁴The EMis approach to multiple imputation was implemented using *AMELIA: A Program for Missing Data* (Honaker et al. 1999). It was not feasible to construct a single model that included all of the relevant variables (both analysis variables and variables to be used only in the imputation process) because of memory constraints; *AMELIA* repeatedly crashed when the data matrix exceeded 7435 observations \times 25 variables. Instead, I constructed two separate models, one that included all variables relevant to the member-constituent dependent measures and one that included all variables relevant to the congressional approval measures. There was significant overlap between these models. The multiple imputation models were run separately for white and for black respondents.

Each imputation process generated five complete datasets (20 datasets total). Schafer and Olsen (1998) note that multiple imputation "can be highly efficient even for small values of m . In many applications, just 3–5 imputations are sufficient to obtain excellent results" (Schafer and Olsen 1998, 548). Using Rubin's (1987) formula for calculating the efficiency of estimates based on m imputations, I calculated that with $m = 5$ I achieve about 91 percent efficiency.

⁵Constituents differ on whether they perceive racial differences in the ideological profiles of Democratic legislators. In seven of the ten ANES surveys, respondents were asked to place their incumbents on a seven-point ideology scale, ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). White constituents place white Southern Democrats 1.09 points higher (more conservative) on the ideology scale than they do black Southern Democrats; outside the South, white Democrats score .70 points higher on the scale than do black Democratic legislators. Each of these racial

TABLE 1 Attitudes and Behavior Toward Democratic Representatives

		MC as Resource (%)	Recall MC Effort (%)	MC Job Approval (%)	Favorable Rating (Degrees)	Particularized Contacting (%)
Respondent:	N					
<i>White Democrat</i>						
White Democrat MC	3646	38.7 ^L	26.5 ^L	87.6 ^L	69.1 ^L	19.1 ^L
Black Democrat MC	176	27.8 ^{RP}	16.8 ^R	76.7 ^P	56.9 ^{RP}	13.4
<i>White Republican</i>						
White Democrat MC	2616	26.5 ^L	18.5 ^L	74 ^L	56.2 ^L	15.9 ^L
Black Democrat MC	93	11.6 ^P	8	53 ^P	38.8 ^P	6.2
<i>Black Democrat</i>						
White Democrat MC	836	32.2 ^L	15.9 ^L	83.4	65.6 ^L	9.4 ^L
Black Democrat MC	431	40.2 ^R	26.9 ^R	87.3	72.9 ^R	16.8

Note: Table entries are the combined descriptive statistics across five multiply imputed datasets. Too few respondents self-identified as Black Republicans to be included in the table. The values listed in column one ("MC as Resource") capture the percentage of respondents indicating the incumbent would be "very helpful." "L" indicates a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between the evaluations of White Democratic Legislators and Black Democratic Legislators by the respondent group. "R" indicates a statistically significant (Racial) difference ($p < .05$) between the evaluations of Black Democratic legislators by white Democratic constituents and black Democratic constituents. "P" indicates a statistically significant (Partisan) difference ($p < .05$) between the evaluations of Black Democratic legislators by white Democratic constituents and white Republican constituents. Superscripts identify only those relationships that are statistically significant in each of five imputed datasets.

politicians' crossover appeal is handicapped primarily by the perception that they are too liberal (Sigelman et al. 1995). Gilliam (1996), in his study of Los Angeles, found that white attitudes towards a black mayor were heavily influenced by perceptions of ideological compatibility, a result consistent with Sigelman et al.'s (1995) hypothesis.

To determine whether the relationships observed in Table 1 reflect the rational calculations of policy-minded constituents, I estimated a series of equations that included measures of ideological placement and partisanship for members and constituents, as well as other relevant member characteristics and individual demographic variables. In addition to the race of the member

differences is statistically significant. Furthermore, when regressing the perceived ideology measure on both the race and *actual ADA score* of the incumbent legislator, with separate models for each region (i.e., South-Non South), I find that black Democrats are perceived as more liberal than whites (1.03 points in the South, .54 points elsewhere) even after controlling for their actual ideological profiles. By contrast, among black constituents, there is no statistically significant difference in the ideological placement of white and black Democratic legislators, regardless of region.

Perceived ideology is not included in the subsequent regression analysis. The perceived ideology item was not asked in 1984, 1988, or 1992. In the seven ANES surveys that included the item, the nonresponse rate was high: only 51.6 percent of the respondents represented by Democratic legislators answered this question. (By comparison, the response rates on the six dependent measures ranged from 60.3 percent to 80.9 percent.) Rather than lose thousands of cases from 1984, 1988, and 1992, I chose an ideology measure for which I have complete information. The ADA scores have the additional advantage of being both objective and clearly exogenous from the dependent variables.

of Congress, each model includes interaction terms between the member's ADA score and the respondent's level of political knowledge. The likelihood that a constituent will take into account a member's voting record and bring it to bear in her assessment of that member is conditional on how politically well informed that constituent is (Zaller 1992; Bartels 1996). More knowledgeable constituents are more likely to be aware of their members' legislative records and, if they are motivated by policy concerns, more likely to link legislative behavior and attitudes. The models also include interaction terms between the race of the member and the ideological self-placement of the constituent. If assessments of black Democrats were affected by the perception that they are more liberal than their white counterparts, I would expect more liberal respondents to judge black representatives more favorably than do more conservative respondents.

