

# Symbols of the Struggle: Descriptive Representation and Issue-Based Symbolism in U.S. House Speeches

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## Abstract

The rhetoric legislators use to discuss race is both important and understudied. In this paper, we explore whether the presence of Black legislators influences symbolic representation in the U.S. House. We ask three questions. First, do Black and white members of Congress (MCs) talk about issues involving race at different rates? Second, when Black and white MCs talk about race, do they do so in different ways? Third, do these rhetorical differences matter for Black constituents? Using data from 790,654 floor speeches in the U.S. House, data from an original survey experiment, and the Cooperative Election Study, we demonstrate that Black legislators are more likely to talk about civil rights, and they employ significantly more symbolic references when they do. This symbolism is linked to both changes in the evaluations of Black constituents and an increase in Black voter turnout, underscoring that symbolic responsiveness is an important facet of representation for African Americans.

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Symbols are crucial to ordinary citizens' understanding of the political world. We see the power of symbols in everyday life, from the patriotism inspired by images of the American flag to the powerful emotions evoked by the inauguration of Barack Obama, the United States' first Black President. Recent debates over kneeling during the national anthem and the appropriateness of Confederate flags and statues both hinge on the importance of symbols (Sinclair-Chapman, 2018). Citizens use symbols to make sense of complicated political issues, and elites use symbols to frame debates and shape public opinion. In this way, they facilitate communication between elected officials and citizens.

For traditionally underrepresented groups, such communication is especially important. Just as the inclusion of members of marginalized groups in government can promote feelings of trust and satisfaction with democracy (Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), and legitimize decisions (Clayton, O'Brien and Piscopo, 2019; Hayes and Hibbing, 2017), so too can the invocation of meaningful symbols signal group interests are being represented. African American legislators, for example, introduce more legislation to honor civil rights icons (Tate, 2003), which likely serves as a means to acknowledge that they have a “connection to individuals, institutions, or symbols that have strong meanings to the racial group” (Wamble, 2019, p. 8). In engaging with this symbolic behavior, representatives can create “badges of identity which define group boundaries, maintain a feeling of togetherness, and weld commitment to a cause” (Klatch, 1988), which legislators can use to express both identification with and empathy for their constituents (Hill and Hurley, 2002), as well as to signal their policy commitments (Gillion, 2016). For example, after the Trayvon Martin shooting “the hoodie became a material witness” to racial profiling and signified “some of the powers that threaten black life” (Nguyen, 2015, p. 793). Thus, when Rep. Bobby Rush (D-IL) donned a hoodie on the floor of the U.S. House on March 28, 2012, he not only highlighted the dangers of racial profiling, but also gave voice to African Americans across the country who had grown increasingly frustrated with police misconduct. Although Bobby Rush hoped to spur legislation restricting “stand your ground” laws, he also wore the hoodie to promote feelings of trust and efficacy within the African American

community. This raises an important question: why was Bobby Rush, a Black Democrat, the only member of Congress to take advantage of this symbol of opposition to racial injustice?

Our paper is motivated by this question. We consider actions like Bobby Rush's an example of a broader phenomenon that we call issue-based symbolism. Using a combination of observational and experimental data, we show that Black members of Congress (MCs) are significantly more likely than white MCs to use symbols of the African American struggle for civil rights when speaking on the House floor, and that the correct application of these symbols can convey meaning to Black constituents. When such symbols are invoked in civil rights speeches, Black constituents report more positive evaluations of MCs. In addition, we find that when such symbols are misused, white MCs risk a significant backlash from their Black constituents, explaining why they might eschew symbolic speeches as a strategy to represent the Black community. Finally, we report supplementary analyses showing that Black turnout is higher in districts where MCs invoked more civil rights symbolism. In analyzing the causes and consequences of references to these symbols, we demonstrate that scholars interested in the representation of marginalized groups should take seriously the role of symbolism in politics.

## The Use of Symbolism in Legislative Speech

Members of Congress use floor speeches to communicate with both their colleagues in the room and their constituents at home (Mayhew, 1974; Proksch and Slapin, 2012). Although previous studies suggest a single legislative speech is largely unpersuasive (e.g., Austen-Smith, 1990), other work finds that large numbers of speeches can increase name recognition (Kam, 2009) and may even influence other lawmakers' behavior when delivered with intensity (Dietrich, Hayes and O'Brien, 2019). These speeches, moreover, can provide electorally-valuable local (Cook, 2010) and national (Dietrich, Schultz and Jaquith, 2019) news coverage, and can serve as important vehicles for symbolic representation (Hill and Hurley, 2002).

The type of symbolic content in floor speeches can range dramatically. In many instances, symbolic speeches are limited to recognizing constituent accomplishments or congratulating victorious sports teams (Quinn et al., 2010). But this belies the potential importance of symbolic gestures. In our study, we treat symbols as specific linguistic devices that “arise from the common attributions of meaning or value to objects, persons, gestures, and things” (Cobb and Elder, 1973, 307). Legislators use these symbols to demonstrate commitment to certain groups and issues, like African Americans and civil rights.

Symbolism is particularly powerful in politics because “so many situations involved in political dialogue are highly complex and often beyond the listener’s ability to judge” (Graber, 1976, 293). Symbols aid in dialogue because they serve as a means for speakers to convey nuanced meaning without imposing undue cognitive demands on listeners. In this way, symbolism can be thought of as a specific type of heuristic which helps people “tame the tide” of political information (Graber 1984). For example, the U.S. flag often reminds Americans of their identity, and reinforces their commitment to that identity (Pitkin, 1967). This is precisely why states adopt national flags and anthems to bolster patriotism and nationalism, which may in turn reinforce cleavages with other groups (Billig, 1995; Butz, 2009; Bornman, 2006). The use of symbols is thus often central to the construction of identities.

Although national symbols such as flags are relatively well-studied and understood, much less studied is what we call “issue-based symbolism,” or the use of symbolic references to connect with constituents on specific issues. Rather than relying on universally-agreed upon meaning, issue-based symbols operate by reinforcing existing emotional attachments. What is crucial for these symbols to convey meaning is that such attachments differ in important ways across groups. For example, in the late 1960s the symbolic phrase “Black power” came to be associated with racial unity among African Americans, whereas white Americans viewed it as a symbol of Black supremacy over whites (Aberbach and Walker, 1970, 370). As a result, the meaning conveyed by a representative invoking Black power would be quite different if she were addressing a Black

versus white audience. The very meaning of the words “Black power” thus differed based on shared within-group understandings of the connotation, history, and intent of the phrase. Issue-based symbols take advantage of these shared meanings to communicate to group members one’s position in an easily understandable and unambiguous way. The appropriate use of these symbols can serve as a signal that one is connected to, and invested in, the group, which is likely to be of particular importance for members of marginalized groups (Wamble, 2019).

However, speakers must use issue-based symbols appropriately in order for them to convey meaning to listeners. For example, invoking symbols of the struggle for racial justice, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Medgar Evers, would be entirely appropriate in the context of a discussion on civil rights. A speaker invoking these symbols would signal to listeners that she understands and is connected with that struggle, and people who hold such icons in high esteem should be more likely to respond favorably. Conversely, if a speaker attaches those same symbols to seemingly unrelated issues – like climate change or funding for space exploration – then listeners are likely to lose the intended meaning of those symbols, and may even react negatively to the misappropriation of protected icons. In this way, we view symbols as having specific meanings linked to particular issues, and for particular groups.

The specific meaning of issue-based symbols usually develops over time rather than occurring spontaneously. In the construction of these symbols, consistency is important. When symbols are used repeatedly to discuss the same issue, it reinforces the connection between that symbol and issue, while simultaneously creating important boundaries for when and where the symbol can be applied. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, is repeatedly invoked in discussions of civil rights, and so has become increasingly intertwined with that issue. Broadening the application of Dr. King as a symbol risks diluting his impact as a symbol of the struggle, which may give pause to those who value the issue of civil rights.

It is this narrower scope which give issue-based symbols additional weight with group members compared to more generic symbols like the American flag. This is because issue-based sym-

bols often emerge from pre-existing “objects, practices, myths, traditions, images and sentiments” which are then attached to identities and issues (Theiler, 2005, 32). Not only does this lead group members to respond to their correct and incorrect use, but it also suggests issue-based symbolism is an important part of many group identities (Cohen, 1979; Firth, 1973). It is not just that African Americans hold civil rights leaders in high esteem, but those leaders symbolize how far African Americans have come and how far they still have to go to overcome structural inequality.

In her discussion of “vertical communication,” Mansbridge (1999) emphasizes the importance of such attachments to the representation of marginalized groups. She argues:

Representatives and voters who share some version of a set of common experiences and the outward signs of having lived through those experiences can often read one another’s signals relatively easily and engage in relatively accurate forms of shorthand communication (641).

Issue-based symbolism allows members of descriptive groups to discuss topics that are firmly grounded in shared experiences. This commonality allows descriptive representatives to communicate their identification with, and support for, constituents in a way that is easily understood. This can, in turn, promote feelings of trust and efficacy, which is encompassed by how many scholars measure symbolic representation (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005).

In addition to these attitudinal effects, the use of symbolic references by descriptive representatives may also affect the behavior of their constituents.<sup>1</sup> For example, a large body of research has demonstrated a link between descriptive representation and feelings of political empowerment and

<sup>1</sup>Indeed, some scholars such as Block (2010) have argued that we ought to think of psychological and behavioral political involvement as two sides of the same coin. Although we analyze attitudes and behaviors separately, below, we recognize that these outcomes may be different manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon.

political participation (Bobo and Gilliam Jr., 1990; Gay, 2001; Keele et al., 2017; Clark, 2019). If part of what makes descriptive representation effective at empowering citizens is the voice they give to constituents' concerns, then the use of meaningful group-based symbols should heighten the participatory boost that comes from having a descriptive representative.

