BLACK

THE REPRESENTATION

FACES,

OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

BLACK

IN CONGRESS

INTERESTS

Enlarged Edition

CAROL M. SWAIN

BLACK FACES, BLACK INTERESTS

The Representation of African Americans in Congress

Enlarged Edition

Carol M. Swain

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For my sons
Benjamin and Reginald

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Preface

How do the members of the House of Representatives represent the interests of African Americans? In this book I examine what is distinctive about black representation of blacks, how white members of Congress fit into the picture, and how black representation can be increased.

Journalistic accounts of the late 1980s asserted that black politicians would soon claim the last few congressional districts with black majorities that were still represented by white incumbents. There was some speculation that black representation in Congress would then stagnate, given that black politicians were thought to need black majorities to get elected. I wanted to test this assumption. In a growing number of cases, after all, black politicians had been victorious in political units with white majorities. I was repeatedly told by voting rights strategists, however, that those elections either were flukes or involved politicians who had sold out the interests of blacks to get themselves elected.

This book therefore takes a close look at black representatives in a variety of districts—historically black, newly black, heterogeneous, and majority white—and at white representatives in districts with either a significant black minority or a black majority. After evaluating representatives in these diverse environments, I conclude that effective representation of black interests is in no danger of being diminished by either demographic changes or "sell-out" black politicians. Redrawing boundaries to create additional districts with large black majorities, however, appears not to be the most effective way to increase the representation of black interests. The potential exists for the election of additional black representatives in other types of congressional districts, including those with white majorities. In addition, white representatives are an underutilized and perhaps underappreciated alternative source of support for many of the issues that are of greatest interest to African

Americans. The representation of black interests depends on more than the shared skin color of the representative and the electorate.

In studying the representation of black interests in Congress, I have relied on a variety of sources. Most important were numerous interviews with members of Congress and their staffs, both in Washington, D.C., and in their districts, and observations in the field. I have also made extensive use of roll-call analysis and historical data. I have used these sources to examine the careers of members of the 100th Congress (1987–1989); my broader discussion considers the issue of African American representation through the spring of 1992 (the 102nd Congress).

Some portions of Chapter 2 appeared in an earlier draft in "Changing Patterns of African-American Representation in Congress," *The Atomistic Congress,* edited by Allen D. Hertzke and Ronald Peters, Jr. (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), and are reprinted with permission. Figure 9.1 is redrawn with permission from a version that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal,* October 18, 1991.

This book could not have been written without the cooperation of numerous people. I am deeply indebted to the members of Congress and their staffs who were most generous in extending to me their time and interest. Being a female attempting to interview a group of mostly male representatives both helped and complicated my work in various ways. One member of Congress offered me a job on his staff, another took me home to meet his parents, and a third introduced me at a party as the woman writing a book about his personal life. Some politicians tried to impress me in their male-dominated world; others did not want to be seen traveling with a woman not known to people in the district. Despite some difficulties, the fieldwork proved to be very valuable, and most of the time it was conducted in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Some of the members who were initially the most reserved and cautious later became frank and open during my visit to their district; one even outlined the strategy that a potential opponent should use to defeat him.

Many others deserve special acknowledgment. Merle Black, Paula Hall, Lawrence Hamlar, David Hillman, William Keech, Richard Shingles, and Deil Wright are among the good friends and, in some cases, former teachers who have encouraged, inspired, and challenged me over the years. More recently I have benefited from the generous attention of my friends and colleagues at Princeton University, especially Fred I. Greenstein. In addition, R. Douglas Arnold, John DiIulio, and Stanley Kelley, Jr., commented on significant portions of the manuscript,

and Jennifer Hochschild and Donald Stokes read an early draft. Iris Hunter provided excellent assistance. Susan Perzel and Patricia Trinity helped with the tables and the preparation of the manuscript and provided other forms of support as well. Yao Azibu, Jesse Borges, George Flint, Mark Lopez, and Erika Nystrom provided research assistance at different stages.

Richard Fenno, Jr., a pioneer in this type of research, has been especially supportive of this project. His enthusiasm, encouragement, and friendship have meant a great deal to me. Chandler Davidson, Charles V. Hamilton, Matthew Holden, Martin Kilson, John Kingdon, Glenn Loury, Russell Nieli, Robert C. Smith, Hanes Walton, and Alan Wheat commented on various portions of different drafts. I would also like to thank Aida Donald, Elizabeth Suttell, and Elizabeth Gretz of Harvard University Press and the Press's readers for their comments and suggestions. Auriel Pilgrim and the staff at the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C., were especially helpful. Finally, the research for this book could not have been conducted without the generous financial support of the National Science Foundation (SES-8723080), the Ford Foundation, the American Association of University Women, Princeton University, and the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But I alone, of course, take full responsibility for the book's content.

