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Author(s): Katherine Tate

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KATHERINE TATE
University of California–Irvine

The Political Representation of Blacks in Congress: Does Race Matter?

Congressional scholars generally take the position that members of Congress don't have to descriptively mirror their constituents in order to be responsive. Yet ample scholarship has shown that legislators work very hard at identifying with their constituents, at conveying the impression that they are alike in interests and opinions. Matching the race of the House member to their constituents' ratings in the 1996 National Black Election Study, I find that blacks consistently express higher levels of satisfaction with their representation in Washington when that representative is black, even controlling for other characteristics of the legislators, such as political party. This study underscores the value of descriptive representation in the black community and highlights the need for additional empirically based studies of political representation.

African Americans have made tremendous gains in holding elective office but still fall short of proportional representation. Constituting 12% of the population, blacks hold about 2% of all elected offices in the country. Congress is the chief lawmaking institution in the U.S. governmental system, and in Congress, blacks make up about 7% of membership, with 38 members in the House of Representatives (including the non-voting District of Columbia delegate), but none presently serving in the Senate. Would increasing the numbers of blacks in Congress improve their representation there? For women, scholarship has seemingly reached a consensus that women's political interests have been underrepresented in the past since male legislators are less likely than their female counterparts to address "women's issues" (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Swers 1998; Thomas 1994). In contrast, the emerging scholarship on blacks has yet to reach such a consensus.

In this article, I address the question of whether or not the racial composition of government is relevant to blacks. A new breed of empirically minded scholars such as David T. Canon (1999), David

Lublin (1997), Carol Swain (1993), and Kenny Whitby (1998) has already grappled with this important question. I approach this question, however, uniquely, from the other side of the representative-constituent relationship, by using data from a 1996 national telephone survey of blacks. Do blacks feel that they are better represented in the U.S. system of indirect democracy when their representative is black?

Substantive, Symbolic, and Descriptive Forms of Political Representation

Does race matter in the political representation of blacks in Congress? Obviously the answer depends on how interests are represented in Congress. Since the eighteenth-century theories of Edmund Burke, congressional scholars have long pointed out the two different styles of political representation, *delegate* versus *trustee*. Delegate representatives try to reflect in their representative role the views of their constituents, while those acting as trustees serve by relying on their best judgment of the issues. Since Burke, political scientists have made a distinction between the focus (nation v. constituent) and style (delegate v. trustee), as both are implied in Burke's view on the role of the elected representative. A two-by-two typology is often presented to establish the four types of legislative roles elected officials can assume (Eulau et al. 1959; Miller and Stokes 1963; Thomassen 1994). On issue after issue, legislators move between a trustee role and delegate role, in pursuit of national or particularistic goals (Arnold 1990; Thompson 2001). After all, as legislators strive to bring back "pork" to their districts, they also participate in making national policy. In the United States, however, the idealized form of political representation is the instructed-delegate version, where representatives are not independent but constrained by elections to strictly submit to the will of their constituencies. Moreover, as much as Congress, along with the President, makes national laws, its members pursue their own particularized goals as representatives of geographically defined districts. The efforts by legislators to represent core groups within their districts as well as individual constituents make the U.S. system of representative government unique.

The role of the elected representative is but one conceptual component; another is the way in which constituents are actually represented. In 1967, political theorist Hanna Pitkin's seminal work held that citizens are represented in elected government in three ways: descriptively, symbolically, and substantively. One is descriptively represented when the representative belongs to your social or demo-

graphic group. Representatives substantively represent their constituents through the realization of their political needs. Descriptive representation devoid of any substance impact was “symbolic.” She concludes by discounting the value of descriptive or “pictorial” representation. In the end political representation is best achieved when legislators act “in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (1967, 209).