## Theoretical Expectations

Our theory of issue-based symbolism is distinct from previous approaches to studying symbolic gestures in the literature. Rather than simply conveying empathy with constituents (Hill and Hurley, 2002, 221), the use of issue-based symbols can signal to marginalized groups that they have a voice in government. Just as non-verbal cues can convey emotion and signal a sincere engagement with issues (Knox and Lucas, 2021), the *way* certain issues are discussed is often just as important as the issues themselves, especially to groups who are rarely afforded the opportunity to make meaningful substantive policy changes. By invoking issue-based symbols, representatives of marginalized groups can communicate to their constituents that their concerns can and will be given a voice. Although this use of symbols is broadly applicable across issues and groups, our study focuses on African Americans and civil rights for three reasons.

First, civil rights are often offered as an issue of considerable importance to African Americans. Although scholars do examine the substantive representation of African Americans in other issue areas (e.g., Clark, 2019), civil rights has become nearly synonymous with the advancement of Black interests, particularly in Congress. There is no greater example of this than the widespread use of Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) vote scores as a proxy for African American substantive representation (e.g., Bullock III, 1981; Hutchings, 1998; Whitby, 1987; Swain, 1993; Cameron, Epstein and O'Halloran, 1996). Just as LCCR scores are one way to capture "higher substantive representation" (Grose, 2005, 440), we use discussions of civil rights to help explain the broader importance of symbolism to African Americans' representation.

Second, many African Americans still prioritize civil rights as an issue. For example, in the 2018 General Social Survey, 66 percent of African American respondents said racial discrimination was one of the main reasons why African Americans had worse jobs, income, and housing than white people (Smith et al., 2019). Similarly, a 2016 Pew Research survey of racial attitudes found 70 percent of African Americans believed racial discrimination prevented Black people from getting ahead (Pew Research, 2016). Not only is this substantially higher than the 36 percent of white respondents who shared the same opinion, but 88 percent of African Americans who took this survey also believed that something must be changed in order to give Blacks equal rights with whites.

Third, symbolic references to the past are particularly salient to African Americans. Unlike other racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, African Americans have participated in electoral politics at rates similar to Anglo whites since at least the 1980s once socioeconomic factors are accounted for (Fraga, 2018). Much of this engagement comes from shared political norms within the Black community, such as the pressure to vote (and to vote Democratic) (White, Laird and Allen, 2014; Anoll, 2018b; White and Laird, 2020). Importantly, references to the past can help reinforce these norms. For example, experimental evidence suggests that reminding African American citizens of the hardships their ancestors faced can bolster political participation (Anoll, 2018a), and African American voters reward candidates who emphasize their own sacrifices on behalf of the group (Wamble, 2019). Taken together, this suggests that reminding Black voters of the struggle for civil rights and the sacrifices that struggle entailed may be an important way for representatives to connect with their Black constituents.

For African Americans, symbols of the struggle for civil rights are not distant memories to be discussed only during Black History Month. Instead, they bear living testament to how far African Americans have come, and how hard African Americans have toiled, to achieve freedom and equality. Because Black legislators are likely to possess a deep, personal, and longstanding appreciation for the value of these symbols, we expect *African American legislators will invoke*

*such symbolism in their discussion of civil rights more than white legislators.* For the same reason, we also expect *when such symbols are used when discussing civil rights, African American constituents will have a positive psychological response and increased political engagement.* Finally, because of the weight given to these issue-based symbols, we expect that *when such symbols are used outside of the issue of civil rights, African American constituents will respond negatively.*

## Data and Measurement

We test our theoretical expectations using a mixed-method design. First, we analyze the largest corpus of floor speeches about civil rights to date, and investigate whether Black and white representatives differ in the extent to which they invoke issue-based symbolism in their discussion of civil rights. Second, to investigate the effects of such symbolism on constituents, we fielded an original survey experiment using a panel constructed by survey firm Qualtrics and fielded from May 7-8, 2018.

To analyze the content of legislative speeches, we use data on all floor speeches given in the U.S. House 1996–2014.<sup>2</sup> We obtained information on the race of speakers from the House Archives<sup>3</sup>, and we then restricted our analyses to those speeches delivered by white (N=731,283) and African American (N=59,281) Representatives. To identify speeches on the topic of civil rights, we follow Schickler, Pearson and Feinstein (2010) and included any speech using the phrase “civil rights.”<sup>4</sup> This procedure resulted in 2,450 white and 3,095 African American speeches on the issue of civil rights.

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<sup>2</sup>All speech data was collected from the now retired *Capitol Words* project. To help fill this noticeable gap, we have posted every speech and the associated metadata online and created an Automated Programming Interface (API). More details are provided in the Supplemental Information.

<sup>3</sup><http://history.house.gov/People/Search?filter=1>

<sup>4</sup>We provide several validity checks of this approach in the SI, all of which yield similar results.

We also collected a number of control variables related to the floor speech, legislator, and congressional district. For all years after 2000, we include an annually-updated estimate of the proportion of African Americans in each representative’s district. For earlier years, we estimate district demographics using a combination of the 1990 and 2000 censuses. We also include control variables capturing the ideology (using DW-NOMINATE scores), seniority, party, gender, and region (South/non-South) of the representative, as well as whether a floor speech occurred during an election year.

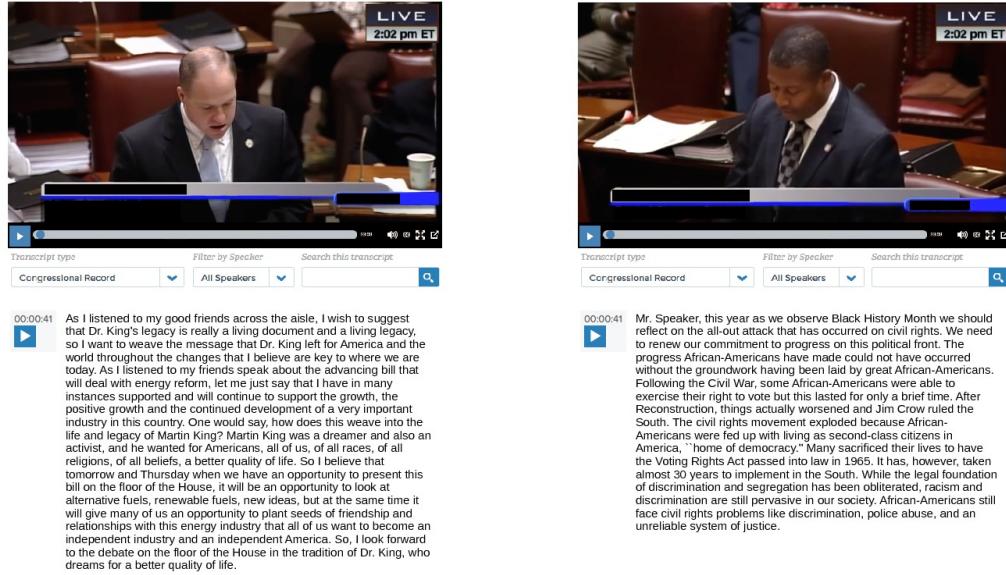
We adopted an inductive approach to identify issue-based symbolism in these speeches. Two graduate student coders independently read a random sample of 100 speeches that included the phrase “civil rights.” Each coder then created a list of any terms or phrases they believed were civil rights symbolism. These independent codings were then reconciled to create a final list of civil rights issue-based symbols falling under four categories: people (e.g., Rosa Parks), events (e.g., the March on Washington), acts (e.g., Brown v. Board of Education), and concepts (e.g., lynching). A full list of symbolic references is available in Section S1 of the SI.

After developing this list of issue-based symbolism, our coders then hand-coded all 5,545 speeches in which the term “civil rights” appeared. Coders identified “symbolic speeches” as any floor speech that included at least two references drawn from our list of civil rights issue-based symbolism. We assessed intercoder reliability by double coding a 10 percent sample of speeches ( $n = 558$ ). Using two independent coders, we achieved a 94.18 percent agreement rate. Krippendorff’s alpha (0.801), Cohen’s Kappa (0.801), and Kendall’s coefficient of concordance (0.902) were all found to be within acceptable ranges (Neuendorf, 2002).

## Experimental Design

We used an original  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experiment to test our second and third hypotheses. For our experiment, we asked subjects to view a purported screen shot from a floor speech broadcast with an accompanying transcript. We randomly varied the symbolic content (Symbolic/Non-symbolic),

Figure 1: Examples of Symbolic and Non-Symbolic Experimental Treatments



*Note:* Text adapted from speeches obtained from *Capitol Words* project. Images adapted from videos of the New York State Senate floor proceedings.

issue (Civil Rights/Energy), and race of speaker (Black/White). Respondents for our experiment were recruited by Qualtrics during May 7-8, 2018. The sample was constructed such that 50% of respondents self-identified as white and 50% self-identified as African American (alone or in conjunction with another race). We also restricted our panel to respondents taking the survey in the United States. In total, 515 of the 1,031 subjects (or 49.95%) who participated in our experiment were African American (balance statistics can be found in Table S1 in the Supplemental Information). Figure 1 provides examples of our treatments.

We adapted our floor speech treatments from actual U.S. House floor speeches. Our civil rights speech was originally delivered by Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) on February 11, 1997. Our energy speech was originally delivered by Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) on January 16, 2007. Both of these original speeches included at least two civil rights issue-based symbols. To create non-symbolic speeches, we removed all issue-based symbolism from the original text. Full examples of our treatments can be found in Section S3 of the Supplemental Information.

