
Race and Symbolic Politics in the U.S. Congress

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The contestation over symbols is a fundamental part of political discourse. On July 22, 1993, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, the first Black woman Senator in U.S. history, took to the floor of Congress to oppose a Senate amendment that would grant trademark protections to the Confederate battle flag. Denouncing the meaning of the flag as a symbol of racism and chattel slavery, she said, “It is absolutely unacceptable to me and to millions of Americans, black or white, that we would put the imprimatur of the United States Senate on a symbol of this kind of idea.” There is similar contestation over the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 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.” By invoking the memory of Dr. King, Conway was attempting to make a symbolic appeal to the principles of justice that were central to the Civil Rights Movement.

As these examples make clear, politics is often symbolic. Yet, scant attention has been paid to the ways legislators use symbols to engage with and represent their constituents. 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. In our view, understanding Black political representation requires us 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 to 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; prominent civil rights actions, including the March on Washington or Selma; and historical injustices like Jim Crow or lynching.

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 one 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 one 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 one out of every four speeches that directly mentions civil rights, compared to about one out of every eight 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 differ-

ences 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, 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.

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. When White House counselor Kellyanne Conway invoked the legacy of Dr. King, to call for President Trump's impeachment acquittal in the Senate, she was attempting to contest the meaning of political symbols. Our evidence suggests that not only will such appeals fall on deaf ears in the Black community, but they may further erode evaluations of those who misappropriate important symbols of the struggle.

Racism and Inequality in Congress

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Typically, we look at lawmakers and the laws they pass to understand race and racism in the Capitol. This expansive literature has provided invaluable insight into how lawmakers' racial identities shape representation and deliberation (Grose 2011; Fenno 2003; Minta 2011), social interactions and the formation of informal groups among lawmakers (Tyson 2016; Hawkesworth 2003), and the creation of public policy. In all, these works have an outward look that investigates how lawmakers use their power to shape the racial world outside of Capitol Hill. However, in my research, I study congressional staff to understand how racism unfolds within the halls of the Capitol. My current book project, *The Last Plantation*, investigates racial inequality in the congressional workplace by analyzing the career experiences of Black congressional staffers. The title draws on the fact that members of Congress and their staff have applied this telling nickname to the legislature in order to highlight how the institution is exempt from the very policies and principles it is tasked to create and implement (including federal workplace laws).

Congressional staff are known as the invisible force in American lawmaking (Fox and Hammond 1977). They provide critical advice, guidance, and analysis to members of Congress, and without them, much legislative work could not be done. The invisibility of congressional staff also hides deep-seated inequality within the congressional workplace. White staffers are overrepresented in top staff positions in the House (Scott et al. 2018) and Senate (Jones 2015) and even dominate entry-level positions like internships (Jones 2020). Moreover, staffers of color primarily work in the offices of the Black, Latino, and Asian lawmakers. Racial stratification and segregation in the congressional workplace (which results in staffers of color missing from top staff positions in the offices of White lawmakers and overwhelmingly concentrated in offices of lawmakers of color) demonstrates a clear and persistent racial hierarchy. These racial dynamics demonstrate how Congress and its workplace is a racialized governing institution.

I use sociological literatures on racism and organizations to explain how racism functions in the congressional workplace. Sociologist Victor Ray (2019) argues that racialized organizations 1) enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, 2) legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, 3) credential Whiteness, and 4) decouple formal rules from on-the-ground organizational practices. Congress embodies all these criteria as a workplace and governing institution. The implications of this racialized system is the production of *legislative inequality*, which I term to describe as the unequal distribution of resources and rewards among workers and which influences the creation of public policy and the organization of the American political system. I discuss below how Congress functions as a *racialized governing institution* and produces inequality on and off Capitol Hill.

First, racial inequality in the congressional workplace enhances the agency of White staffers to participate in areas of policymaking, oversight, and representation and, similarly, constrains the agency of staffers of color to do the same. I interviewed over 75 congressional staffers about their jobs. These data revealed that staffers not only support lawmakers' political enterprises but help guide their political and policy agendas as well. Senior staff have considerable influence and power, especially in areas where a lawmaker's agenda is uncrystallized and malleable. Black staffers I interviewed described how they used their position to facilitate *inclusive policymaking*, to advocate for communities of color in their districts who might be otherwise be overlooked and to incorporate anti-racist policy solutions in lawmaking. In contrast, in interviews with White staffers, they provided race-neutral job descriptions and rarely discussed communities of color or systemic racism. The underrepresentation of Black staffers and other staffers of color in top staff positions diminishes inclusive policymaking in the same way that we have come to understand why descriptive representation among elected officials is important.

Second, racial inequality among congressional staff is legitimated by lawmakers practicing the old adage "do as I say and not as I do" in the management of the congressional