The initial empirical work that emerged generally ignored symbolic and descriptive representation in favor of a model of representation that was purely instrumental. Warren Miller and Donald Stokes’s article published in 1963 searched for “congruence” between constituents’ beliefs and the legislator’s voting behavior, and subsequent studies would interpret political representation as policy responsiveness or congruence. Policy congruency, for good and bad, would become the elusive “Holy Grail” (the mythical chalice used by Christ), in empirical studies of political representation. The Miller and Stokes study was roundly criticized for its methodological shortcomings (e.g., Erikson 1978). Other scholars have concluded that a one-to-one correspondence between legislators’ policy positions and constituent opinions need not exist on all the issues, as the constituencies to which members are accountable are varied, and as the decision-making process in Congress is quite complex (Arnold 1990; Froman 1963; Kingdon 1981; Weisberg 1977). Still others have found policy congruence is achieved in the aggregate, as the voting records of members of Congress do faithfully correspond to the majority sentiment in their districts (Erikson and Wright 1993). Still others have sought to establish a link between constituency service, committee position, legislative activity and the House incumbent’s electoral success, but to no avail (Fiorina 1989; Fiorina and Rivers 1990).

Political representation is much more than policy representation, or even service, whether to districts through pork-barrel legislation or to individual constituents. Representation is powerfully symbolic, according to Heinz Eulau and Paul Karps (1978). As they note:

By emphasizing only one component of responsiveness as a substantive concept, they reduced a complex phenomenon like representation to one of its components and substituted the component for the whole. But if responsiveness is limited to one component, it cannot capture the complexities of the real world of politics. . . . How else could one explain that representatives manage to stay in office in spite of the fact that they are *not* necessarily or always responsive to the represented. . . ?” (60-61).

For Eulau and Karps, constituents were symbolically represented through “public gestures of a sort that create a sense of trust and support in the relationship between the representative and the represented” (1978, 63). Congress is loaded with acts of symbolic representation: politicians routinely push for policies that they know won’t ever become law (Edelman 1964); legislators vote for legislation that won’t ever be implemented (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). The average citizen, however, does not understand that certain resolutions (simple and concurrent), for example, don’t make law and are unenforceable by law. However, because 200 or more such symbolic resolutions are generally passed in each Congress, there must be political rewards and tactical advantages associated with them. Symbolic legislation is also a byproduct of the American legislative structure, where members are elected to represent geographic communities in addition to their parties and constituents. Empirical examination of how members of Congress symbolically represent their constituents and the electoral and political significance of symbolic representation is still a fledging field (Chapman 1996). This said, members strive to symbolically represent their constituents.

The battle between black and white legislators in South Carolina over the state’s Confederate flag illustrate the continuing significance of symbols. The flag was hoisted over the state capitol in 1962, during the peak period of southern resistance to the black civil rights movement, and thus symbolizes white southern resistance to equal rights for blacks. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in its efforts to force the white-dominated state government to remove the flag, sponsored a boycott aimed at the state’s tourism industry. By media accounts, this boycott was successful, draining millions of tourist dollars from that state. Seeking a compromise, in May 2000, Governor Jim Hodges backed a bill removing the flag from the dome of the statehouse, but allowing a smaller one to be flown on a 30-foot pole in front near a monument to soldiers of the Confederacy. The war over racial symbols in South Carolina plainly demonstrates that such symbols matter not only to blacks but also to many whites. A few months earlier, South Carolina finally agreed to recognize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday as a state holiday, but only as part of a compromise bill that created a state holiday called the “Confederate Memorial Day.” To ignore the role that elected representatives play in symbolically representing their constituents and to examine only the substantive legislative products is to miss a very critical component of how constituents are actually represented in the American political system.

Since Pitkin's seminal work, a new group of political theorists, stimulated by the voting rights controversy, have begun to assert that descriptive representation, something Pitkin herself discounted, is an important form of political representation. A number have pointed out the importance of representatives "standing" for social groups (Williams 1998; Young 1990). Taking this a step further, Melissa S. Williams (1998) argues that fair representation in legislative bodies must include descriptive representation for marginalized social groups. Because the American system of government functions as a deliberative democracy, marginalized groups must take part in it (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995). Such groups, these theorists contend, must be free to define their interests and defend them publicly. Any other form of political representation short of descriptive representation might result in the neglect or dilution of the interests of marginalized groups. Descriptive representation remains potently symbolic to blacks today. It represents their inclusion in the polity, the progress achieved in America's race relations, and their political power in the U.S. system (Whitby 1997).