## How Do Members of Congress Talk About Civil Rights?

Our first hypothesis is that there will be racial differences in how legislators discuss civil rights, with Black MCs more likely to invoke issue-based symbolism than white MCs. Before investigating whether there are racial differences in *how* legislators talk about civil rights, it is useful to first examine if there are differences in *whether* legislators talk about civil rights. If Black MCs invoke issue-based civil rights symbolism because of their commitment to this issue and their deep knowledge of its connection to the Black community, then we should also see them discussing this issue with greater frequency in House floor speeches. We test this initial expectation in Table 1, Models 1 (Model 1.1) and 2 (Model 1.2). The unit of analysis here is an MC in a given term, and our dependent variable is a count of the number of civil rights speeches given in that term. We estimate multilevel negative binomial regressions with randomly varying intercepts for each MC to account for any within legislator clustering across terms.<sup>5</sup> We also include an offset for the total number of speeches given to account for baseline differences in how often a legislator spoke.

Beginning with Model 1.1, we find white MCs are significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) less likely to talk about civil rights in their floor speeches than Black MCs. To assess the substantive significance of this finding, we plot the predicted number of civil rights speeches in the left-hand panel of Figure 2. In this figure, we hold the offset number of speeches at the non-zero mode (28), meaning that the result is the predicted number of civil rights speeches out of every 28 speeches delivered by an MC in a given Congressional term. This results in an estimate that African American legislators will talk about civil rights in about 0.78 out of every 28 speeches, which is over 15 times more often than white MCs who are predicted to deliver only 0.05 speeches on civil rights. This result holds

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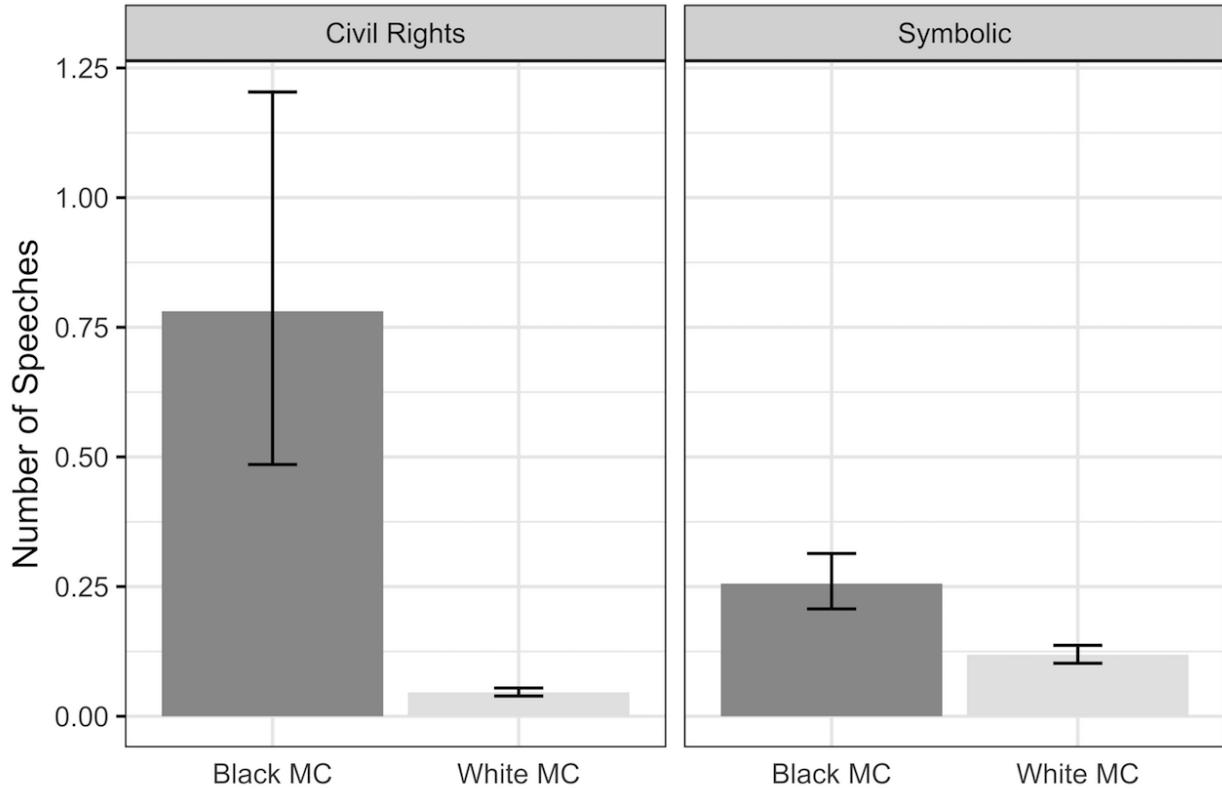
<sup>5</sup>Since the dependent variable is the number of civil rights speeches delivered in a given term either a multilevel Poisson or negative binomial regression should be used. In the SI, we report the results from a series of likelihood ratio tests – all of which suggest a negative binomial regression is the most appropriate given the distribution of civil rights speeches.

Table 1: White MCs Deliver Fewer Speeches on Civil Rights and Are Less Likely to Invoke Symbolism

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Civil Rights Speeches		Number of Symbolic Speeches	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
Constant	-3.553*** (0.231)	-4.073*** (0.289)	-1.359*** (0.106)	-2.696*** (0.336)
White MC	-2.825*** (0.245)	-1.664*** (0.206)	-0.769*** (0.128)	-0.538*** (0.196)
Percent Black		0.178 (0.322)		1.112*** (0.369)
DW-Nominate		-0.472 (0.300)		1.695*** (0.411)
Democrat		0.612** (0.303)		1.521*** (0.434)
Male		-0.102 (0.141)		-0.180 (0.145)
Election Year		0.024 (0.038)		0.051 (0.061)
South		0.113 (0.134)		0.033 (0.145)
Seniority		-0.006 (0.008)		0.032*** (0.011)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	2.902 (1.704)	0.975 (0.987)	1.212 (1.101)	0.944 (0.972)
N <sub>1</sub>	7,915	6,651	2,064	2,063
N <sub>2</sub>	772	655	435	434
Log Likelihood	-6,222.653	-5,950.581	-1,601.776	-1,583.510
AIC	12,453.310	11,923.160	3,209.551	3,187.020

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Models 1 and 2 are multilevel negative binomial regressions. Models 3 and 4 are multilevel Poisson regressions. In Section S3 of the SI, log-likelihood tests suggest these models are best given the distribution of dependent variables. In Models 1 and 2, offset included for the total number of speeches. In Models 3 and 4, offset included for total number of civil rights speeches and MCs had to deliver at least 1 civil rights speech to be included. All models include a random intercept for each MC. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. Standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

Figure 2: Predicted Number of Civil Rights Speeches and Symbolic References



*Note:* “Civil Rights” panel presents predicted values calculated from Model 1.1. “Symbolic” panel presents predicted values calculated from Model 1.3. Offsets of 28 and 1 for baseline rate of speeches are included for the “Civil Rights” and “Symbolic” predictions, respectively. Error bars represent 95 confidence intervals from 1,000 bootstrapped samples.

even when we include a host of controls (see Model 1.2)

White and Black members of Congress clearly differ in whether they talk about civil rights. But do they also differ in *how* they talk about civil rights? To explore this question, we turn now to our measure of issue-based symbolism in the context of civil rights. Models 3 and 4 in Table 1 predict the number of symbolic speeches given by an MC in a given term. Since we only have data on the symbolic content of civil rights speeches, we restrict our models to MCs who delivered at least one civil rights speech in a given term. We then model a count of symbolic speeches using a multilevel Poisson regression, including a randomly varying intercept for each MC and an offset

for the number of civil rights speeches.<sup>6</sup>

Model 1.3 shows that white MCs are significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) less likely to use issue-based symbolism in their speeches about civil rights, and this result holds even when a number of controls are included (see Model 1.4). In the “Symbolic” panel of Figure 2, we plot the predicted number of symbolic speeches using the coefficients from Model 1.3 and setting the offset number of civil rights speeches at the non-zero mode (1). This figure shows that Black members of Congress invoke symbolism in 0.26 floor speeches for every 1 speech on civil rights, or about one quarter of the time. In contrast, white members of Congress only invoke issue-based symbolism in 0.12 speeches for every civil rights speech. To put it another way, this finding shows that Black members of Congress invoke issue-based symbolism when discussing civil rights over twice as often as white members of Congress.

Our results thus far demonstrate clear racial differences in *how* and *how often* legislators talk about civil rights. African Americans in Congress talk about civil rights over 15 times as often as do whites. And among those legislators who gave at least 1 speech on civil rights, Black legislators are more than twice as likely to invoke issue-based symbolism when discussing civil rights. This finding provides new evidence for the importance of descriptive representation. Although scholars have argued that liberal white Democrats can provide comparable substantive representation to Black Democrats (e.g., Cameron, Epstein and O’Halloran, 1996; Lublin, 1999), our evidence adds to the chorus of scholars who find that Black legislators engage in significantly different legislative behavior than their white counterparts when it comes to representing their Black constituents’ interests (e.g., Grose, 2011; Clark, 2019).

## Race, Issue-Based Symbolism, and Evaluations of Legislative Speech

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<sup>6</sup>As with Models 1 and 2, we conducted a series of likelihood ratio tests in Table S2 in the Supplemental Information. These tests indicate that a Poisson regression is more appropriate than a negative binomial.

Having demonstrated racial differences in issue-based symbolism in Congress, we turn now to an investigation of whether these differences matter for constituents. Our second and third hypotheses predict that African American constituents should respond favorably to issue-based symbolism invoked in the context of civil rights, but should respond negatively when those same symbols are invoked in other domains. To test these hypotheses, we use our original  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experiment, described above. To reiterate, respondents were randomly assigned to conditions varying symbolic content (Symbolic/Non-symbolic), issue (Civil Rights/Energy), and legislator race (Black/White). To assess whether the content and topic of a floor speech affects constituents' evaluations, we asked respondents how much they approved of what the representative said on a 5-point scale (rescaled from 0-1).