The models also take into account the number of years a member has served in the House. Longer tenure increases the probability that shared values and interests between members and constituents will be demonstrated and perceived, providing a basis for more favorable evaluations. Over time, legislators may be able to build a reputation for trust, even if they did not come into office with that reputation ready made. As noted earlier, constituents represented by black Democrats are represented, on average, by a legislator who has served only six years, compared to the eight year average for the constituents of white Democrats. The assessment of black Democrats may be a product, in part, of their relatively

short tenure and, as a result, their limited opportunity to win over skeptics through their performance in office.

Finally, each model controls for several individual-level characteristics that might influence assessments of Democratic legislators, including gender, education, age, income, and southern residence. An interaction term between southern residence and the race of the member of Congress is also included. Because prior research has shown that issues of race are particularly salient in the South, I would expect the relationship between the race of a member of Congress and her evaluation by constituents to be more pronounced in that region than elsewhere. Table 2 presents the coefficients from the equations.

Even controlling for the ideological differences among white and black Democratic legislators, as well as for ideological and demographic differences among constituents, the relationships depicted in Table 2 for whites are similar to the patterns observed in the initial cross-tabulation. While partisan affiliation affects how white constituents evaluate Democratic legislators, on every measure they assess black Democrats less favorably than they do similar white MCs. The model predicts that the average white Democratic constituent, where average is defined by the mean value on each of the independent variables, represented by a black Democratic MC is 15.6 percentage points (27.6 percent versus 43.1 percent) less likely to consider her MC “very helpful,” 27.7 percentage points (51.3 percent versus 79 percent) less likely to recall her MC’s efforts, and 23.6 percentage points (31.9 percent versus 55.6 percent) less likely to approve of her MC’s job performance than the same average constituent represented by a white Democratic MC.⁶ On the feeling thermometer scale, white constituents assign black members of Congress scores that trail those of white Democrats by 11 points.

Unlike past research, I find no evidence that the effect of the legislator’s race on the assessment of Democratic members varies with constituent’s ideological self-identification. Liberal whites represented by African-American MCs are no more likely to assess these legislators favorably than are moderate or conservative whites. In none of the equations listed in Table 2 (for whites) are the interaction effects between black representation and individual ideology statistically significant.

⁶ Mean values used in the calculation of the predicted probabilities: Tenure = 10.8 years; ADA Score = 66.4; Age = 45 years; Education = 3.75 (between high school [3] and some post-graduate [4]); Income = 2.89 (between 17 and 33 percentile [2] and 34–67 percentile [3]). For the categorical variables, the predicted probabilities assume the constituent is a non-Southern woman, self-identified as a Democrat and ideological conservative, and with a medium level of political knowledge.

This result is at odds with earlier hypotheses that African-American politicians are primarily handicapped by the perception that they are too liberal. If ideological conflict were to blame for white American’s more limited receptivity to Black Democratic legislators, we would expect to observe ideological differences among whites in their assessments of these legislators.

This is not to say that ideology plays no role in whites’ assessments of Democratic legislators in general and black Democrats in particular. With the exception of overall job approval, black Democratic legislators are clearly hurt by their comparatively high ADA scores. As one example, legislators with higher ADA scores receive lower feeling thermometer ratings: every one-point increase in the MC’s ADA score is associated with a half-point decline on the thermometer scale. For politically well-informed whites, a member’s ideological profile has little effect on whether they are likely to recall her efforts on behalf of the district or consider her a resource in the resolution of a constituent’s problem.⁷ But for less well-informed constituents (i.e., those with medium to low scores on the political knowledge measure), the higher ADA scores typical of black Democratic MCs result in less favorable assessments.

Although the member-constituent relationship varies with the incumbent legislator’s length of service, black Democrats’ relatively short tenure cannot fully account for the less favorable evaluations of white constituents. In fact, white constituents, though less likely to recall the efforts of relatively new legislators, are *more* likely to approve of their job performance and to consider them potential resources. I also tested a model that included an interaction term between the race of the representative and the length of service. The coefficient on the interaction term was statistically insignificant: there is no evidence that the effect of race varies based on the legislator’s length of service—or, put another way, that experience in office assumes added importance when white constituents are not able to identify racially with their MC.

Whereas whites’ attitudes vary systematically with race, the attitudes of African Americans are seemingly unaffected by their ability to identify racially with their elected representatives. No significant differences exist among black constituents in their assessments of Democratic legislators based on their ability to identify racially with the member of Congress. On every measure, the coefficient on black representation is statistically insignificant.

⁷ The total effect of legislator ideology for well-informed whites is calculated as the sum of the coefficient on “ADA Score” and the coefficient on the interaction term “ADA Score × Hi Info.”