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I • THE CONTEXT

1 · The Representation of Black Interests in Congress

The political interests of African Americans are varied and complex.[1] Although the black middle class is increasing in size and some of its members are politically conservative, an alarming proportion of blacks remain at the bottom of the economic ladder, in need of the type of assistance likely to be offered by a liberal government and yet deeply distrustful of all government. The ability of the political system to address the needs of its black citizens is a test of representative democracy. More than two decades after the passage of civil rights legislation, African Americans are still underrepresented in political office, particularly at the federal level. They have sought to increase their congressional representation by challenging white incumbents in majority-black districts and by demanding that courts and state legislatures create new districts with black majorities. But often this way of proceeding has limited black politicians to two choices: to wait in the wings for retirement, death, or crippling scandal to remove white incumbents, or to fight among themselves for those seats made available in newly created black districts. And in recent years, the prospects for getting more blacks into Congress by using these two strategies have decreased dramatically. The retirement in 1990 of Louisiana's Lindy Boggs left no white politicians representing majority-black congressional districts, and 1990 census data initially revealed few areas where new districts with black majorities could be drawn. This situation occurred at a time when the percentage of blacks in Congress, although greater than it had ever been before, was far smaller than the percentage of blacks nationally. In 1991, when blacks held 25 of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives and constituted roughly 6 percent of the House, African Americans made up 12 percent of the U.S. population.

The magnitude of the unsolved problems facing black communities

throughout America raises troubling questions for people who equate black representation with more black faces in Congress. What will happen to black representation when courts and state legislatures can no longer draw new majority-black congressional districts? Do blacks have any alternatives for increasing their congressional representation? Can more black politicians be elected in majority-white congressional districts? Can white politicians represent black interests?

In this book I explore some of the answers to these questions. Using quantitative analysis of roll-call data, detailed interviews, and observation of the constituency relations of black and white members of Congress from a variety of districts, I have found additional sources of representation, different strategies for achieving true representation, and different expectations about what representation entails.

This book is divided into four parts. Part I establishes the context for the study. After defining the key concepts "black interests" and "black representation" in the balance of this chapter, in Chapter 2 I briefly trace the history of black representation from the ill-fated and largely ineffective efforts of the Reconstruction era through the relative improvements of the twentieth century. Parts II and III present case studies of thirteen black and white representatives. In Part II, I focus on black representatives in four types of congressional districts: historically black, newly black, heterogeneous, and majority-white. "Historically black" districts are districts with black majorities that have consistently elected blacks to Congress for ten or more years. "Newly black" districts have acquired black majorities more recently. These districts are usually the product of court-ordered redistricting plans, and the percentage of blacks in them is, on the whole, much lower. "Heterogeneous" districts are composed of three or more racial groups and lack a single racial majority. In the terminology that I use, "majority-white" districts are those that are at least 50 percent white and have black congressional representatives. For the next few decades, at least, heterogeneous and majority-white districts must be the source of any significant growth in the number of new black faces in Congress.

Part III examines white representatives of minority-black and majority-black districts. These are districts in which the black voting-age populations, those blacks who are eighteen years of age or older, constitute 35–39 percent and 50 percent or more, respectively, of the total voting-age population. White representatives prove to be an important and often undervalued force in what I call the "substantive representation" of African Americans. Part IV considers the implications of the study: Chapter 9 discusses the relevance of the findings to issues of

congressional redistricting, and Chapter 10 concludes with some observations about representation and the general outlook for the future.

What Is Representation?

What, indeed, is representation? And what is so special about black representation? Of the many analyses of the concept, Hanna Pitkin's is the most useful. Pitkin distinguishes between "descriptive representation," the statistical correspondence of the demographic characteristics of representatives with those of their constituents, and more "substantive representation," the correspondence between representatives' goals and those of their constituents.[2]

Descriptive representation can be examined by comparing the incidence of particular demographic characteristics in the population—for example, race, gender, religion, occupation, or age—with those of the representative. I define descriptive representation for African Americans as representation by black officeholders; that is, for this kind of representation the match between the race of the representative and his or her constituents is paramount. But a shared racial or ethnic heritage is not necessary for substantive representation and says little about a politician's actual performance. Bernard Grofman notes: "Being typical may be roughly synonymous with being representative, but it is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for effective representation."[3] The extent and quality of substantive representation can be determined by examining the responsiveness of the representative to his or her constituency.

More black faces in political office (that is, more descriptive representation for African Americans) will not necessarily lead to more representation of the tangible interests of blacks. Robert Smith, Dianne Pinderhughes, and Mack Jones have used the term "symbolic representation" to refer to the failure of black (and, by extension, any) elected officials to advance the policy interests of their constituency.[4] In effect, they refer to descriptive representation that is *not* accompanied by substantive representation. Whenever we consider the descriptive representation of blacks in Congress, we must always ask whether substantive representation is also present.

What Are Black Interests?