Table 2 displays the results of our survey experiment. Panel A shows respondents assigned to the "Symbolic" condition, and Panel B shows respondents assigned to the "Non-Symbolic" condition. Our results are generally supportive of our second hypothesis. Comparing Panels A and B, mean levels of approval are higher for civil rights speeches delivered with issue-based symbolism (0.68) than those delivered without such symbolism (0.65). Since our theory suggests that issue-based symbolism should be group- and context-specific, it is useful to focus solely on Black respondents (presented in the second row of each panel). Here, it is clearer that the correct application of civil rights symbolism appears to boost evaluations (from 0.69 to 0.76). This lends support to our theory that issue-based symbolism can be employed by representatives to boost feelings of symbolic representation.

But are such efforts entirely without risk? Our evidence suggests not. In line with our third hypothesis, we find that the invocation of civil rights issue-based symbolism *outside* the domain of civil rights appears to hurt legislators on average. Black constituents report significantly lower levels of approval ( $t = 3.100, p = 0.002$ ) when civil rights-based symbolism is used to talk about renewable energy (0.66) than when it is used to talk about civil rights (0.76).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>We find no significant effect among white respondents. This is consistent with our theory that

Table 2: Symbolic References Significantly Improve the Evaluation of White Speakers by Black Respondents, Whereas No Significant Effect is found for Black Speakers

	Civil Rights Speech	Energy Speech	Difference	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value
All	0.68	0.64	0.04	1.878	0.061
Black	0.76	0.66	0.10	3.100	0.002
<i>Black Speaker</i>	0.74	0.74	0.00	0.139	0.890
<i>White Speaker</i>	0.77	0.58	0.19	4.602	< 0.001

(a) Speeches with Symbolism

	Civil Rights Speech	Energy Speech	Difference	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value
All	0.65	0.69	-0.04	1.629	0.104
Black	0.69	0.70	-0.01	0.323	0.747
<i>Black Speaker</i>	0.70	0.75	-0.05	1.235	0.219
<i>White Speaker</i>	0.69	0.66	0.19	0.529	0.598

(b) Speeches without Symbolism

*Note:* “Civil Rights” mean, “Energy” mean, and the difference between the two are shown in the first three columns. The next two columns report results from two-sample *t*-tests. Bonferroni-adjusted *p*-values are provided in the last column.

But this penalty does not appear to be universal. Instead, African Americans tend to punish only white legislators who misappropriate civil rights-based symbols. There is essentially no difference ( $t = 0.139$ ,  $p = 0.890$ ) in approval when a Black legislator invokes civil rights-based symbolism when discussing civil rights (0.74) or renewable energy (0.74). When the speaker is white, however, we can see the importance of using civil rights-based symbolism “correctly.” When white representatives invoke issue-based symbolism when speaking about civil rights, they are actually evaluated slightly, but insignificantly ( $t = 0.752$ ,  $p = 0.454$ ), more favorably (0.77) than when issue-based symbols are not universal, but instead tend to be understood differently in the context of different groups and audiences.

Black representatives do so (0.74). But there is a significant punishment for using civil rights-based symbolism outside of that issue: approval declines from 0.77 to 0.58 ( $t = 4.602, p < 0.001$ ). This underscores the importance of shared identity between constituents and their representatives. Black representatives appear to have the leeway to make use of, and perhaps even reinterpret the meaning of, civil rights symbols. White representatives are not afforded this opportunity. Instead, when white speakers apply civil rights-based symbols outside of that domain, they face significant backlash from their Black constituents.

Our experimental results provide strong evidence for our second and third hypotheses for Black constituents. Consistent with our second hypothesis, Black respondents report higher mean levels of approval when a representative uses issue-based symbolism in a speech about civil rights than when no such symbolism is used. When symbolism is invoked during issue-based discussions, then it signals to groups who care about the issue that the representative has a deeper understanding of the issue and – as a consequence – the group to which it is attached. But this effect is contingent on the race of the legislator. Consistent with arguments that descriptive representation promotes trust (Gay, 2002), but also gives legislators leeway in their behaviors (Bianco, 1994), we find essentially no benefit or punishment towards Black representatives when they use or mis-use issue-based symbolism. But (white) representatives on the contrary face a substantial risk of backlash if they use symbols of the struggle outside the context of civil rights. This suggests that the use of symbolism in Congress is far from “cheap talk” that simply honors local sports teams or constituents. Instead, our experimental evidence shows that the verbal behavior of legislators can have significant and meaningful effects on how constituents evaluate their representatives.

## **White Members of Congress and Symbolic Representation**

Our findings thus far underscore the importance of analyzing legislators’ use of symbolism in legislative speech. In the context of an experiment, we find that Black constituents are willing to punish or reward (white) representatives for invoking civil rights-based symbolism in their floor

speeches. If this extends to the electoral arena, then we should expect that white legislators should be attuned (in some circumstances) to the importance of symbolic representation generally, and perhaps even issue-based symbolism in particular. More specifically, when African Americans are electorally important, they should be more likely to provide such representation, especially since it is less costly to deliver than policy outcomes. For that reason, we should expect that the speaking behavior of white representatives should (1) generally be more responsive to the proportion of African Americans in their districts and (2) such responsiveness should also lead to a convergence of speaking behavior in which Black and white MCs tend to speak more similarly about civil rights as the proportion of African Americans in the district increases.

To answer these questions, we re-estimated all the models reported in Table 1 including an interaction between the race of the MC and the percent of African Americans in the district. These results are reported in Table 3. Our findings are consistent with white legislators providing symbolic representation for African Americans when they are electorally motivated to do so. As in Table 1, we find that white MCs are significantly less likely to make speeches about civil rights than Black MCs, and less likely to use issue-based symbolism when doing so. White representatives are, however, responsive to the percent Black in their district. In Model 3.1, we find that white MCs are significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) more likely to include the phrase “civil rights” in their speeches as the percent of African Americans in their district increases, a result that remains when a number of controls are included in the model (see Model 3.2).

We find parallel results for the use of issue-based symbolism in Models 3.2 and 3.3 – white MCs are significantly more likely to invoke symbolism in their civil rights speeches as the percent Black in their district increases. To help interpret this interaction term, we plotted predicted values for Model 3 in Figure 3. The y-axis represents the predicted proportion of speeches on civil rights that invoke symbolism by Black (dark grey) and white (light grey) MCs. A white MC who represents a district that is 3% Black (the first quartile) is predicted to invoke symbolism in only 9% of their civil rights speeches, whereas a white MC representing a district that is 12.97% Black (the third

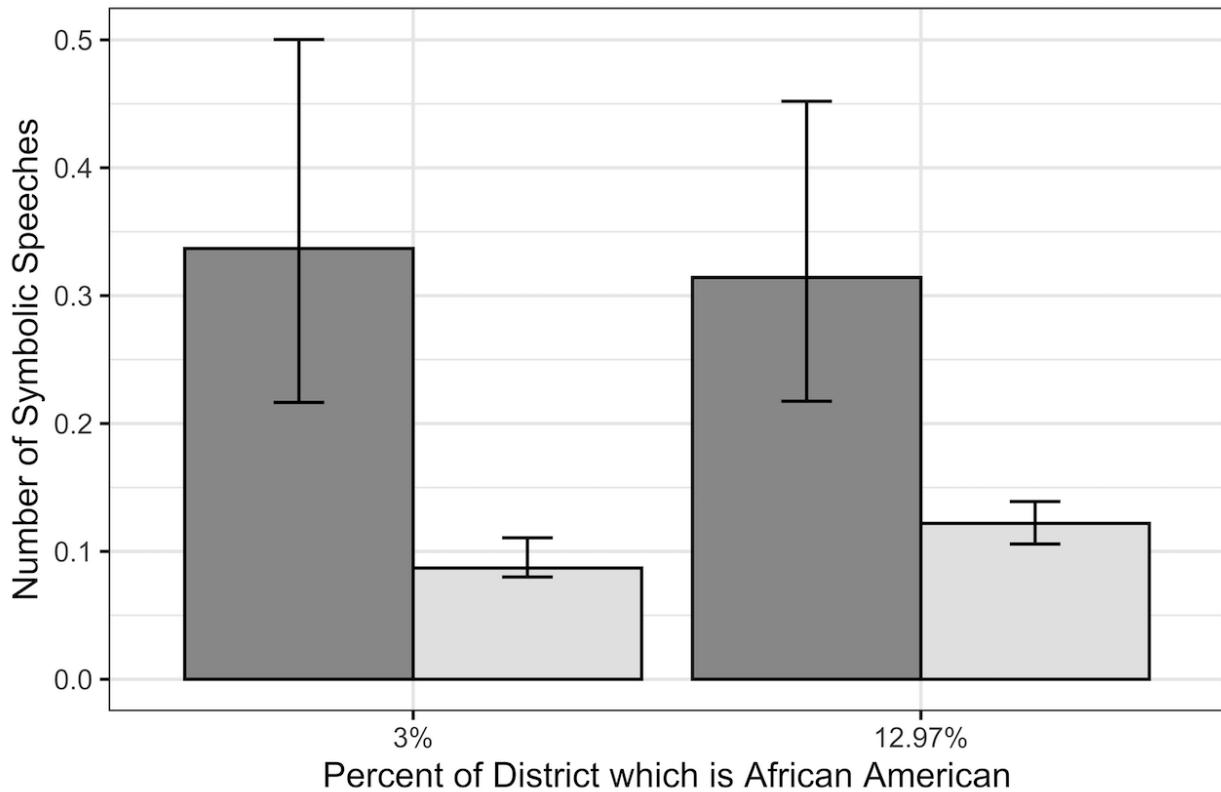
Table 3: As the Proportion of African Americans in the District Increases, White MCs Deliver More Civil Rights Speeches and Increasingly Use Symbolism