TABLE 2 Predicting Attitudes Towards Democratic Representatives

Variables	WHITES				BLACKS			
	MC as Resource (Ord. Probit)	Recall MC Effort (Logit)	MC Job Approval (Logit)	Favorable Rating (OLS)	MC as Resource (Ord. Probit)	Recall MC Effort (Logit)	MC Job Approval (Logit)	Favorable Rating (OLS)
Constant		-2.53 (.297)***	1.71 (.277)***	60.41 (2.14)***		-3.79 (.752)***	-5.93 (.655)	40.78 (5.58)***
Black MC								
Tenure of MC	-5.48 (.142)***	-891 (.454)*	-937 (.306)***	-10.62 (3.67)**	-0.98 (.171)	.675 (.355)	.900 (.489)	4.40 (2.77)
	-0.04 (.002)*	.018 (.004)***	-0.09 (.005)*	.004 (.035)	.002 (.005)	.002 (.011)	-0.06 (.012)	.070 (.100)
Policy Controls								
ADA Score	-0.02 (.001)*	-0.12 (.002)***	-0.05 (.003)	-0.52 (.016)***	-0.03 (.002)	.000 (.001)	.004 (.008)	-0.35 (.050)
ADA Score * Hi Info	.002 (.001)*	.014 (.002)***	-0.01 (.002)	.011 (.014)	.005 (.002)***	.016 (.003)***	.004 (.003)	.078 (.033)*
ADA Score * Medium Info	.001 (.001)	.008 (.001)***	-0.01 (.001)	.010 (.012)	.003 (.001)***	.007 (.003)***	.004 (.003)	.069 (.022)***
Black MC * Liberal	.227 (.185)	-0.73 (.543)	.335 (.547)	2.81 (4.95)	.253 (.223)	-4.50 (.374)	-7.64 (.492)	1.44 (4.08)
Black MC * Conservative	-1.42 (.206)	-383 (.565)	-0.43 (.445)	-5.29 (4.92)	.206 (.155)	-3.12 (.412)	-4.64 (.571)	-2.99 (5.27)
Black MC * South	.313 (.153)*	.932 (.389)**	.530 (.423)	-1.34 (3.56)	.184 (.176)	.125 (.485)	-5.24 (.640)	5.45 (3.60)
Individual Level Controls								
Democrat	.170 (.048)***	.382 (.124)***	.527 (.125)***	6.59 (.885)***	.133 (.132)	.156 (.364)	.347 (.297)	7.18 (2.39)***
Republican	-.136 (.050)***	-.178 (.127)	-.298 (.111)***	-4.43 (.947)***	.112 (.152)	-.239 (.448)	.242 (.492)	.349 (3.52)
Liberal	.054 (.042)	-.000 (.126)	.094 (.113)	2.04 (.759)***	-.078 (.139)	-.082 (.240)	.184 (.353)	1.09 (2.35)
Conservative	.008 (.040)	-.011 (.098)	-.152 (.103)	-1.54 (.736)*	-.002 (.097)	-.016 (.246)	-.047 (.244)	.192 (2.87)
Male	-.093 (.029)***	.172 (.067)**	-.228 (.080)***	-1.11 (.611)	-.137 (.071)	.053 (.149)	-.280 (.269)	-.812 (1.36)
Age	.011 (.001)***	.014 (.003)***	.007 (.003)**	.173 (.017)***	.009 (.002)***	.013 (.005)**	.010 (.005)*	.233 (.044)***
Education	.009 (.011)	.100 (.025)***	.000 (.027)	-.365 (.262)	.003 (.033)	.124 (.060)*	.160 (.097)	1.06 (.525)*
Income	-.010 (.015)	.008 (.036)	.010 (.037)	-.861 (.306)***	-.016 (.032)	.064 (.090)	.044 (.146)	.185 (.767)
South	.081 (.048)	.011 (.082)	-.065 (.110)	2.30 (.870)**	.117 (.117)	.670 (.355)	1.04 (.316)***	4.12 (2.50)
Threshold 1	-.760 (.103)***				-.774 (.260)***			
Threshold 2	-.392 (.104)***				-.277 (.263)			
Threshold 3	.845 (.107)***				.901 (.259)***			
N	7435	7435	7435	7435	1506	1506	1506	1506
Log-Likelihood	-8816.19	-3700.36	-3444.93		-1809.05	-663.08	-629.61	
R²				0.12				0.11

Note: Coefficient and standard error (in parentheses) estimates, and goodness of fit measures are combined statistical results across five multiply imputed datasets.

"MC as Resource" is coded 1(Not Very Helpful), 2(Depends), 3(Somewhat Helpful), 4(Very Helpful). *p<.05, **p<.02, ***p<.01.

What appears in Table 1 to be a clear preference for descriptive representation on the part of African Americans is, in reality, a function of the ideological differences that separate white and black Democratic legislators. It is ideology that drives African-Americans' assessments of Democratic MCs. With the exception of overall job approval, black constituents who are at least moderately well informed about politics and public affairs more favorably assess Democrats with more liberal political profiles. Only black constituents with low levels of political knowledge—constituents who are not likely to know much about their legislator's voting record—do not take into account their members' ideology when making judgments about them. Interestingly, however, lack of political information does not heighten the salience of race. In a series of regressions that added interaction terms between the race of the MC and individual political knowledge to the initial set of predictors, the interaction effects were consistently statistically insignificant. That is, there was no evidence that race matters more to constituents without the political knowledge necessary to root their assessments in a member's actual voting record. Quite simply, for even the most poorly informed

constituents the ability to identify racially with their member of Congress has no independent effect on the member-constituent relationship.

Further, the effect of race on African-American assessments does not vary at all with individual ideology. As demonstrated by the insignificant coefficients on the interaction between the race of the MC and individual ideology, self-identified liberals are no more likely to favorably assess black representatives than are black moderates and conservatives.

But if the evidence suggests that only white constituents put a premium on race when evaluating a member of Congress, then what explains the patterns of particularized contacting observed in Table 1, where African-American behavior varies more sharply with the race of the MC than does white behavior? To test whether the relationship between contacting and descriptive representation arises from constituents' policy concerns alone, I regressed the contacting item on the same set of predictors used in Table 2. The results are listed in Table 3.