Like power, political representation may elude all efforts toward a precise theoretical definition. Constituents are represented in everything that legislators do in their formal capacity as elected representatives. Members of Congress engage in three principal activities: (1) constituency service; (2) policy making; and (3) reelection. Out of all of their activities, members substantively, symbolically, and descriptively represent their constituencies. Constituents are substantively represented by legislators in the form of policy initiatives, votes on policy, and service to constituents. They are represented in activities below the floor level of Congress, which are not as visible to the public (Hall 1996). At the same time, constituents can also be represented descriptively and symbolically. Both forms of political representation can give voice and recognition to the goals and values of a key interest and social group. Substantive, symbolic, and descriptive representation are not mutually exclusive categories but can overlap. And of course, black legislators providing substantive representation provide black constituents with all three.

This conceptualization of representation is a general one, not at all exclusive to blacks. I believe that legislators strive in their everyday activities to represent their constituents descriptively as well as substantively and symbolically. After all, while the evidence suggests that party and ideological records of members do matter to their poorly informed constituents in elections, Richard Fenno's detailed case studies establish that members of Congress emphasize their personal

qualities as much as, and perhaps more than, their policy stands. Reading Fenno's (1978) book, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, one is struck by how much members of Congress stress their "descriptive" representation of their constituents when in their districts. Fenno quotes one Congressman who is telling his audience, "I am not exactly one of you, but we have a lot in common, and I feel a lot like you." It may be that with most members of Congress being socially so unlike the population, members work very hard at identifying with their constituents and connecting with them at a personal level. Samuel Popkin (1991) writes that presidential candidates will eat tacos in Mexican American communities to symbolize their support. Similarly, during their campaigns, politicians will eschew ties and suit jackets to symbolically bond with the ordinary, working person.

Voters use demographic facts about candidates such as their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social origins, as a "low-information shortcut" to estimate their policy stands, according to Popkin (1991). Voters use more information when it is available, such as party affiliation and the candidate's qualifications, but descriptive characteristics are not ignored. The public's inability to closely track and interpret Washington politics may in the end give special weight to the symbolic, as well as descriptive, forms of representation. Thus, all Americans most likely recognize and value descriptive and symbolic representation as much as they also expect to be substantively represented. Researchers using the National Election Study data sets, such as Gay (1996) and Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2000), are finding that whites as well as blacks express higher levels of satisfaction with representatives of their own race.

Analytic Approach

The literature on congressional elections suggests that the following three factors are used in the vote decision: (1) party, (2) ideology, and (3) candidate qualities. All three are also relevant in how representatives are evaluated after election. Constituents of the same party are typically going to rate representatives of the same party higher than members belonging to the rival party, all other things equal. But in U.S. legislative politics, party membership is not a perfect predictor of the legislator's voting record. Ideology is therefore important. Roll-call votes are the primary basis on which one can determine the legislator's political ideology. In this analysis, I examined the impact of ratings on constituents' attitudes by four interest groups: (1) Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal Democrat

organization, (2) the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), the lobbying arm of labor unions, (3) the Chamber of Commerce of the United States (CCUS), which represents local and state business interests, and (4) the American Conservative Union (ACU), a group organized to further the cause of “conservatism.”

An equally important component of candidate qualities is competency. Competency is established many ways by legislators, through bill sponsorship, seniority, party chairmanships, and staff. Although few bills make it out of committee and actually become policy or law, voters may still value policy activism or its aggressive pursuit, or at least the articulation of tangible policy goals. Voters may also favor lawmakers who have been successful in the pursuit of their policy goals. However, in addition to determining how many bills in a given Congress the member does sponsor, one needs to know how many of these bills make it out of committee and are voted on the floor. What proportion actually become law? To answer these questions, I examined bill sponsorship data from LEGI-SLATE, a legislative and regulatory archival firm in Washington, D.C. I focused on two types of measures: the total number of bills sponsored by the legislators, and the total number of those bills that became law. The average number of bills sponsored by members in the 104th Congress was 7. These include co-sponsored and personal bills. Typically, black Democrats sponsored about eight pieces of legislation in the 104th Congress, while white Democrats sponsored nine and white Republicans about 12. By contrast, the average number of bills that became law per legislator was less than one.