Because representation involves a relationship between constituents and elected officials, the question of interests immediately arises. What is it

that is being represented? W. B. Gallie describes "interest" as an essentially contested concept—one that is used differently by different writers and that can therefore lead to empty debates in which semantic confusion obscures real issues.[5] But here it is sufficient to note that interests can have both objective and subjective components, which can at times conflict with each other for a given individual or group.[6] One may treat observable phenomena, such as level of income, physical well-being, or employment status, as indicators or clues to an individual's or group's objective interests. It is possible, however, for objective interests to be wrongly attributed to an individual or group. We may assume, for example, that two-parent families are "better" than one-parent families, that employment is better than unemployment, and that good health is preferable to poor health; but some individuals and groups may not share the values of, or agree with, those who attempt to define what their objective interests are. Thus what certain researchers consider "deviant" in some black families may only appear so because of the tendency of American society to judge black behavior by the cultural norms of whites.

Subjective interests are less observable because they are so closely connected with the feelings, emotions, and temperaments of the people involved. Usually subjective interests are, in fact, related to objective conditions and circumstances—but they do not have to be. The perception of subjective interests may be influenced by cultural and psychological needs that lie outside the range of normal political activity—for example, the need of African Americans to feel that their contributions as a group are valued by society at large. Whenever an individual or a group defines an issue or concern as an interest, then that interest becomes at least to some extent legitimized as a worthwhile pursuit and should be taken seriously by anyone who purports to represent that individual or group on the issue in question.

If one accepts both objective and subjective indicators of interests as valid, what happens when these interests diverge? The conclusion is often that the individual or group is a victim of a false consciousness or, perhaps, of a consciousness that has not been raised. Those who seek to advance their own notion of the interests of a particular group commonly reach this conclusion. Having defined what is in the group's objective interest, they argue that it should be in its subjective interest as well, and, if it is not, they claim that the group is (for whatever reason) unaware of its "true" interests. The question of whether or not a group or individual is evincing a false consciousness is a normative one—it

cannot be resolved empirically. For the present purposes, therefore, it is sufficient to identify objective and subjective indicators of the interests of American blacks and then to ask whether and to what extent these are represented in Congress.

No one can argue that African Americans are monolithic. Some are capitalists; others are socialists. Most live in the South, but some reside in the Northeast, Midwest, and other sections of the country. Some are doctors, lawyers, and engineers; others are sanitation workers, street cleaners, and domestics. Owing to these differences the interests of blacks must vary in important ways; still, it would be a mistake to place more emphasis on the variations within American black society than on the commonalities. Broad patterns of objective circumstances and subjective orientations characterize American blacks, and striking differences continue to exist between black and white Americans well over a century after abolition and a quarter of a century after the enactment of civil rights legislation.

Indicators of Objective Interests

Indicators of the objective interests of blacks paint a stark picture of the daily reality in which so many African Americans find themselves. On virtually every indicator of objective well-being, black Americans fall below the white majority.

Unemployment disproportionately affects African Americans: labor statistics regularly show the black unemployment rate to be double and often triple the white rate.[7] Even when minorities are gainfully employed, their income does not equal that of whites. Furthermore, blacks have lost ground since 1970, when their median income was 61.3 percent of that for whites; by 1989 this figure had fallen to 56.2 percent (see Table 1.1).

Almost forty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, disparities exist with regard to the quality of schools and the educational achievement rates of blacks and whites.[8] Despite widespread efforts to achieve school desegregation, a large number of black children still attend predominantly black schools, which are often grossly inferior to those attended by most white children. Some of the persistent inequities are a manifestation of problems alluded to earlier: black children are likely to be of a lower socioeconomic status than white children. As a consequence, they drop out of school at a higher rate than do their white counterparts and perform more poorly on standardized achievement tests.[9]

Table 1.1. Median family income, 1970–1989

Year	Blacks	Whites	Ratio of black income to white
1970	$20,067	$32,713	61.3
1975	20,234	32,885	61.5
1980	19,073	32,962	57.9
1985	19,344	33,595	57.6
1987	20,091	35,350	56.8
1988	20,260	35,549	57.0
1989	20,209	35,975	56.2

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Money Income and Poverty Status in the United States, 1989* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), table 8, p. 36.

Health care continues to pose a serious problem for blacks. The life span for black adults has decreased from 69.7 years in 1982 to 69.4 in 1988. Over the same period, the life span of whites increased slightly, from 75.3 to 75.4 years.[10] A wide disparity exists in the infant mortality rate of blacks and whites; the black rate is 19.2 per thousand, that of whites 9.7.[11] In addition, a high incidence of HIV infection among African Americans is wreaking havoc in some communities; blacks constitute a fourth of all cases of AIDS reported between 1981 and 1986.[12] Blacks also suffer disproportionately from a host of other physical ailments, including hypertension, heart disease, and cancer. Data on health care indicate that blacks are far less likely than whites to receive quality care, and they are more likely to be underinsured and to rely on hospitals, rather than private physicians, for their primary care. Thus it appears that African Americans would benefit from a national health care system, which liberal Democrats have sought to establish for years.[13]

Both criminal activity and victimization reach alarming proportions in many black communities. In 1984, one in four persons arrested for homicide or non-negligent manslaughter was black. In 1987, 51 percent of all homicide victims were black males.[14] For over four decades homicide has been the leading cause of death among black males aged fifteen to thirty-four.[15] More stringent laws and victimization programs would