
Life in the Beltway: Assessing the Performance of Representatives of Majority Black Districts in the South

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The redistricting in the South following the 1990 census has had a profound effect on the style of representation that many black citizens in the states of the former Confederacy received from their Congressperson after the 1992 elections. Following the stringent demands of the Republican-led Justice Department in 1990, state legislatures in the South scrambled to draw as many majority-black districts as possible. The Justice Department, acting under its expanded power following the 1982 Congressional amendments to the Voting Rights Act, was subjecting states with histories of voting discrimination to intense scrutiny and pressure to create more districts in which more than 50 percent of the voting age population was black. As a result, 15 new majority black districts were carved out of the South, each of which elected a black Democrat to the House of Representatives in 1992. However, two years later the auxiliary effects of these districts were demonstrated, as 52 new Republicans were elected to the House and every one of the now-sophomore black Representatives from the South were relegated to minority party status. The resultant conservatism of the adjacent districts that were drained of their minority constituencies after 1992 had resulted in a record number of white Republicans elected from the South.

This article is designed to elucidate the style and substance of representation by Congresspeople elected from majority black districts in the South. I will examine whether the constituent-centered style of representation that seems to dominate in these districts is more appropriate for Representatives whose poor, majority black constituencies generally expect more support and funding from the government than voters in richer white districts.

ARE BLACK REPRESENTATIVES UNIQUELY QUALIFIED TO REPRESENT MAJORITY BLACK DISTRICTS?

Black representatives elected from majority black districts are behaving differently than their legislative cohorts who represent majority white districts. They are introducing fewer bills, yet are winning by much larger margins. Whether these margins are a result of an effective gerrymander or

an effective Congressperson is impossible to determine. However, the overwhelming support of the black legislators, whose time has been spent doing casework and bringing money back to the district, is an indication of the acceptance by the voters of the work that they are doing in Washington. But is it only black representatives who can effectively represent black people and black interests? Can liberal white Democrats perform equally well as a representative for black people?

Interest group ratings are one appropriate measure of how a representative has performed in office according to the ideological leanings of a particular group. Interest group ratings from the Leadership Council on Civil Rights (LCCR), Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) show that, with a few exceptions, the Democratic representatives from the majority white districts are voting as liberally as the black representatives. This indication of massive support for legislation that was favored by interest groups sympathetic to minority concerns by representatives with very few blacks in their districts is an indication of the wide-ranging concern for minority interests absent a minority constituency.

Ratings for these same representatives from the Christian Coalition (CC), the Conservative Index (CI), and the American Conservative Union (ACU) indicate that most of the representatives received low scores from these groups, regardless of the racial composition of the Congressional district. Liberal white representatives are clearly able to represent black interests based on their roll call voting scores. Given the choice between a conservative and a liberal stance on an issue, these white Democrats will often vote alongside the black representatives from majority black districts. Still, there is more to being a House Representative than just introducing legislation and voting scores. Whether white representatives are as effective as blacks in handling casework and being a trustworthy representative of a majority black constituency remains to be seen.

Opinion polls are a useful tool for assessing the attitudes of whites and blacks on a variety of racial issues. Like interest group ratings, they measure people's attitudes according to preference, not intensity. However, unlike interest group ratings which can only evaluate representative performance based on a yes or no vote on proposed legislation, opinion polls often offer more than two answers for each given question. The most recent comprehensive series of polls conducted by Gallup on the state of race relations in the United States took place in January and February of 1997. The polls showed that while white attitudes, on the whole, had become much more liberal since the 1960s when the poll was first taken, but

that whites are also much more optimistic about the status of blacks. This optimism often translates into the fact that whites favor government aid and re-distributive programs less than the majority of black people. For example, 59 percent of blacks agreed that the "government should make every effort to improve conditions of blacks and minorities."¹ Conversely, 59 percent of whites responded that minorities "should help themselves." Similarly, while 53 percent of blacks favored increasing affirmative action programs, only 22 percent of whites said the same. On the whole, whites are much more positive about the state of blacks in society. While a full 76 percent of whites think that blacks are treated the same as whites in their community, only 49 percent of blacks feel the same way. Clearly, blacks are much more pessimistic, on average, than whites about the prospects for true racial equality.

Many of these discrepancies may be a result of the lower economic status of blacks. It is this lower economic status that prompts many black voters to demand more from their government and their Congressperson, specifically. Michael Dawson has postulated that the tendency for blacks, especially in the South, to turn to the Federal government for assistance is a result of a historical pattern of racist state and local governments that perpetuated the system of racism. He writes:

During other periods, especially Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the Great Society, the federal government proved to be the only ally (even if a poor one) of African Americans. It should not be surprising then, that the federal government, rather than state and local governments and the market system, has been the authority that African Americans have turned to in their time of need.²

This evidence meshes well with the comments from black representatives that indicate that their Congressional offices have become, according to Congressman Thompson, "a one-stop shop for constituent inquiries." Black Southerners, many for the first time since Reconstruction, have a member of their own race in a national office. As a result, they have been more apt to contact and demand services from these black representatives. The personal attention paid to their problems and the money coming back to their district have certainly improved the quality of representation for many blacks in the South.

This is not to say that whites could not be representing these same interests. There have indeed been white representatives of majority black constituencies in the past. Peter Rodino (D, NJ 10) served Newark's

majority black district for eighteen years and Lindy Boggs (D, LA 2) served the New Orleans district for fifteen years. Both retired after increasing pressure from black leaders to accede the seat to a black representative became overwhelming. Carol Swain has argued that the pressure from black leaders was detrimental to black interests. She wrote:

The assumption that only blacks can represent black interests puts African Americans who want to maximize the descriptive and substantive representation of blacks in Congress in an untenable position. If the argument is carried to its logical conclusion, it follows that only whites can represent white interests.³

However, the situation that Swain describes is not evident in the South. Currently, every majority black district is represented by a black Democrat and every majority white district is represented by a white representative. The only exceptions are the four black representatives who are representing majority white districts after the Supreme Court struck down their formerly majority black districts in 1995 and 1996 with the decisions in *Shaw v. Reno*, *Miller v. Johnson*, and *Bush v. Vera*.

Based on the evidence collected by the author, it appears that there are differences in the style and substance of representation for representatives from majority black districts. Whether this difference is attributable to the race of the representative or the majority race in the district is impossible to say. Based on the economic indicators, the large number of people living in poverty in these districts necessitates more public works projects and revitalization initiatives. Further, the large number of black residents in these districts, the majority of whom expect high levels of service from the Federal government, are more likely to approach their Congressperson with case-work demands. But how much does the race of the representatives themselves matter? If the Congresspeople interviewed are correct in their assertion that black constituents are more likely to interact and demand services from a black representative, then the race of the representative is important for ensuring adequate representation. If, however, these casework demands are at the expense of substantive legislative work because the representatives recognize that they were elected from incredibly safe districts, then perhaps the creation of more majority black districts would merely be a descriptive remedy. In the end, however, it would seem that the voters would decide what type of representation they desire. Whether voters will indeed be aggregated in districts to elect someone who will satisfactorily represent them is a question for another study.

Notes

- ¹ All Gallup Polling information available at <www.gallup.com>.
- ² Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989)54.
- ³ Carol Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 189.

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