The legislator’s seniority and party leadership posts can enhance his or her influence in Congress. Constituents may judge a member’s quality and the effectiveness of his or her representational activities by the leadership positions that the member has obtained. For this analysis I identified members of Congress as leaders if they held a party leadership post, and measured seniority as the number of years the member has served in the House since first elected.

Committee work is another way legislators attempt to represent their districts. Obviously, there are chairmanships that clearly amplify legislative influence in Congress. In terms of the numbers of committees members served on, most members served on two, although a few served on one or three. The type of committee the member serves on may affect the type of policies he or she can claim credit for, and hence, may impact on his or her standing in the district. Christopher Deering and Steven Smith (1997) identified congressional committees that were either (1) policy oriented, (2) constituency service oriented,

(3) prestigious, and/or (4) undesirable. I examined the type of committee a member belonged to to see if it affected their ratings, and then created and analyzed four sets of dummy variables based on the Deering-Smith classification.

Staff allowances are the same for all members in the U.S. House of Representatives, and typically, House members employ about 20 people on their personal staffs. Because casework is difficult and time consuming, the member's personal staff size might be a useful indicator of constituency service. Of the two measures of legislative staff that I examined, I used in the analysis only the number of staff employed within the district, as opposed to the number working in the Capitol.

In addition to legislative and committee work and constituency service, members of Congress devote considerable time to reelection activities. Highly rated members of Congress might be the most effective campaigners, especially since name recognition and approval ratings are strongly correlated. Campaign activity can include campaign expenditures and margin of victory in the last (1994) election. Those who win by high margins might be better known and better liked than those who win narrowly. Similarly, incumbents who spent the most on their last campaigns might also be better known, although it is not clear that they are also the best liked. I collapsed campaign expenditures into three categories: low, moderate, and high. High scores constituted expenditures over \$600,000 in 1994.

Black attitudes toward their representatives are likely to be affected by the following legislator attributes:

1. Political party
2. Race
3. Ideology, roll-call votes or key votes
4. Legislative record, specifically roll-call votes and bill sponsorship
5. Committee work, including the number of committees, chairmanship, or type of committee service
6. Legislative position, such as seniority and party leadership
7. Staff size
8. Campaign activity, such as margin of victory and campaign expenditures

Data for these measures for the 252 legislators whose districts fell into the sample were appended onto the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES). The 1996 NBES is modeled after the 1984 NBES (Jackson, Gurin, and Hatchett 1989) and the 1996 American National Election Studies (Rosenstone et al. 1997). It is a national random-digit-dial telephone survey of African Americans during the 1996 presidential

election. It contains both pre- and post-election components. A total of 1,216 respondents completed interviews during the pre-election component, 854 of whom were re-interviewed for the post-election component. Since 1998, the data set has been available to the academic community through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan (Tate 1998).

Of the 34 African American House members whose districts were represented in the sample, all were Democrats, and none were Republicans. The 1996 NBES contained a significant number of questions about the black respondents' elected representatives in Congress. The first measure was one of recognition, whether they knew the name, party, and race of the legislator representing them in the U.S. House of Representatives. Following recognition, they were asked to rate their representative on a "feeling thermometer" scale that runs from zero to one hundred. Only respondents who recognized their representatives' names rated them. After a number of other questions, they were then asked whether they approved or disapproved of the representative, making reference to the legislator by name, once again.

Finally, research on constituency representation, particularly that which follows the Miller and Stokes tradition, has been criticized because it uses national samples of congressional districts. Notably Erikson (1978) and Fiorina (1974) each critique the original Miller and Stokes' study for the very small number of cases that fell within the sampled congressional districts. The within-district sample size is significantly less of a problem in this analysis because of my focus on descriptive, as opposed to policy, representation. This analysis, in other words, is testing for correspondence among a few characteristics—notably race—rather than a broad and "noisy" spectrum of issue positions.

Results

Preliminary results shown in Table 1 reveal a statistically significant link between the representative's race and their ratings by their black constituents. Even controlling for party membership, black legislators received significantly higher ratings on average than their white counterparts. The "feeling thermometer" rating from blacks represented by black Democrats was 16 degrees warmer than the rating from blacks represented by white Democrats. A full 60% strongly approved of their legislator's performance when that legislator was a black Democrat, as opposed to only 36% when the legislator was a white Democrat. In contrast still, only one-quarter of the respondents represented by white Republicans strongly approved of their performance, while nearly 30% strongly disapproved.

