

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Descriptive Representation under Group Conflict Scenarios

Katherine Tate 

Brown University, USA
Email: Katherine_Tate@brown.edu

(Received 2 November 2021; revised 3 May 2022; accepted 29 July 2022)

Jane Mansbridge (1999) challenges critics of descriptive representation, writing that it leads to improvements in substantive representation. Theorists, however, continue to debate the degree to which groups can be represented by single individuals in government as gains in descriptive representation fail to be transformative. The effects of descriptive representation are more complex than they are often presented as new descriptive representatives do not always win acceptance. Even as there are substantive policy gains through descriptive representation, there are also setbacks for groups through the mobilization of opposition groups. There is also pressure on descriptive representatives to moderate their positions and be less vocal. Given the dominant position of privileged groups and their conservative ideologies that defend inequality, substantive gains from descriptive representation are less than implied by descriptive representation advocates.

The empirical work has mostly supported Mansbridge's claims of improved government legitimacy. In my 1996 survey, I found that Blacks feel better represented in Congress when represented by Blacks, even taking into account the political party of the House member (English, Pearson, and Strolovitch 2019; Tate 2003). However, in my study, Blacks represented by Blacks were no more trusting of government or efficacious than Blacks represented by other races. In another study, Blacks were more likely to contact Black representatives when represented by Blacks (Gay 2002).

Latinos express lower levels of political alienation when represented by Latinos (Pantoja and Segura 2003). For women, in one study, women appeared more engaged in politics in states where women were running for governor or the U.S. Senate (Atkeson 2003). In another study, women were not more likely to be mobilized by the candidacies of women in House races (Dolan 2006). Women

give women U.S. House representatives slightly more favorable ratings than male representatives, all things being equal (Lawless 2004). In another study, gender congruency did not improve the legislator's rating for women (English, Pearson, and Strolovitch 2019). Women represented by women were no more efficacious or participatory than women represented by men (Lawless 2004). Another study found that women generally support women candidates more than men do (Martin 2019).

Descriptive representatives, as Mansbridge wrote in 1999, enlarge the political agenda. Black legislators are more likely to sponsor Black interest bills than White legislators (Grose 2011). Black members of Congress are also more active in committee hearings to advance Black interests than White Democrats (Gamble 2007; Minta 2011). Government has increased its hearings on civil rights and social welfare because of its growing diversity (Minta and Sinclair-Chapman 2013). Similarly, the research on women legislators has found that women are more likely to sponsor women's interests and feminist bills than men (Burrell 1996; Dodson 2006; Swers 2002; Thomas 1994). There is additional work showing that women of color legislator act on both race and gender (Brown 2014; Brown and Banks 2014; Orey et al. 2006). Diversity in government enhances its responsiveness to minorities, and therefore increases its legitimacy. Recently, however, Hardy-Fanta et al. (2016) found that men legislators were just as strongly committed to women's rights as women were.

Beyond better deliberation and legitimacy, Mansbridge claims that group members win acceptance as political leaders. Acceptance is not automatic, and Mansbridge does not acknowledge prejudice and rejection even as she coauthored an important piece on political reprisals and threats (Mansbridge and Shames 2008). In 1983, Harold Washington, the first Black mayor of Chicago, found it difficult to win his race and govern because of the city's racial divisions. In a solidly Democratic city, a White Republican challenger was able to mount an effective campaign (Kleppner 1985). David Dinkins, New York City's first Black mayor, won in 1989, only to be defeated for a second term in 1993 by a moderate White Republican. Minority legislators, even today, like Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN), have experienced Islamophobia, racism, misogyny, and death threats. President Donald Trump referenced her and other progressive Democrats in tweets advising them to "go back" to their native countries. Some speculate that Trump's election in 2016 was the result of a political backlash to Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States.

Racism remained a problem during the Obama presidency. Obama was repeatedly asked whether he had been born in the United States, despite no evidence otherwise. There were some signs of resistance to his presidency in the public and within Congress (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2016, 74–75). Two years into Obama's first term, the Senate majority leader, Republican Mitch McConnell, famously stated his goal to make Obama a one-term president if Obama was too liberal. Using survey data, Jardina (2019) shows that the Obama presidency triggered White in-group identities and fed beliefs about Whites being losers. Obama, however, did much to limit a backlash over race. He downplayed public perceptions that he was a race advocate (King-Meadows 2021; Price 2016; Shaw,

Brown, McCormick 2021). Shaw, Brown, and McCormick (2021) write that Obama did not view himself as a spokesperson for Blacks, while Price (2016) claims that Obama failed to talk explicitly about race. Harris (2014) writes that the Obama presidency did not improve conditions for Blacks.