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Civil Rights Speeches		Number of Symbolic Speeches	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
Constant	-2.748*** (0.264)	-3.393*** (0.330)	-1.093*** (0.233)	-1.933*** (0.357)
White MC	-3.015*** (0.275)	-2.419*** (0.274)	-1.355*** (0.255)	-1.446*** (0.267)
Percent Black	-1.025** (0.449)	-1.128** (0.447)	-0.539 (0.446)	-0.296 (0.454)
DW-Nominate		-0.498* (0.298)		1.616*** (0.403)
Democrat		0.570* (0.301)		1.409*** (0.426)
Male		-0.071 (0.140)		-0.110 (0.142)
Election Year		0.019 (0.038)		0.050 (0.061)
South		0.022 (0.134)		-0.020 (0.139)
Seniority		-0.011 (0.008)		0.027** (0.011)
White MC × Percent Black	2.410*** (0.620)	2.528*** (0.618)	3.395*** (0.674)	3.125*** (0.662)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	1.212 (1.101)	0.944 (0.972)	0.326 (0.571)	0.295 (0.543)
N <sub>1</sub>	6,659	6,651	2,064	2,063
N <sub>2</sub>	659	655	435	434
Log Likelihood	-5,992.097	-5,942.343	-1,586.088	-1,572.822
AIC	11,996.190	11,908.690	3,182.177	3,167.645

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Models 1 and 2 are multilevel negative binomial regressions. Models 3 and 4 are multilevel Poisson regressions. In Section S3 of the SI, log-likelihood tests suggest these models are best given the distribution of dependent variables. In Models 1 and 2, offset included for the total number of speeches. In Models 3 and 4, offset included for total number of civil rights speeches and MCs had to deliver at least 1 civil rights speech to be included. All models include a random intercept for each MC. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. Standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

quartile) is predicted to invoke symbolism in 12% of their speeches, representing a 33% increase in the use of symbolism. Black MCs, on the other hand, appear to invoke symbolism at similarly high rates regardless of district demographics – in 34% and 31% of their civil rights speeches, respectively.

Figure 3: Predicted Number of Symbolic Speeches as the Proportion of African Americans in the District Varies



*Note:* Predicted values were derived from Model 3 in Table 3. Percent Black is set to the first (3%) and third (12.97%) quartiles for white MCs, and White MC was set to 0 (■) and 1 (□). Offsets are included, meaning the y-axis reports the number of speeches using symbolism for every civil rights speech delivered. Error bars represent 95 confidence intervals from 1,000 bootstrapped samples.

In sum, our findings indicate that Black and white members of the U.S. House of Representatives differ in both the amount of time they spend discussing an issue of importance to the Black community – civil rights – and also in their use of symbols of the civil rights struggle. Black MCs

are more likely to speak on civil rights and, on average, more likely to invoke symbolism. Yet we find evidence of these patterns changing in response to district demographics; as the percent African American in a district increases, white legislators give more speeches on civil rights and use issue-based symbolism more often when giving those speeches. This provides observational support for our experimental findings. Despite the risk of backlash, white MCs who stand to gain from rhetorical gestures to the Black community actually attempt to provide symbolic representation in the form of issue-based symbolism on the topic of civil rights.

## **Does Symbolic Rhetoric Affect Voting Behavior?**

We have shown that the invocation of symbolism can matter for the evaluations of Black constituents. We turn now to additional implications of symbolism. Does the use of symbols matter for political behavior more broadly? In this section, we present a supplementary analysis that suggests that Black voters are more likely to vote when representatives invoke civil rights symbolism. We also find Black voters are more likely to vote for white MCs when they use symbolism, whereas symbolism does not significantly influence their willingness to vote for Black MCs. These results provide preliminary evidence that incorporating theories of issue-based symbolism can help us understand not only psychological responses to representation, but behavioral responses as well.

For these analyses, we turn to the Cooperative Election Study's (CES, formerly the CCES) cumulative data file, which covers the years 2006-2020. In these analyses, we are interested in self-reported respondent vote choice and voter turnout. For the former, we created a dummy variable set to 1 if the respondent reported voting for the incumbent representative and 0 otherwise. For the latter, we use a validated voter turnout variable that equals 1 if the respondent voted (by any method of voting) in the general election, and 0 otherwise.

To determine incumbent MCs' level of symbolic representation on civil rights, we constructed a measure of how frequently they invoked symbolism prior to the election covered by each year of the CES. To do this, we restricted our analysis to speeches that occurred during the months in which

the CES was administered (typically October-November). We do this for two reasons. First, we believe that the effects of representatives' floor speeches are likely to be relatively short lived and dependent on how closely constituents are monitoring politics. Thus, focusing on those speeches most proximate to the election should give us the best chance of observing constituents' exposure to legislative speech. Second, committing valuable time and effort to symbolic representation on the issue of civil rights in the months prior to an election is likely to send a stronger signal of a representative's commitment to the Black community than doing so exclusively during Black History Month or on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday<sup>8</sup>. Using this time period in each CES, we then computed the simple proportion of all civil rights floor speeches that invoked symbolism for every MC. Since our experimental results suggest that Black constituents respond differently to the symbolic representation of Black versus white MCs, we also interact this variable with the race of the MC (restricting our analysis to only white and Black MCs). Our models also include a number of controls that ought to be related to voter turnout and/or vote choice: shared partisanship and gender, whether the election is a presidential election, South vs. non-South, and the MCs' level of seniority.

Table 4 reports the results from four multilevel logistic regressions which include a random intercept for each MC. In Models 1 and 2, the dependent variable is whether a Black respondent voted in the general election. Here, we find a strong and statistically significant main effect for the use of symbolism – as the use of symbolism in civil rights speeches increases, Black constituents are significantly more likely to turn out to vote. The insignificant effects for “White MC” and our interaction term suggest that this effect is consistent regardless of an incumbent’s race. Model 2 shows this result is robust to the inclusion of several additional controls.

As Models 3 and 4 indicate, symbolic references also appears to be strongly associated with Black constituents’ vote choice, but only for white representatives. Here, when “White MC” is set

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<sup>8</sup>We also estimated a model capturing changes in symbolic speeches from one Congress to the next. This model, reported in Section S7 of the SI, finds substantively similar results.

Table 4: Issue-Based Symbolism Predicts Black Voter Turnout and Vote Choice

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Voted in General Election		Voted for Representative	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
Constant	-4.174*** (1.041)	-4.505** (1.398)	-3.561*** (0.991)	-3.553* (1.981)
Proportion Symbolic	2.263** (0.972)	2.132** (0.918)	-3.009 (1.873)	-4.251 (2.581)
White MC	-0.292 (1.209)	-0.001 (1.068)	-1.017 (1.178)	-1.786 (1.525)
Same Party		0.524 (0.559)		2.228* (1.098)
Same Gender		-0.513* (0.278)		-0.339 (0.330)
Presidential Election		2.414*** (0.633)		-1.418* (0.768)
South		0.245 (1.219)		0.731 (1.512)
Seniority		0.040 (0.088)		-0.192 (0.159)
White MC × Proportion Symbolic	1.308 (1.844)	1.035 (1.539)	6.898*** (2.509)	8.308** (3.407)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	7.767 (4.477)	4.368 (2.603)	5.163 (3.307)	7.149 (5.026)
N <sub>1</sub>	551	474	551	474
N <sub>2</sub>	45	44	45	44
Log Likelihood	-243.095	-203.523	-173.980	-153.636
AIC	496.191	427.046	357.960	327.271

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a CES respondent. All models are multilevel logistic regressions. The dependent variable in Models 1 and 2 is whether the respondent voted in the general election. In Models 3 and 4, the dependent variable is whether the respondent did or did not vote for the MC. “Proportion Symbolic” is the number of symbolic speeches delivered while the CES was in the field divided by the number of civil rights speeches during that same time period. All models include a random intercept for each MC. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. Standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

to 0, there is an insignificant (but negative) relationship between “Proportion Symbolic” and voting for the representative. This effect is unsurprising, given that the vast majority of both Black voters and representatives are Democrats. When “White MC” is set to 1, however, we find a large and statistically significant coefficient on our interaction term. This suggests that Black respondents are significantly more likely to report voting for a white MC who invoked more issue-based symbolism on civil rights in the months prior to an election. This effect, moreover, is robust to the inclusion of controls, including shared party between constituent and representative. Thus, white MCs who are willing to provide symbolic representation for their Black constituents may be able to reap electoral rewards for doing so, at least among their Black constituents.

Of course, our ability to test causal claims is limited by the observational nature of these data. But the aim of our supplemental analyses is to suggest that the real-world implications of issue-based symbolism extend beyond psychological evaluations of representatives. Our findings are consistent with our theoretical argument that invoking symbolism can help representatives connect with (and perhaps even empower) their constituents. And what we report in Table 4 is a particularly difficult test of our theory. Indeed, for our observed effect to occur, not only do representatives need to use issue-based symbolism, but constituents need to be aware of and respond to that symbolism. Although we cannot say for sure whether the CES respondents were aware of any of the speeches we used to construct our variables, we believe these analyses – in conjunction with our experimental results – provide strong initial evidence that symbolic actions by elected officials can be consequential for both attitudes and behaviors.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that issue-based symbols are an important and understudied rhetorical tool for elected officials. Using the most comprehensive collection of civil rights speeches to date, we find that Black MCs are significantly more likely than white MCs to talk about civil rights. When doing so, we find that Black MCs frequently employ issue-based symbols associated with the long

struggle for civil rights for African Americans. These overtures matter. Our survey experiment demonstrates that Black citizens express greater approval of MCs who invoke issue-based symbolism when discussing civil rights than when they omit such symbols, and observational data shows a strong link between increases in symbolic rhetoric and increases in subsequent Black turnout in Congressional districts.