Policy concerns clearly influence the likelihood that a white or black constituent has contacted a Democratic legislator. Similar to the results from Table 2, black

TABLE 3 Predicting Contacting of Democratic Representatives

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Whites (Logit)</i>	<i>Blacks (Logit)</i>
Constant	-2.96 (.245)***	-4.12 (.782)***
Black MC	-.879 (.421)*	.980 (.396)**
Tenure of MC	.017 (.004)***	.043 (.012)***
Policy Controls		
ADA Score	-.008 (.002)***	-.009 (.007)
ADA Score * Hi Info	.012 (.002)***	.011 (.004)***
ADA Score * Medium Info	.006 (.001)***	.007 (.003)**
Black MC * Liberal	.008 (.576)	-.437 (.406)
Black MC * Conservative	-.140 (.517)	-.685 (.525)
Black MC * South	.793 (.399)*	.434 (.478)
Individual Level Controls		
Democrat	.348 (.128)***	-.349 (.348)
Republican	-.038 (.132)	-.793 (.671)
Liberal	-.022 (.111)	.720 (.313)**
Conservative	.117 (.109)	.349 (.300)
Male	-.039 (.068)	.007 (.196)
Age	.009 (.002)***	.010 (.006)
Education	.135 (.028)***	.084 (.079)
Income	.038 (.036)	.255 (.113)*
South	.081 (.099)	.190 (.348)
N	7435	1506
Log-Likelihood	-3232.86	-493.18

Note: Coefficient and standard error (in parentheses) estimates, and goodness of fit measures are combined statistical results across five multiply imputed datasets. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .02$, *** $p < .01$.

constituents who are at least moderately well informed about politics are more likely to contact legislators with more liberal voting records. Whites who score high on the political knowledge scale are also more likely to contact liberal members of Congress than conservative members, even when taking individual ideology into account. By comparison, white constituents with only low or moderate levels of political information are less likely to contact members with high ADA scores.

After controlling for the ideological differences among Democratic legislators, the race of a member of Congress continues to affect the likelihood that a white or black constituent has contacted that legislator. The average black Democratic constituent represented by a black legislator is almost twice as likely to have contacted her MC than a black constituent represented by a white Democrat (16.7 percent versus 8.8 percent).⁸ For the average white constituent, the likelihood of having contacted a legislator is 11.4 percentage points (8 percent versus 19.5 percent) lower under black representation than under white representation. Further, no significant differences exist among white or black constituents in the effect of race based on constituent's ideological self-identification. Regardless of individual ideology, constituents are more likely to contact a legislator of their own race than they are a legislator with whom they do not racially identify. These results support Mansbridge's (1999) contention that descriptive representation facilitates vertical communication between representatives and constituents.

Thus, a constituent's ability to identify racially with her member of Congress can influence her relationship with that legislator in concrete ways. For whites, the consequences extend to both the attitudes and the behavior that define the member-constituent relationship. For African Americans, it is only in their willingness to contact elected representatives that one observes a clear preference for descriptive representation.

The effect of race in the member-constituent relationship may be a product of extrapolicy concerns such as accessibility. White constituents, perhaps believing that the first priority of black legislators is to serve the African-American community, may feel these representatives are not available to them as resources. The "assurance of two-way communication" (Fenno 1978, 239)

⁸ Mean values used in the calculation of the predicted probabilities: Tenure = 10; ADA Score = 66.1; Age = 43.3; Education = 3.3 (between high school [3] and some post-graduate [4]); Income = 2.3 (between 17 and 33 percentile [2] and 34–67 percentile [3]). For the categorical variables, the predicted probabilities assume the constituent is a southern woman, self-identified as a Democrat and ideological conservative (38 percent of black survey sample identifies as conservative; 35 percent as liberal), and with a medium level of political knowledge.

valued by white constituents may be lacking in the absence of descriptive representation, leading to less favorable overall assessments and to doubt over the ease and usefulness of contacting. While Canon (1999) finds that black legislators differ significantly in the amount of attention focused on the white and African-American communities in their districts, with many representatives actively seeking to balance the needs of multiple constituencies, there are black legislators who largely ignore their white constituents, choosing to practice a "politics of difference" where priorities are defined in strictly racial terms. Until the recent post-1992 surge in the number of black congressional representatives, which brought with it greater diversity in representational styles, the "politics of difference" was more prevalent than the "politics of commonality," the approach adopted by many of the younger generation of black House members.

Black legislators' extra attention to the needs of the African American community may resonate with black constituents. These efforts (e.g., the establishment of a downtown district office with a predominantly black staff) may have the effect of making particularized contacting appear less difficult. However, it is interesting to note that while descriptive representation may ease particularized contacting for African Americans, it does not increase the perceived utility of contacting: black constituents are as likely to consider white legislators potentially "very helpful" as they are black legislators.

A second possible explanation for the residual effect of race on the member-constituent relationship is that it reflects the racial biases held by whites and African Americans. Prior research has found racial prejudice to be an important determinant of white Americans' attitudes toward black political candidates. Perhaps white attitudes and behavior toward black incumbent legislators derive from similar sentiments. Conversely, a combination of racial group consciousness and a sense of comfort with same-race elected officials may account for African Americans' greater willingness to contact black legislators. However, judging by the asymmetry in the relative effect of descriptive representation on white and black constituents, the predisposition towards favoring members of one's own race appears to be stronger among whites than among blacks.