The same criticisms of the Obama presidency would likely carry over to a first woman president. Social norms, power, and inequality cause women representatives to avoid divisive issues such as establishing a national right to abortion and reproductive health. Congress became a focal point for abortion debates in the 1980s (Ainsworth and Hall 2011). Notably, women have found it impossible to remove the Hyde Amendment, which since 1976 has blocked Medicaid from funding most abortions. Republicans continue to attack opponents for advocating public funding for abortions. Swers's (2013) study of women U.S. senators found that some Democratic female senators were reluctant to take strong public positions on abortion rights because of the public divide over it, despite having clear legislative records in this area.

Ambition may also reduce the substantive representation of marginalized groups. Female lawmakers may wish to represent majority interests, such as national defense, to appeal to the larger voting public in future elections. Swers (2013) found that women senators, like men, have equally strong records on defense and national security even though women are less likely than men to favor large defense budgets. In a study of Black lawmakers, those in Congress who later ran for statewide office were more moderate ideologically than those who had not (Tate 2020). Women and minorities may strategically embrace dominant values and stake out positions that do not challenge them in order to advance politically. Group conflict theories (Blumer 1958) posit that power is a zero-sum good, with dominant groups viewing minorities as endangering their privileged positions. Survey work bears this out (Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Filindra (2019), in analyzing immigration policies at the state level, found evidence for both welcoming and hostile reactions to the growth rates of immigrant groups. Women and minorities enter government and represent in ways that are not overtly threatening to the position, power, privilege, and resources of dominant groups.

Women and minorities have pressured the Democratic Party to liberalize. Still, political parties are inherently conservative. Samuel Alito's nomination to replace retiring Sandra Day O'Connor on the U.S. Supreme Court was not filibustered by the Democrats. A lone Democratic senator filibustered, and it failed (Swers 2013). In 2021, Senator Tammy Duckworth vowed to block President Joe Biden's non-diversity appointments until more Asian Americans were added to his administration. Senator Mazie Hirono joined Duckworth. Duckworth's and Hirono's defections could have cost Biden his non-diversity appointments in an evenly divided Senate. Again, diversity goals run against the dominant cultural norms of a meritocracy and individualism. Having women and minorities in government make the case is why this issue of diversity and fairness will not go away.

Watershed events like the election of the first Black president in 2008 fail to be dramatically transformative because of a stratified social order, conservative dominant ideologies, and a majoritarian electoral system. Descriptive representatives

may also fail to challenge the existing social order as they moderate their positions to gain legitimacy and to win votes. Change does occur, as descriptive representation elevates the group. But this is not automatic, and it can be met with pushback from the dominant group. McAdam (1999) writes about a changing political opportunity structure, or the degree to which the political system is open or closed to reform and challenge. Groups can lose standing and there can be repression, as we saw with the Trump administration's conservative immigration policies. In the end, a theory of descriptive representation should posit that its effects are complex and radical change is generally elusive.