TABLE 1
Blacks' Evaluations of Their House Representatives
by the Legislator's Race and Political Party
(weighted data)

Race and Party of National Black Election Study (NBES) Respondent's Representative	Black Democrat	White/Other Democrat	White/Other Republican
Average "feeling thermometer" rating**	72	56	45
Approve/disapprove of representative's job?***			
Strongly approve	60	36	25
Not strongly approve	24	37	27
Not strongly disapprove	9	14	19
Strongly disapprove	7	12	29

Source: 1996 National Black Election Study.

*Chi-square sig. level (two-tailed) < .05.

**Chi-square sig. level (two-tailed) < .01.

Although results shown in Table 1 suggest that blacks in districts that have black representatives are significantly more satisfied with their representative, it is not clear that the reason is entirely due to the race of the representative. It could also be that other political characteristics of House members beyond their race and political affiliation explain these preliminary results. It is important to consider different characteristics of House members beyond their race, and control for them in the statistical analysis.

In addition to the eight factors blacks associated with legislators discussed above, I included as controls the key social characteristics of the respondents themselves, such as age, gender, number of years the respondent had lived in the community, and education. Because of multicollinearity, not all of the predictor measures could be tested simultaneously. Those tested separately because of multicollinearity included total staff size v. staff employed in Washington and staff employed in the district, the number of bills sponsored v. the number of bills that became law, and the Deering-Smith committee classifications in which some committees overlapped. In fact, because none of the interest group ratings nor the Deering-Smith classifications ever reached statistical significance, they were dropped from the analysis and are not shown in the results presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
The Effect of Descriptive Representation on the Member's Approval
and Thermometer Ratings by Blacks
(OLS Estimates)

Independent Variable	Member's Approval Rating (1-5)		Member's Thermometer Rating (1-100)	
	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	2.464**	.372	36.83**	5.99
Member's race (Black)	.422**	.135	14.63**	2.22
Party match	.793**	.135	12.68**	2.14
Party leader	-.088	.131	-4.76*	2.11
Committee chair	-.239	.428	-8.37	7.16
Years of seniority	-.000	.007	.04	.12
Number of home staff	.038	.025	.18	.41
Number of bills law	.088	.052	1.93*	.89
Campaign spending	.141	.082	-2.69*	1.30
Respondent's residency	.000	.002	.02	.03
Respondent's age	.008*	.004	.19*	.06
Respondent's education	.055	.035	.74	.57
Respondent's gender (male)	-.128	.114	.705	1.86
N	663		778	
R-squared	.15		.21	

Source: 1996 National Black Election Study and compiled by author.

*statistically significant at .05.

**statistically significant at .01.

Table 2 presents the results of an OLS regression analysis of the two dependent measures: (1) the representative's approval rating, and (2) a feeling thermometer rating of the representative. In terms of the relative weight of race and party affiliation on black attitudes toward their representatives, political party appeared to overshadow race in the overall evaluation of the legislator's approval.

As shown in Table 2, blacks who had blacks representing them in Congress were more approving of their performance than were blacks represented by whites. All things being equal, blacks represented by blacks in Congress gave them approval ratings of about one-half point higher on average than blacks represented by whites. However, the political party of the legislator had an even larger impact on the legislator's approval rating. Constituents represented by members of their own political party (legislators whose party "matched" their constituent's, in other words), got ratings nearly one point higher than those legislators whose party didn't match the respondent's. The same

held true in the case of the feeling thermometer ratings, except that the effect of race was comparable to the effect of party. Blacks represented by blacks in Washington tended to give their legislators ratings about 15 degrees warmer than those represented by whites. Conversely, blacks represented in Washington by Republicans rated them about 13 degrees cooler than those represented by Democrats.