To test whether the effects of race arise from extrapolicy concerns regarding accessibility or from predispositions that are difficult to change, I reestimated the equations in Tables 2 and 3, adding to the original set of predictors a measure of social distance, a dummy variable for legislators elected in 1992 or later, and interaction terms between black representation and each of

these new variables.⁹ Social distance is measured as the difference between the feeling thermometer score assigned to the respondent's own racial group, e.g., the white feeling thermometer score for a white respondent, and the score she assigns to the opposite racial group, e.g., the black feeling thermometer score.¹⁰ If affective attachments to one's own racial group account for the preference for descriptive representation, then white constituents who feel relatively close to blacks as a group will respond more favorably to black MCs than will whites who feel more distant. At the extreme, for those whites who feel as close to blacks as they do to whites, there should be no difference in the attitudes or behavior towards Democratic legislators based on the legislator's race (i.e., the coefficient on the dummy variable for black representation should be statistically insignificant). If African Americans' greater willingness to contact black legislators has a similar affective basis, then black constituents who feel no closer to blacks than they do to whites (i.e., a social distance score of zero) should be as likely to contact a white Democratic legislator as they would a black legislator.

If, however, the race coefficients are capturing unmeasured extrapolicy concerns, then assessments of black legislators should vary depending on whether the MC is among the younger generation of black officeholders, elected since 1992, who have been more likely to practice the "politics of commonality."¹¹ For whites, the

⁹ I also tested models that controlled for whether the congressional district was majority-minority or majority-white. The coefficients on the district composition variables (a dummy variable and an interaction term between the dummy variable and the race of the legislator) were consistently statistically insignificant.

¹⁰ The two feeling thermometer items range from 0 to 100; the differences, -100 to 100. Median social distance for white respondents is 10, indicating that the median white respondent feels 10 degrees warmer towards other whites than towards blacks as a group. Median social distance for black respondents is 0, indicating that the median black respondent feels as close to whites as a group as she does to other blacks.

This social distance measure is the best available indicator of affective attachments. However, a more effective test of the hypothesis that the preference for descriptive representation is a reflection of racial predispositions would include the more sophisticated measures typically used in the research on racial attitudes and policy preferences: simple prejudice, "symbolic" or "modern" racism, general measures of out-group hostility, and racial group consciousness (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Dawson 1994; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Unfortunately, these measures are not available in the ANES.

¹¹ A "post-1992" dummy variable is a blunt tool for differentiating among legislators and testing for extrapolicy concerns. However, a more in-depth study of the representational styles of black legislators is beyond the scope of this research. (Canon [1999] provides a useful framework for such a study.) The measure employed here allows for a conservative test of the hypothesis outlined; the finding of a significant effect suggests possibilities for future research.

member-constituent relationship with these legislators should be more favorable than what generally exists with older generations of black MCs. It is less clear how contacting by black constituents would be affected by the different balance of representational styles observed among the younger generation of black Democratic legislators. Canon's (1999) research finds that the "politics of commonality" does not necessarily imply less attention to the needs of black constituents. If so, then the likelihood of contacting a black legislator should not vary based on whether the legislator was elected before or after 1992 (i.e., the coefficient on the interaction term between the 1992 dummy variable and the race of the legislator should be statistically insignificant). If, however, African Americans equate the racial exclusivity characteristic of the "politics of difference" with greater accessibility, then I should find greater contacting of black legislators elected before 1992 than those elected in 1992 or later. The results are listed in Table 4.¹²

Affective attachment to members of one's own racial group plays a real but limited role as a determinant of white attitudes towards black Democratic legislators. For white constituents who feel much closer to whites than they do to blacks, the effect of a legislator's race on job approval and favorability ratings is greater than it is for whites who feel as close to blacks as they do to other whites. When social distance is at its maximum (100), a white constituent rates a black Democratic legislator 21.8 ($7.8 + .14 \times 100$) feeling thermometer points below a white Democratic legislator; when there is no social distance, the gap is reduced 64 percent to just 7.8 points. In short, white attitudes toward black legislators reflect existing tensions in black-white relations. These tensions do not, however, fully explain the preference among whites for descriptive representation. Not only do white constituents who feel close to blacks continue to give lower job approval and favorability ratings to black Democratic legislators, but social distance has no effect on the likelihood of recalling the efforts of black legislators, believing that these legislators could be "very helpful" if contacted, or actually contacting a black MC. Regardless of how white constituents feel about blacks as a group, there is a significant difference between the member-constituent relationships with black Democratic legislators and those with white Democrats.

In only one case, the likelihood that a legislator would be "very helpful" if contacted, is there clear evidence of differences among white constituents in their evaluations of black legislators based on whether that

¹² Since I found no relationship between descriptive representation and attitudes among black constituents (see Table 2), I do not present a new set of results for these attitude items in Table 4.

