

Race and Symbolic Politics in the U.S. Congress

The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is often invoked to justify political positions only tangentially (and dubiously) linked to issues of justice and civil rights. For example, White House counselor Kellyanne Conway referenced Dr. King in defending President Trump from impeachment by saying “I don’t think it was within Dr. King’s vision to have Americans dragged through a process where the president is not going to be removed from office. . . . And I think that anybody who cares about ‘and justice for all’ on today or any day of the year will appreciate the fact that the president now will have a full-throttle defense on the facts, and everybody should have that.” Similarly, on July 13th, 2021, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) denounced the teaching of critical race theory in schools by saying “Critical race theory goes against everything Martin Luther King has ever told us, don’t judge us by the color of our skin, and now they’re embracing it.”

As these examples make clear, politics is often symbolic (Sears, 1993; Sinclair-Chapman, 2018). Yet, scant attention has been paid to the ways legislators use symbols to engage with and represent their constituents (but see, Hill and Hurley, 2002). This oversight is particularly problematic when thinking about the representation of racial and ethnic minorities in general, and African Americans in particular. Because African Americans are both a numeric minority and historically underrepresented in government, achieving significant substantive progress in the form of new bills and laws can often be extremely challenging without sympathetic white allies. As a result, alternative forms of politics, from symbolic politics to protest, are often used to make progress on racial issues when traditional legislative avenues remain shut (Tate, 1994, 2003; Gillion, 2013,

2016).

We can see this importance from Sen. Carol Mosely-Braun's pivotal speech against Confederate flag patents to Rep. Bobby Rush's iconic donning of a hoodie in response to Trayvon Martin's killing. In our view, understanding Black political representation requires use to investigate the important role played by symbolic politics, especially on issues closely tied to race. Our ongoing research contributes to this understanding by providing the most comprehensive analysis conducted to date of race and symbolic rhetoric in the U.S. Congress. We first collected every floor speech on the floor of the House of Representatives from 1996-2014, nearly 800,000 speeches in total. To examine symbolic politics in the domain of racial issues, we focus on speeches that mentioned civil rights. Although this is by no means an exhaustive collection of speeches in Congress on racial issues, the issue of civil rights remains central to most African American voters and legislators, and legislation on this issue is often used as a proxy for attention to racial issues by legislative scholars. To identify the use of symbolic rhetoric in these speeches, research assistants hand coded the 5,545 speeches that mentioned civil rights for symbolic content. We identified every instance in which symbols of the Civil Rights Movement were invoked. These included references to important civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, or Medgar Evers as well as prominent civil rights actions, including the March on Washington or Selma. Because references to past sacrifices can be an important influence on African Americans' political attitudes (Wamble, 2019) and behaviors (Anoll, 2018), we believe these symbolic references should be particularly powerful in shaping how Black voters evaluate representatives.

With a focus on these symbols of the struggle for African Americans' civil rights, we find that speeches invoking symbolism play an important role in members of Congress's behavior. Across the nearly 800,000 floor speeches in our data, we find striking racial differences in how often, and how, members of Congress talk about the issue of civil rights. Our data show that Black representatives mention civil rights in about 1 out of 35 of their speeches. Although this may appear rare, that is nearly 16 times the rate at which white members of Congress mention