Taken together, our findings underscore the importance of examining symbolic responsiveness in the study of Black political representation. The rhetoric legislators use to discuss issues of importance to the Black community clearly matters to Black constituents. Symbols are not only important to such discussions, but they also uniquely give voice to the concerns of descriptive groups. The invocation of symbols of the struggle for civil rights is a natural first place to explore the importance of issue-based symbolism, but it is not the only issue area for which we are likely to see such symbols mattering. For example, previous work has shown the symbolic importance of the American flag (Billig, 1995; Butz, 2009; Bornman, 2006), but no study has considered when and where the American flag is used during legislative debates. Although our results only speak to one type of symbolism, they suggest invoking such symbols could have important implications both on and off Capitol Hill.

Legislative speech has typically been viewed as one of the many ways legislators can advance important issues. Considerably less work has been done on *how* those issues are discussed, despite the importance of such frames being well-documented in other literature (for review, see Chong and Druckman, 2007). This study uses issue-based symbolism related to civil rights in an effort to move studies of legislative speech in this direction. Instead of treating floor speeches as being an amalgamation of certain topics, we argue floor speeches are also important speech acts in which MCs (both Black and White) often choose their words carefully to convey both an ethos and pathos. Our results suggest the latter may prove more consequential for voting behavior than previously thought, especially for some descriptive groups. Not only does this help move congressional literature in a new direction, but it also establishes a framework for the study of the causes

and consequences of political speech, more broadly.

Consequently, our study offers several potential avenues for future research. First, our experimental results suggest a strong punishment mechanism for the mis-use of civil rights symbolism by Black voters. Future work could explore the contexts in which civil rights symbolism is (mis-)used outside of speeches explicitly about civil rights to determine how and when legislators make such appeals, and what effect those appeals have on constituents' attitudes and behaviors. Second, our work provides strong initial evidence that symbolic responsiveness is a facet of representation worthy of greater study. Despite calls for applying psychological theories of emotions to understand symbolic politics (Sears, 1993), scholars have only just begun examining the importance of symbolic appeals to democratic life. We believe that future research should take symbolic politics as a key component of the behaviors of political representatives.

Finally, our general framework should be broadly applicable to the study of underrepresented groups and other identities. For scholars interested in the representation of minority interests (Osborn and Mendez, 2010; Pearson and Dancey, 2011*a,b*; Gerrity, Osborn and Mendez, 2007), our results regarding discussions of civil rights offer an important new dimension to how floor speeches can be used to better reflect common group experiences. Future work could investigate which symbols are useful in these other domains. What symbols are used when female MCs are discussing women as a group? What rhetorical strategies are used by Latino representatives? Or Asian Americans? Our results provide an important empirical and theoretical foundation for those interested in answering these and related questions.

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Supporting Information for:  
Symbols of the Struggle: Descriptive Representation  
and Issue-Based Symbolism in U.S. House Speeches.

August 3, 2021

## S1 Coding Symbolism

In order to code the symbolic references in each civil rights speech we created a survey using Google Forms. The survey displayed each of the following questions one at a time:

1. Who is coding this speech? [Coder 1/Coder2]
2. What is the file name? [Fill in Blank]
3. Is this speech at least 150 words? [Yes/No]
4. Do you see two symbols from the above list separated by at least one sentence? [Yes/No]

Immediately below the final question, we included the following statement:

The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King (\*symbol\*) can be seen in this legislation.  
This bill does a lot of really good things for our country. Like the Voting Rights Act (\*symbol\*), this legislation advances civil rights.

Coders were also encouraged to reference hyperlinked examples we provided as many times as they needed.

We read several batches of sample speeches to come up with our list of symbols. This process involved everyone reading a sample of 100 speeches. Once everyone was done, we had a group meeting where each team member would recommend a symbol be either included or excluded from the final list. Ultimately, we settled on a final list of four main categories and several subcategories that fell under each:

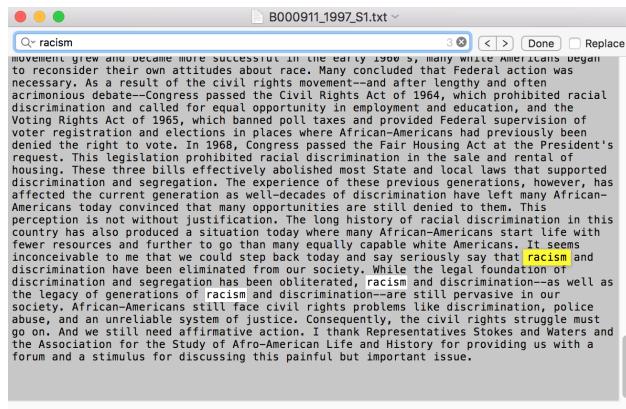
- People
  - Martin Luther King

- Coretta Scott King
  - Rosa Parks
  - Thurgood Marshall
  - Caesar Chavez
  - Medgar Evers
  - Malcolm X
  - Abraham Lincoln
  - Ghandi
- Events
    - Birmingham sit in
    - Selma sit in
    - Selma March
    - March on Washington
    - Freedom Rides
  - Policy Acts
    - Voting Rights Act
    - Civil Rights Act
    - Brown v. Board of Education
    - Plessy v Ferguson
    - Jim Crow
  - Concepts (at least 5 percent)
    - Racism
    - Segregation
    - Lynching
    - Slavery
    - Equality
    - Diversity
    - Freedom

For example, under the “People” category there are nine subcategories, meaning references to “Martin Luther King” could include a variety of things, such as “MLK,” “Dr. King,” etc. This gave the coders guidance while giving them flexibility to interpret references to Martin Luther King we did not foresee in our group meetings. Under this category, there was considerable debate about whether to include Caesar Chavez and Ghandi. These references were made in a handful of speeches and they were always in conjunction with another symbolic reference which is why they were included in our final list. When they are excluded, they have essentially no effect on our substantive results.

For the “Concepts” category, we asked the coders to visually inspect each document. For example, when they saw references to “racism,” they would do a search for other references in the document. This would highlight several terms they thought were relevant. They would then assess whether those terms represented more than 5 percent – a number we settled on after a couple of training batches. Here is an example of one of the highlighted documents:

Figure S1: An Example of the Visual Coding Scheme We Used To Code Symbolic “Concepts”



The visual coding scheme was actually developed by our coders. We liked their idea because it limited the number of false positives. By looking at the distribution of each concept, our coders ensured the symbolic references were widely distributed across the entire speech, rather than simply being made in passing. This ultimately produced results that were very similar to what we were expecting when we created the “Concepts” category.

To learn more about our coding scheme, please download the speeches we used in this study from the following URL:

The speeches are posted on one of the author’s website. URL removed for blind review.

Once downloaded, use the following to pair the text of each speech with our coding scheme:

CSV file is posted on one of the author’s website. URL removed for blind review.

If there are any irregularities, please let us know. No coding scheme is perfect, but the one we developed for this study seemed to reliably differentiate between “symbolic” and “non-symbolic” civil rights speeches. Indeed, Figure 1 shows we obtained a 97 percent agreement rate, meaning we could reliably code speeches using the scheme we developed.

## S2 Creating Our Experimental Treatments

To create the experimental treatments we report in the main text, we rely on two floor speeches in the U.S. House of Representatives. Both original speeches were coded as invoking symbolism from the African American struggle for civil rights; one of these speeches was identified as a civil rights speech because it included the bigram “civil rights” in the text of the speech. The first speech we selected was delivered by Rep. Corrine Brown, a Black Democrat representing Florida’s 3rd Congressional District, on February 11, 1997<sup>1</sup>. In that speech, Rep. Brown discusses what she perceives as an “all-out attack” on civil rights, and invokes the symbols of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, and others. We extracted one paragraph of this speech for our **Symbolic civil rights** treatment (see Figure S2). To create our **Non-symbolic civil rights** treatment, we edited that paragraph to omit the references to civil rights icons, instead referencing the work of “great African Americans” (see Figure S3). For each of these treatments, we paired the text with an image of either a white or Black state legislator giving a floor speech.

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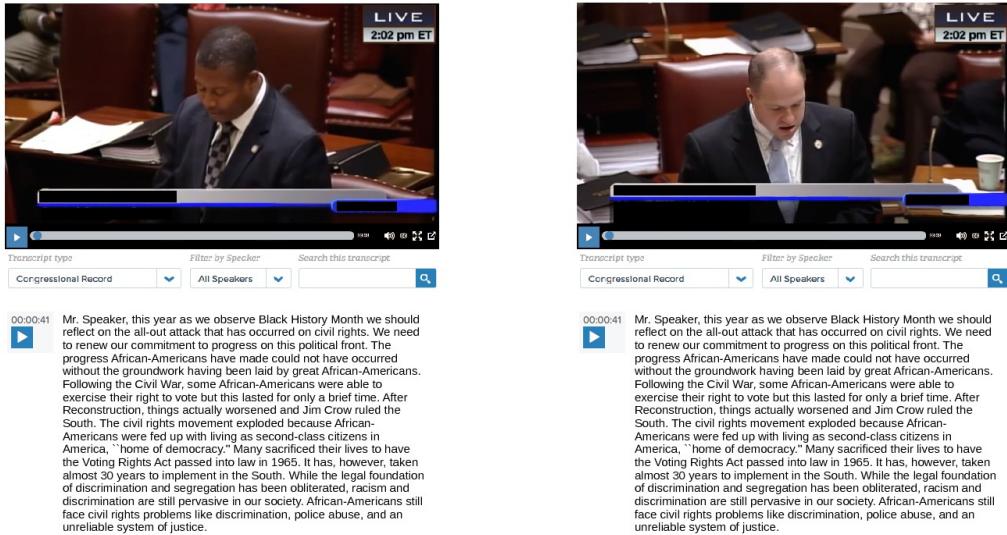
<sup>1</sup>Full text of the speech can be found in the Congressional Record at: <https://www.congress.gov/105/crec/1997/02/11/CREC-1997-02-11-pt1-PgH422.pdf>

Figure S2: Symbolic civil rights treatments



*Note:* Text adapted from speeches obtained from *Capitol Words* Project and originally delivered by Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) on February 11, 1997. Images adapted from videos of the New York State Senate floor proceedings.