TABLE 4 Predicting Attitudes and Behavior Toward Democratic Representatives

Variables	WHITES					BLACKS
	MC as Resource (Ord. Probit)	Recall MC Effort (Logit)	MC Job Approval (Logit)	Favorable Rating (OLS)	Particularized Contacting (Logit)	Particularized Contacting (Logit)
Constant		-2.51 (.248)***	1.48 (.245)***	59.2 (2.24)***	-2.92 (.312)***	-4.26 (.812)***
Black MC	-.436 (.173)**	-.843 (.430)*	-.725 (.337)*	-7.82 (3.47)*	-1.12 (.484)*	1.08 (.461)*
Tenure of MC	-.005 (.002)	.021 (.004)***	-.012 (.005)**	.010 (.037)	.018 (.004)***	.037 (.013)***
Policy Controls						
ADA Score	-.002 (.001)*	-.012 (.002)***	-.003 (.003)	-.049 (.019)**	-.009 (.002)***	-.006 (.007)
ADA Score * Hi Info	.002 (.001)***	.014 (.002)***	-.002 (.001)	.021 (.012)	.012 (.002)***	.013 (.004)***
ADA Score * Medium Info	.001 (.001)	.008 (.001)***	-.001 (.002)	.015 (.011)	.006 (.002)***	.007 (.004)
Black MC * Liberal	.269 (.218)	.108 (.522)	.539 (.458)	.676(4.98)	.247 (.618)	-.638 (.442)
Black MC * Conservative	-.112 (.207)	.026 (.446)	-.227 (.342)	-5.35 (4.00)	.047 (.510)	-1.07 (.563)
Black MC * South	.289 (.224)	.658 (.406)	.736 (.444)	-1.81 (2.86)	.702 (.438)	.344 (.629)
Extrapolicy Controls						
Elected 1992 or later	-.230 (.139)	-.432 (.269)	-.394 (.192)*	-4.97 (1.83)**	.084 (.218)	.478(1.06)
Black MC * Elected 1992 or later	.661 (.296)*	.983 (.687)	.994 (.633)	3.74 (4.92)	.220 (.960)	-.576(1.34)
Affective Attachments						
Social Distance	-.001 (.001)	-.000 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.018 (.012)	-.002 (.002)	-.005 (.006)
Black MC * Social Distance	-.007 (.004)	-.016 (.010)	-.023 (.006)***	-.138 (.069)*	.011 (.010)	-.003 (.011)
Individual Level Controls						
Democrat	.200 (.053)***	.361 (.109)***	.548 (.111)***	6.86 (.998)***	.301 (.163)	-.384 (.422)
Republican	-.102 (.048)*	-.199 (.128)	-.249 (.104)**	-4.24 (1.09)***	-.063 (.140)	-.643 (.567)
Liberal	.010 (.041)	.005 (.110)	.078 (.106)	2.18 (.738)***	-.072 (.098)	.742 (.290)**
Conservative	-.018 (.043)	.001 (.089)	-.126 (.090)	-1.60 (.703)*	.105 (.095)	.447 (.405)
Male	-.097 (.028)***	.190 (.077)*	-.234 (.065)	-1.43 (.569)**	-.017 (.080)	-.011 (.228)
Age	.010 (.001)***	.014 (.002)***	.008 (.003)***	.176 (.017)***	.009 (.002)***	.010 (.007)
Education	.002 (.011)	.103 (.025)***	-.001 (.030)	-.403 (.251)	.128 (.026)***	.066 (.079)
Income	.003 (.017)	.006 (.032)	.022 (.033)	-.789 (.355)*	.063 (.040)	.243 (.150)
South	.077 (.034)*	.003 (.087)	.019 (.087)	2.29 (.767)***	.076 (.099)	.288 (.390)
Threshold 1	-.787 (.131)***					
Threshold 2	-.410 (.136)***					
Threshold 3	.836 (.138)***					
N	7435	7435	7435	7435	7435	1506
Log-Likelihood	-8812.84	-3663.96	-3441.03		-3202.63	-477.39
R²				0.12		

Note: Coefficient and standard error (in parentheses) estimates, and goodness of fit measures are combined statistical results across five multiply imputed datasets. "MC as Resource" is coded 1(Not Very Helpful), 2(Depends), 3(Somewhat Helpful), 4(Very Helpful). *p<.05, **p<.02, ***p<.01.

legislator was elected before or after 1992. White constituents are more likely to consider the black legislators elected since 1992 "very helpful" than they are the legislators elected prior to 1992, or even white Democratic legislators. Whereas the average white constituent is 35.6 percent likely to consider a black Democrat elected in 1992 or later to be "very helpful," she is only about 27 percent likely to similarly assess a black Democrat elected before 1992 (26.4 percent) or a white Democratic legisla-

tor elected after 1992 (26.5 percent). Thus, on at least one dimension, the "politics of commonality" resonates favorably with white constituents, perhaps by addressing their extrapolicy concerns about accessibility. In general, however, there is little evidence that white constituents distinguish among black legislators on the basis of representational style.

The tendency among black constituents to contact black legislators at higher rates than they contact white

Democrats does not vary with social distance or with generational differences between black legislators. Regardless of a constituent's affective attachment to other African Americans, she is more likely to contact a black legislator. Further, black constituents are no less likely to contact black legislators elected in 1992 or later than legislators elected before 1992, all else (e.g., years of service) equal.