References

- Ainsworth, Scott H., and Thad E. Hall. 2011. *Abortion Politics in Congress*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Atkeson, Lonna Rae. 2003. "Not All Cues Are Created Equal: The Conditional Impact of Female Candidates on Political Engagement." *Journal of Politics* 65 (4): 1040–61.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1958. "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." *Pacific Sociological Review* 1 (1): 3–7.
- Bobo, Lawrence, and Vincent L. Hutchings. 1996. "Perceptions of Racial Group Competition: Extending Blumer's Theory of Group Position to a Multiracial Social Context." *American Sociological Review* 61 (6): 951–72.
- Brown, Nadia E. 2014. *Sisters in the Statehouse: Black Women and Legislative Decision Making*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Nadia, and Kira Hudson Banks. 2014. "Black Women Agenda Setting in the Maryland State Legislature." *Journal of African American Studies* 18 (2): 164–80.
- Burrell, Barbara C. 1996. *A Woman's Place Is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dodson, Debra L. 2006. *The Impact of Women in Congress*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dolan, Kathleen. 2006. "Symbolic Mobilization? The Impact of Candidate Sex in American Elections." *American Politics Research* 34 (6): 687–704.
- English, Ashley, Kathryn Pearson, and Dara Z. Strolovitch. 2019. "Who Represents Me? Race, Gender, and Partisan Congruence, and Representational Alternatives in a Polarized America." *Political Research Quarterly* 72 (4): 785–804.
- Gamble, Katrina L. 2007. "Black Political Representation: An Examination of Legislative Activity within U.S. House Committees." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32 (3): 421–47.
- Gay, Claudine. 2002. "Spirals of Trust? The Effect of Descriptive Representation on the Relationship between Citizens and Their Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (4): 717–32.
- Grose, Christian. 2011. *Congress in Black and White: Race and Representation*. In *Washington and at Home*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Filindra, Alexandra. 2019. "Is 'Threat' in the Eye of the Researcher? Theory and Measurement in the Study of State-Level Immigration Policymaking." *Policy Studies Journal* 47 (3): 517–43.
- Hardy-Fanta, Carol, Pei-te Lien, Dianne Pinderhughes, and Christine Marie Sierra. 2016. *Contested Transformation: Race, Gender, and Political Leadership in the 21st Century America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris, Fredrick. 2014. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- King-Meadows, Tyson D. 2021. "Invitations to the Dance: The Obama Administration's Complex Engagement with Black Elected Officials and Advocacy Groups." In *After Obama: African American Politics in a Post-Obama Era*, eds. Todd C. Shaw, Robert A. Brown, and Joseph P. McCormick II. New York: New York University Press, 72–103.

- Kleppner, Paul. 1985. *Chicago Divided: The Making of a Black Mayor*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Lawless, Jennifer L. 2004. "Political of Presence? Congresswomen and Symbolic Representation." *Political Research Quarterly* 57 (1): 81–99.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent Yes." *Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628–57.
- Mansbridge, Jane, and Shauna L. Shames. 2008. "Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power." *Politics & Gender* 4 (4): 623–34.
- Martin, Danielle Joesten. 2019. "Playing the Women's Card: How Women Respond to Female Candidates' Descriptive versus Substantive Representation." *American Politics Research* 47 (3): 549–81.
- McAdam, Doug. 1999. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Minta, Michael D. 2011. *Oversight: Representing the Interests of Blacks and Latinos in Congress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Minta, Michael D., and Valeria Sinclair-Chapman. 2013. "Diversity in Political Institutions and Congressional Responsiveness to Minority Interests." *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (1): 127–40.
- Orey, Bryon D'Andra, Wendy Smooth, Kimberly S. Adams, and Kisha Harris-Clark. 2006. "Race and Gender Matter: Refining Models of Legislative Policy Making in State Legislatures." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 28 (3/4): 97–119.
- Pantoja, Adrian D., and Gary M. Segura. 2003. "Does Ethnicity Matter? Descriptive Representation in Legislatures and Political Alienation among Latinos." *Social Science Quarterly* 84 (2): 441–61.
- Price, Melanye T. 2016. *The Race Whisperer: Barack Obama and the Political Uses of Race*. New York: New York University Press.
- Shaw, Todd C., Robert A. Brown, and Joseph P. McCormick II. 2021. "Introduction: There's No Such Thing as a 'Black President.'" In *After Obama: African American Politics in a Post-Obama Era*, eds. Todd C. Shaw, Robert A. Brown, and Joseph P. McCormick II. New York: New York University Press, 1–42.
- Swers, Michele L. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Swers, Michele L. 2013. *Women in the Club: Gender and Policy Making in the Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tate, Katherine. 2003. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tate, Katherine. 2020. *Concordance: Black Lawmaking in the U.S. Congress from Carter to Obama*. New ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Katherine Tate is Professor of Political Science at Brown University: katherine_tate@brown.edu

Cite this article: Katherine Tate. 2023. "Descriptive Representation under Group Conflict Scenarios." *Politics & Gender* 19, 1256–1260. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000587>