Only a few of the legislator characteristics impacted upon black evaluations of their representatives, and the effect was inconsistent, emerging only in the feeling thermometer model, and not both. Unexpectedly, party leaders got significantly lower ratings from their black constituents than did other legislators. Big campaign spenders also got lower marks from their constituents. Bill attainment modestly improved the incumbent legislator's rating by constituents. Committee chairmanships, seniority, and district staff size were unrelated to the approval ratings of legislators. Except for age, respondent characteristics introduced in the regression models were unrelated to black attitudes toward their representatives. Older blacks tended to give their representatives higher ratings than younger blacks. It could be that older blacks are more familiar with the records of their representatives than younger blacks, tending as a consequence to give them higher marks.

The failure to find a relationship between blacks' evaluations of legislators' performance and the legislators' ideologies, legislative records, seniority, and service could be statistically rooted. These factors may be indirectly tied to black evaluations, and thus a non-recursive, simultaneous structural equation model might better establish their impact. This could be an intractable methodological problem according to Fiorina and Rivers (1991). They go as far as suggesting that it requires a controlled experiment where legislative votes and service are manipulated to ascertain their effects. Fiorina and Rivers contend that once the legislator acquires a reputation in the district for being "liberal," or "hard working," or whatever, their day-to-day legislative votes and records of service no longer matter that much to constituents. They argue that, only in the long run, would incumbent ratings be significantly affected by changes in legislative votes or performance such as deviations from casting liberal votes or accusations by challengers in competitive races that the incumbent is "too old" or "out of touch."

At the same time, it could be that better and more refined measures of legislative productivity and service are needed. Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2000) have found that the proportion of bills that are *local* in content does positively boost constituent ratings of legislators. And

my analysis shows that certain factors do matter, namely the race and party of the House members. Voters rely heavily on political party and certain demographic factors, such as race, to make inferences about the legislator's performance. While considerable work has been invested in exploring the linkage between legislators and their constituencies since Miller and Stokes (1963), more work is obviously needed.

Discussion

Why are blacks more satisfied with their political representation in Washington when that representative is black? Members of Congress are elected to represent the 600,000 or so people in their districts, districts that are diverse and complex. Blacks are simply delighted when their representative turns out to be black because they feel that black representatives will better represent their interests. This could be a mistake. A liberal black in J.C. Watts' district in Oklahoma would not be well represented on policy matters by this conservative black Republican. When it gets down to it, although I've defined representation broadly as everything the legislator does in Washington and at home, it may be that representation from the vantage point of the voter is simply "being like me" on two easily discernible public dimensions: race and political party. Trying to determine their competency and legislative record is far more difficult and not as emotionally satisfying as figuring out how much the legislator and constituent are alike on social and political attributes.

Finding that the race of black legislators positively impacts upon their evaluations by their black constituents has clear implications for the present debate over the Voting Rights Act. Blacks obviously think that they are better served by being represented by members of their own race. Thus, while white Democrats can still earn high marks from black Democrats for their performance, even taking into account political party and political leadership, black Democrats can earn even higher marks. It is not clear, however, from this analysis that the benefits of being represented descriptively in Congress on the basis of race outweighs other political considerations. For Democrats, there remains the difficult balancing between creating and sustaining majority-black districts and preserving or maximizing the number of districts where a Democrat can win. The application of a sports metaphor might be a better illustration of this dilemma. With respect to black descriptive representation, it may not be enough that blacks belong to a team and cheer it on to victory from the sidelines if none of the players happens to be black. At the same time, if having blacks

on the field reduces the team's likelihood of winning, as Swain (1993) and Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran (1996) contend, some blacks may prefer winning over having their group represented in the sport.

The findings also point to a new direction in which the empirical scholarship on Congress might fruitfully be redirected. The policy-making process remains at the heart of representational government, and this accounts for its vaulted status in the literature. Still, it may not be the process most valued by constituents. In fact, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995) work shows, it is the endless debating, bickering, mudslinging, confusion, and bargaining that the public sees involved in legislative work that explain the public's lack of confidence in Congress. And it may be that it is the ongoing efforts by individual members of Congress to connect to their constituents, as established in Fenno's (1978) work, that accounts for the remarkably high public evaluations that members of Congress receive. In legislators' efforts to build trust, loyalty, and support in their district, being "descriptively representative" of constituents might go farther than substantive and symbolic accomplishments.

Katherine Tate is Professor of Political Science, University of California-Irvine, Irvine, California 92697.

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