Thus, while it is clear that constituents assign some value to descriptive representation—with whites showing a consistent preference for legislators with whom they can identify racially—it is not entirely clear what accounts for the trust invested in same-race elected officials. After controlling for ideological differences and using the best available measures to take into account constituents' extrapolicy concerns and affective attachments, the race of a legislator continues to affect white attitudes and the behavior of both blacks and whites. The racial dynamic underlying the member-constituent relationship is driven by a set of concerns or predispositions not easily captured in this analysis. It may be that the dynamic has a strong affective basis but one rooted in a more overt out-group hostility that is not adequately measured by social distance. Alternatively, even the black legislators who practice the "politics of commonality," while perceived as more "helpful" to whites than the legislators who practice the "politics of difference," may be failing to address all of white constituents' extrapolicy concerns. Perhaps black legislators as a group, regardless of their outreach to the white community, put more effort into making themselves available to black constituents than do white Democrats. This could explain the differences in contacting among black constituents; conversely, white attitudes and behavior may stem from resentment over what appears as preferential treatment. Whatever the source of the effect, a constituent's ability to identify racially with her member of Congress has important implications for her subsequent relationship with that elected official.

Descriptive Representation and Congressional Approval

To explore further the effects of constituents' ability to identify racially with their representatives, I turned from the attitudes and behavior that define the member-constituent relationship to perceptions of Congress as an institution. Studies of minority office-holding at the local level have found that trust in city government is closely related to citizens' attitudes towards individual local political actors and to perceptions of group representation

in local government. In fact, Abney and Hutcheson (1981) found trust in city government to be more closely associated with group identification with the incumbent mayor than it was with perceptions of equity in the delivery of public services. If public opinion regarding Congress is responsive to variations in the identification of racial groups with incumbent legislators of different races, then white constituents represented by white legislators should be more supportive of Congress than white constituents represented by black legislators. Black constituents who are descriptively represented should be more likely to approve of the performance of Congress than black constituents represented by white legislators. To test this hypothesis, I regressed the congressional approval item on the same set of predictors used in Table 2. I also included two dummy variables indicating whether Democrats or Republicans controlled the House and Senate (partisan control of only one chamber is the omitted category), and four interaction terms between the party identification of the constituent and partisan control of the Congress. The results are listed in Table 5.

Rather than the hypothesized "spiral of trust," the effects of descriptive representation in Congress are confined to the member-constituent relationship. Public approval of Congress as an institution is unrelated to citizens' ability to identify racially with their legislators. As indicated by the statistically insignificant coefficients on black representation and its interaction terms, white constituents represented by white Democrats are no more likely to approve of the performance of Congress than are white constituents represented by black Democrats. For most African-American constituents, opinion on Congress is similarly unaffected by the race of the legislators who serve them. It is only among the 38 percent of African Americans who self-identify as ideologically conservative that the race of the incumbent legislator influences attitudes towards Congress. The average black conservative represented by a white Democrat serving in a Democrat-controlled Congress is 2.8 percentage points (37.1 percent versus 34.3 percent) more likely to favorably assess the Congress than a similar constituent represented by a black legislator. Compared to the size of the measured effects reported in Tables 2 and 3, the influence of race on congressional approval among black conservatives is substantively insignificant.¹³ There is little

¹³There is also no clear explanation for the direction of the effect. Perhaps it stems from constituents' assumptions about the relative influence of white and black legislators within the institution. If black legislators—trusted by liberal and conservative African Americans alike—are perceived to be on the margins of the institution (whether for reasons of ideology or due to racism), their constituents may be less likely to draw favorable inferences about Congress as a whole.

TABLE 5 Predicting Congressional Approval Among Constituents of Democratic Representatives

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Whites (Logit)</i>	<i>Blacks (Logit)</i>
Constant	.666 (.209)***	-.927 (.551)
Black MC	.218 (.313)	.397 (.256)
Tenure of MC	.004 (.003)	-.003 (.009)
Policy Controls		
ADA Score	.006 (.002)***	.001 (.004)
ADA Score * Hi Info	-.006 (.001)***	-.007 (.002)***
ADA Score * Medium Info	-.003 (.001)***	-.002 (.002)
Black MC * Liberal	-.395 (.322)	-.575 (.303)
Black MC * Conservative	-.150 (.380)	-.801 (.286)***
Black MC * South	-.134 (.316)	.280 (.318)
Partisan Controls		
Democratic Congress	-.389 (.164)*	.110 (.601)
Republican Congress	-.038 (.344)	1.01 (.812)
Democrat * Democratic Congress	.055 (.179)	-.082 (.644)
Republican * Democratic Congress	-.320 (.182)	-.176 (.801)
Democrat * Republican Congress	-.435 (.362)	-1.39 (.839)
Republican * Republican Congress	.134 (.359)	-.719 (1.15)
Individual Level Controls		
Democrat	.145 (.127)	.469 (.344)
Republican	.078 (.126)	.619 (.498)
Liberal	.043 (.078)	.121 (.169)
Conservative	-.076 (.071)	.092 (.158)
Male	-.243 (.054)***	.025 (.128)
Age	-.013 (.001)***	.001 (.004)
Education	-.060 (.023)**	.085 (.047)
Income	.044 (.025)	.018 (.058)
South	.094 (.070)	.270 (.222)
N	7435	1506
Log-Likelihood	-4974.49	-1015.47

Note: Coefficient and standard error (in parentheses) estimates, and goodness of fit measures are combined statistical results across five multiply imputed datasets. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .02$, *** $p < .01$.

evidence that the effects of descriptive representation extend beyond the dyadic relationship between members and constituents.