Figure S3: Non-symbolic civil rights treatments

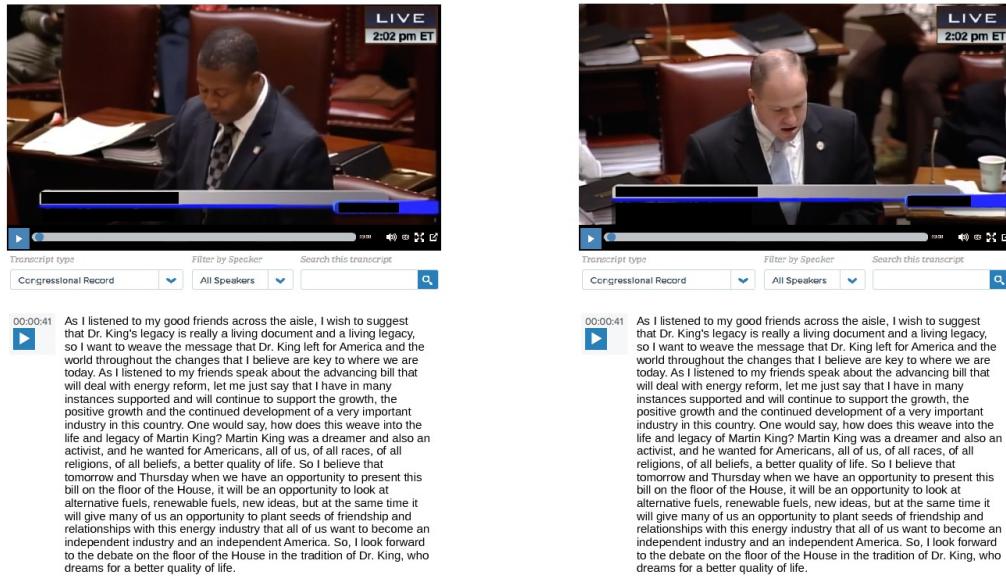


*Note:* Text adapted from speeches obtained from *Capitol Words* Project and originally delivered by Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) on February 11, 1997. Images adapted from videos of the New York State Senate floor proceedings.

We based our second set of treatments on a speech delivered by Rep. Sheila Jackson-

Lee, a Black Democrat from Texas, on January 16, 2011<sup>2</sup>. In that speech, Jackson-Lee invoked the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to argue that enacting clean energy policy was in keeping with Dr. King's legacy. We extracted one paragraph of this speech for our **Symbolic energy** treatment (see Figure S4). To create our **Non-symbolic energy** treatment, we edited that paragraph to omit references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and instead reference "our country's legacy" (see Figure S5). For each of these treatments, we paired the text with an image of either a white or Black state legislator giving a floor speech.

Figure S4: Symbolic energy treatments

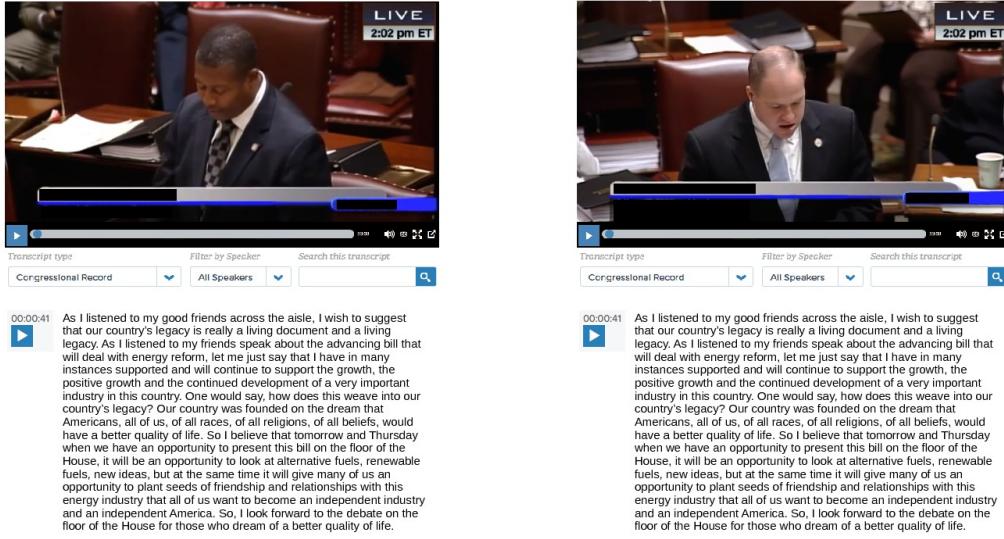


*Note:* Text adapted from speeches obtained from *Capitol Words* Project and originally delivered by Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) on January 16, 2007. Images adapted from videos of the New York State Senate floor proceedings.

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<sup>2</sup>Full text of the speech can be found in the Congressional Record at: <https://www.congress.gov/110/crec/2007/01/16/CREC-2007-01-16-pt1-PgH561.pdf>

Figure S5: Non-symbolic energy treatments



*Note:* Text adapted from speeches obtained from *Capitol Words* Project and originally delivered by Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) on January 16, 2007. Images adapted from videos of the New York State Senate floor proceedings.

## S3 Balance Statistics and Subject Recruitment

Subjects for our survey experiment were recruited as part of a Qualtrics panel from May 7-8, 2018. Participants in Qualtrics panels have agreed to complete surveys in exchange for compensation, promotions, and prizes. The first page of our online survey was an informed consent page describing the nature of the research and asking for respondents' willingness to participate. No respondents refused participation. This research was determined to be Exempt from full IRB review by the corresponding author's University Institutional Review Board under protocol number IRB-FY2018-280.

Our experiment involved a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design, with respondents assigned to symbolic/non-symbolic, civil rights/energy, and white/Black treatments. Total N and descriptive statistics for these eight treatment conditions can be found in Table S1.

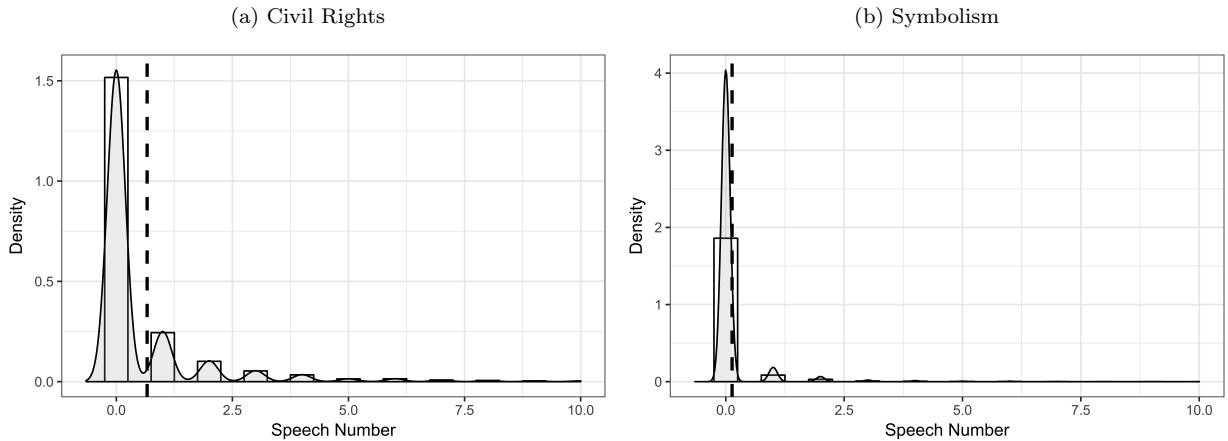
Table S1: Summary statistics by treatment condition

Treatment Condition	White N	Black N	Women	College Educated	Mean PID (1=Strong Democrat)
Black non-symbolic civil rights	69	66	56%	28%	0.65
Black non-symbolic energy	59	56	52%	27%	0.54
Black symbolic civil rights	58	62	48%	21%	0.61
Black symbolic energy	85	71	61%	28%	0.64
White non-symbolic civil rights	57	69	45%	24%	0.66
White non-symbolic energy	59	60	45%	25%	0.65
White symbolic civil rights	63	67	43%	27%	0.67
White symbolic energy	66	64	57%	21%	0.63

## S4 Choosing The Correct Count Model

Since we are modeling the number of speeches delivered by black and white MCs either a Poisson or negative binomial regression is most appropriate. To choose, we first plotted the distribution of each variable. These plots can be found in Figure S6. Not only does the number of civil rights speeches have a higher mean, but there also seems to be greater variance. This simple visual inspection already suggests a Poisson regression is likely not the best way to model this dependent variable.

Figure S6: Density Plots for the Number of Civil Rights Speeches and Symbolic References



*Note:* The left panel shows the distribution of the number of civil rights speeches. The right panel shows the distribution of the number of civil rights speeches that use symbolism. The dashed line represents the mean of each variable.

The distribution of symbolic speeches looks much more similar to a Poisson distribution. Not only is the mean much closer to zero, but the variance is considerably less. The mean and variance should be equal in a Poisson distribution, otherwise the distribution is said to be either over- or underdispersed, depending on whether the variance is higher or lower than the mean. The mean for the number of symbolic speeches is 0.13, whereas the variance is

0.43 which suggests this dependent variable is slightly overdispersed.

A negative binomial regression accounts for this dispersion by estimating another parameter ( $\theta$ ). A Poisson distribution actually is the same as a negative binomial distribution when  $\theta$  equals infinity. This means the models are nested. When this occurs, a likelihood ratio test can be used to determine whether estimating  $\theta$  significantly improves the model fit. This statistic can be calculated by simply doubling the absolute difference between the log-likelihoods of each model. The result can be compared to a  $\chi^2$  distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the models' degrees of freedom. Since the only difference between the two models is  $\theta$ , the  $\chi^2$  distribution will always have a single degree of freedom. A significant  $\chi^2$  statistic indicates the addition of  $\theta$  significantly improves the model fit, meaning a negative binomial regression should be utilized.