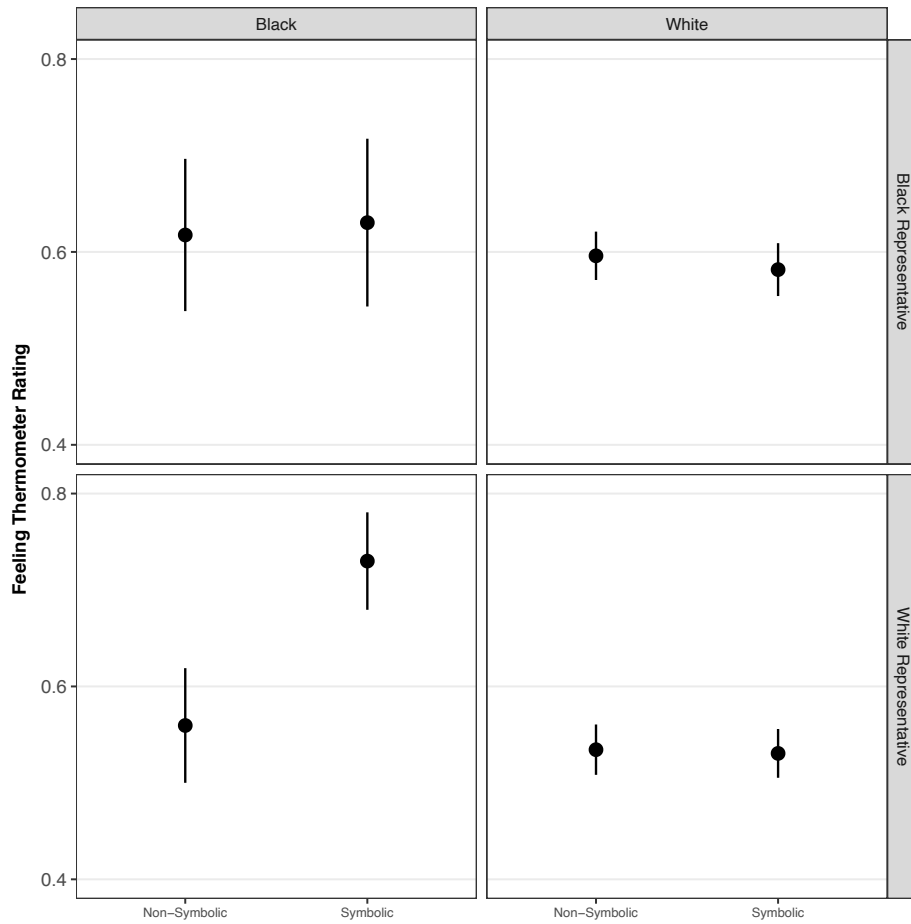
civil rights (less than 1 in 500 speeches). Importantly, in addition to discussing civil rights more frequently, African Americans in Congress also discuss civil rights in different ways. We find that Black MCs are significantly more likely than white MCs to invoke symbols of the Civil Rights Movement. When discussing civil rights, Black representatives invoke symbolism in about 1 out of every 4 speech that directly mentions civil rights, compared to about 1 out of every 8 civil rights speeches for white members of Congress. It is worth noting, however, that our findings also suggest that white MCs are responsive to district characteristics – white MCs who represent districts with a higher percentage of Black residents are not only substantially more likely to give speeches about civil rights, but also more likely to invoke symbolism when they do so.

Not only do Black and white lawmakers invoke symbols differently, but this rhetoric matters to Black voters. In 2017, we fielded a survey to 500 white and 500 Black respondents drawn from a Qualtrics panel that included a survey experiment asking respondents to evaluate a representative on the basis of his floor speech. Respondents read the text of a floor speech, and viewed an accompanying image of the purported speaker. Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of four speeches. The speeches were either about civil rights or renewable energy, and differed in whether we edited the speech to remove symbolic references to the Civil Rights Movement. We also selected accompanying images of either a white or a Black representative.

We found that these differences mattered, but only for Black respondents, and primarily when evaluating white representatives. We found no statistically significant differences in Black respondents' evaluations of a Black representative when speaking about civil rights versus renewable energy, nor when invoking civil rights symbolism or not. But for white representatives, as Figure 1 shows, the choice to invoke symbolism matters. Black respondents, on average, provided the most favorable evaluations of white representatives when they gave a speech on civil rights that invoked symbols of the Civil Rights Movement. When those same symbols were used outside the domain of civil rights, however, white representatives receive a significant punishment. That is, Black respondents were significantly more negative in their evaluations of white representatives

who (mis-)used civil rights symbolism to advance renewable energy than in any other experimental condition.

Figure 1: Black respondents punish and reward white representatives for invoking symbolism



In addition to influencing African Americans' evaluation of representatives, our research also shows that symbolic references to the civil rights struggle are linked to Black turnout. Using an analysis of validated voter turnout from the 2006-2018 Cooperative Election Study, our analyses suggest that increases in the number of symbolic speeches given by an MC during a given Congress are associated with an increase in Black turnout in the subsequent congressional election. Our model predicts that going from the minimum of symbolic speeches in the previous Congress to the maximum in the current Congress is associated with a 65.67 percentage point increase in Black

turnout as compared to the previous year.

What does this tell us about contemporary politics? We believe that our research shows that, while most voters might care first about substance, symbolic politics still matters. It is precisely because of the power of symbols that white officials, such as Kevin McCarthy or Kellyanne Conway, attempt to invoke the legacies of the civil rights struggle in advocating for their preferred policies. But our research suggests such efforts will fall on deaf ears, at least in the Black community. When such symbols are mis-used, they may actually further erode evaluations of those who might misappropriate important symbols of the struggle for personal or political gain.

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