The lack of significant spillover effects attributable to descriptive representation, while at odds with research on local politics, is consistent with research suggesting that constituents routinely distinguish between Congress and its members. Such distinctions may be understandable in light of the limited influence of a single member of the legislature. The disconnect between the policy and extrapolicy concerns that lead constituents to contact and, in the case of whites, favor legislators with whom they racially identify and the relative stability of congressional approval may derive from a realization that it takes

more than one in 435 to affect change in an institution and to satisfy the programmatic standards (e.g., expectations about the manner of doing business) by which Congress is evaluated. For a constituent, the race of a legislator may speak volumes about *her* priorities and accessibility, factors that can influence the member-constituent relationship and can endear an individual legislator to her constituents, while offering no guarantees about the efficiency or the outputs of a legislative process in which the preferences of hundreds of political actors must be taken into account. A mayor, as a city's executive, is in a position to affect the direction of local government; the significance attached to racial change in the former is more likely to impact evaluations of the latter.

By comparison, constituents may recognize that a single black legislator is limited in her ability to affect significant change in congressional performance and, thus, significant change in attitudes about Congress.

Conclusion

Empirical research on black representation in Congress has emphasized the material gains associated with black electoral success over the “intangible goods” associated with citizens’ ability to identify racially with their legislators. Yet these “intangible goods,” which some scholars have theorized to include feelings of trust and inclusion, sentiments critical to the proper functioning of a representative democracy, are politically significant enough to warrant closer examination. With this in mind, the preceding analysis considered the effect of descriptive representation on the relationships between citizens, legislators, and the Congress.

Descriptive representation plays a real albeit limited role in shaping constituents’ perceptions of their government. While there is no sign that constituents expect a single legislator to fundamentally alter how Congress does business, a constituent’s ability to identify racially with her MC influences the attitudes and behavior that define the member-constituent relationship. White constituents are more likely to recall the efforts of white legislators, more likely to approve of their job performance and rate them favorably, and more likely to view these legislators as resources. Both white and African-American constituents are more inclined to contact legislators who share their racial group membership.

The preference for same-race elected officials reflects more than the rational calculations of policy-minded constituents, although the ideological differences that separate white and black Democratic legislators do affect constituents’ evaluations. The findings suggest that extrapolicy concerns such as skepticism about the accessibility of black legislators may play a role in white constituents’ limited receptivity to black members of Congress; black legislators who adopt a more racially inclusive representational style are more likely to be viewed by whites as resources. Affective attachments to members of one’s own racial group also influence the preference for same-race legislators, with white constituents who generally do not feel close to blacks as a group being less likely to approve of or favorably rate black legislators.

However, even after taking into account ideological differences and constituents’ extrapolicy concerns, as well as the social distance that exists between whites and

blacks, the attitudes and behavior that define the member-constituent relationship continue to differ based on a constituent’s ability to identify racially with her representative. The preference for same-race elected officials—particularly among whites, less so among blacks—is clear; however, the reasons behind this preference are less transparent. (In fact, neither extrapolicy concerns, as measured, or affective attachments can explain the African-American preference for contacting black legislators.) Perhaps these preferences arise from other concerns regarding the efforts or character of elected representatives. Abney and Hutcheson, noting the close correlation between political trust and perceptions of honesty, conclude that public officials “may be agents of opinion change simply as a result of the images they project,” regardless of the policies they pursue (1981, 100). Alternatively, these preferences may arise from unmeasured predispositions among constituents, such as out-group hostility as opposed to just affective in-group attachments. With better data, these theories may hold promise for future research.

The effect of descriptive representation is limited not only insofar as it influences just the member-constituent relationship but also in that it appears to matter more consistently for white constituents than for blacks. What initially appeared to be a preference for descriptive representation among African Americans is largely explained by the ideological differences that separate white and black Democratic legislators. In the end, it is only the levels of particularized contacting that differ significantly based on whether a black constituent is represented by a black or white legislator.

The asymmetry between whites and African Americans in the preference for descriptive representation, while consistent with earlier studies showing lower rates of crossover voting among whites (Bullock 1984; Williams 1990), is at odds with the concerns expressed by political observers who openly worry about African Americans’ willingness to “think beyond the desire for black faces and black solidarity” (Swain 1995, 210). Swain laments that “white liberal Democrats who view themselves as the allies of African Americans cannot always count on black support” (Swain 1995, 216). Although white liberal Democrats are less likely than their black colleagues in the House to hear from black constituents, the results here suggest that it is white constituents and not African Americans who place the greater premium on race.

For scholars concerned with issues of minority representation, these findings underscore the need to think broadly about the consequences of black office-holding, taking into account the ways in which it significantly

influences citizens' orientations towards politics and political actors. Too often these influences have been dismissed as matters of individual psychology without clear political implications. However, the attitudes associated with black office-holding are significant for what they indicate about the quality of representation and the ability of black representatives to build effective relationships with white constituents who, even in majority-minority districts, can account for more than one-third of a district's population. Furthermore, the behavior associated with black representation may have important implications for the issues of policy responsiveness of concern to many social scientists. Because representatives attend to the participant community, the level of congruence between the policy preferences of constituents and the legislative priorities of members depends in part on the willingness of constituents to communicate their preferences through all modes of political participation. Conditions that undermine the willingness to reach out to legislators may also undermine the quality of policy representation. Conversely, conditions that facilitate vertical communication between constituents and legislators may strengthen the link between constituent preferences and legislative behavior. Thus, by appreciating the effects of descriptive representation on attitudes and behavior, we may be able to better understand its policy consequences as well.

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