Table S2: Comparing Poisson and Negative Binomial Regression Models Predicting Civil Rights Speeches and Symbolic References

Table Number	Model Number	Dependent Variable	Log-Likelihood (Poisson)	Log-Likelihood (Negative Binomial)	$\chi^2$	df	p
1	1	Civil Rights	-6453.727	-6222.653	462.149	1	0.000
1	2	Civil Rights	-6180.512	-5950.581	459.862	1	0.000
1	3	Civil Rights	-6212.583	-5992.097	440.972	1	0.000
1	4	Civil Rights	-6164.294	-5942.343	443.902	1	0.000
2	5	Symbolism	-1601.776	-1601.426	0.699	1	1.000
2	6	Symbolism	-1583.510	-1583.288	0.444	1	1.000
2	7	Symbolism	-1586.088	-1585.870	0.437	1	1.000
2	8	Symbolism	-1572.822	-1572.785	0.074	1	1.000

We conducted these tests for the models reported in Tables 1 and 2. The results can be found in Table S2. Beginning with Models 1–4 (see Table 1), we see every  $\chi^2$  statistic is statistically significant at the .05-level, suggesting estimating  $\theta$  improves our ability to appropriate model the number of civil rights speeches delivered by each MC. The same cannot be said for Models 5–8 (see Table 2), where not only are the  $\chi^2$  statistics not statistically significant at the .05-level, but they approach zero. This provides strong evidence that the number of symbolic speeches is best modeled using a Poisson regression. For these reasons, in Table 1 we report the results from four negative binomial regressions, whereas in Table 2 we used Poisson regressions to obtain our point estimates.

## S5 The Curious Case of Steve Cohen

Steve Cohen (D-TN) is a curious case to say the least. Not only is he the only white MC to represent a majority-minority district, but he was caught tweeting a young woman during the President Obama's 2013 State of the Union address. After the tweets were deleted, he

claimed the woman was his “secret daughter,” a claim immediately proved false by *CNN*. Although the latter episode is certainly troubling, we are more concerned about Steve Cohen driving our results, especially the interaction between **White MC** and **Percent Black**. Several white representatives have African-American constituents, but Steve Cohen has the largest – giving us some pause about whether he is unduly influencing our results.

Table S3: Do White Republicans and Democrats Deliver Fewer Civil Rights Speeches?

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Civil Rights Speeches			
	<i>Republicans</i>		<i>Democrats</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	−6.214*** (0.112)	−6.316*** (0.376)	−5.204*** (0.102)	−5.819*** (0.275)
Percent Black	1.466* (0.753)	1.700** (0.848)	1.232** (0.546)	1.320** (0.557)
DW-Nominate		0.266 (0.405)		−2.359*** (0.559)
Seniority		−0.009 (0.016)		−0.030*** (0.012)
Male		−0.048 (0.286)		−0.071 (0.203)
South		−0.138 (0.198)		0.184 (0.273)
Election Year		0.070 (0.083)		−0.008 (0.055)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	0.991 (0.995)	0.976 (0.988)	1.212 (1.101)	1.089 (1.044)
N <sub>1</sub>	3,399	3,391	2,624	2,624
N <sub>2</sub>	354	350	250	250
Log Likelihood	−1,866.941	−1,863.263	−2,723.069	−2,712.844
AIC	3,741.881	3,744.527	5,454.138	5,443.688

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Coefficients are from a multilevel negative binomial regression with a random intercept for each MC. Log-likelihood tests reported in the Supplemental Information suggest this is the most appropriate model given the distribution of dependent variable (# of civil rights speeches). Positive values imply more civil rights speeches were delivered. Offset included for the total number of speeches. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. The standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

To give us more confidence, we first estimated models predicting the number of times a white Democrat and Republican mentioned “civil rights.” These can be found in Table S3. Regardless of party affiliation, **Percent Black** is positive and statistically significant – suggesting the results we report in Table 1 of our paper cannot be largely attributed to a single party. We reached a similar conclusion when we estimated predicted values. Here, when the proportion of African-Americans in the district is allowed to vary from the minimum (0) to maximum (0.79) white Republicans are predicted to deliver 0.15 more speeches referencing “civil rights” for ever 28 speeches they deliver. The predicted effect for white Democrats is in the same direction, but slightly less. For these MCs, when the proportion of African-Americans in the district is allowed to vary from the minimum (0) to maximum (0.79) they are predicted to deliver 0.09 more speeches referencing “civil rights” for ever 28 speeches they deliver. These results provide strong evidence that white MCs generally are more likely to reference civil rights as the number of African-Americans in their district increases.

Similar results are found in Table S4. In these models, we consider the degree to which white Democrats and Republicans use symbolism when talking about civil rights. Although **Percent Black** is only statistically significant for Democrats, the coefficients for both parties are positive. When the proportion of African-Americans in the district is allowed to vary from the minimum (0) to maximum (0.79) white Republicans are predicted to use symbolism in 0.12 more speeches for every civil rights speech they deliver. The predicted effect for white Democrats is in the same direction, but in this instance it is much more pronounced. For these MCs, when the proportion of African-Americans in the district is set to the minimum (0) they are predicted to use symbolism 0.17 times for every civil rights speech they deliver. When the proportion of African-Americans in the district is set to the maximum (0.79), white Democrats are predicted to use symbolism 2.40 times for every civil rights speech they deliver. Although the effect of African-Americans in the district is more pronounced for white Democrats, we still do not think our results can largely be attributed to a single party. Indeed, although insignificant, there is still considerable variation in the predicted direction for white Republicans which suggests we have likely isolated a more generalizable effect.

Table S4: Do White Republicans and Democrats Use Symbolism When Talking About Civil Rights?

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Symbolic Speeches			
	<i>Republicans</i>		<i>Democrats</i>	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Constant	-2.165*** (0.173)	-2.474*** (0.547)	-2.656*** (0.138)	-2.211*** (0.381)
Percent Black	1.479 (0.945)	1.457 (0.997)	3.543*** (0.632)	3.350*** (0.624)
DW-Nominate		1.024* (0.606)		1.659** (0.735)
Seniority		0.031 (0.027)		0.021 (0.020)
Male		-0.486 (0.376)		0.171 (0.234)
South		0.116 (0.248)		-0.191 (0.324)
Election Year		-0.176 (0.165)		-0.011 (0.118)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	0.296 (0.544)	0.309 (0.556)	0.444 (0.666)	0.384 (0.620)
N <sub>1</sub>	567	566	1,005	1,005
N <sub>2</sub>	196	195	186	186
Log Likelihood	-325.662	-320.109	-618.222	-615.067
AIC	657.325	656.219	1,242.444	1,246.134

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Coefficients are from a multilevel Poisson regression with a random intercept for each MC. Log-likelihood tests reported in the Supplemental Information suggest this is the most appropriate model given the distribution of the dependent variable (# of symbolic speeches). Positive values imply more symbolic speeches were delivered. MCs had to deliver at least 1 civil rights speech to be included. Offset included for the number of civil rights speeches. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. The standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

Table S5: Even When Controlling For Steve Cohen, White MCs Deliver Fewer Civil Rights Speeches

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Civil Rights Speeches			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
Constant	−3.553*** (0.231)	−4.014*** (0.290)	−2.748*** (0.264)	−3.396*** (0.329)
White MC	−2.825*** (0.245)	−1.712*** (0.206)	−3.015*** (0.275)	−2.405*** (0.273)
Percent Black		0.067 (0.325)	−1.025** (0.449)	−1.122** (0.446)
Steve Cohen		2.220** (1.031)		1.545 (1.034)
Democrat		0.609** (0.302)		0.570* (0.300)
DW-Nominate		−0.464 (0.299)		−0.492* (0.298)
Seniority		−0.006 (0.008)		−0.010 (0.008)
Male		−0.109 (0.140)		−0.077 (0.140)
South		0.127 (0.133)		0.038 (0.134)
Election Year		0.024 (0.038)		0.019 (0.038)
White MC × Percent Black			2.410*** (0.621)	2.368*** (0.625)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	2.902 (1.704)	0.962 (0.981)	1.212 (1.101)	0.940 (0.970)
N <sub>1</sub>	7,915	6,651	6,659	6,651
N <sub>2</sub>	772	655	659	655
θ	2.928 (0.911)	2.901 (0.949)	2.956 (0.965)	2.952 (0.987)
Log Likelihood	−6,222.653	−5,948.268	−5,992.097	−5,941.226
AIC	12,453.310	11,920.530	11,996.190	11,908.450

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Coefficients are from a multilevel negative binomial regression with a random intercept for each MC. The dependent variable is # of civil rights speeches. Offset included for the total # of speeches. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. The standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

However, just because we have shown our results cannot largely be attributed to a single party does not mean that Steven Cohen is not significantly influencing our results. A more definitive test is offered in Table S5. Here, we re-estimated the models reported in Table 1 including a dummy variable for Steve Cohen. We found both the main and interactive effects of race and the proportion of African-Americans in the district are nearly identical

in Table S5 as compared to the same coefficients in Table 1. With that said, the AIC for Models 2 and 4 is slightly smaller when the dummy variable is included, meaning isolating the "Steve Cohen" effect somewhat improves the model fit, but does not ultimately change our substantive results.

Table S6: Even When Controlling For Steve Cohen, White MCs Still Use Less Symbolism

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Number of Symbolic Speeches			
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
Constant	-1.359*** (0.106)	-2.589*** (0.337)	-1.093*** (0.233)	-1.937*** (0.357)
White MC	-0.769*** (0.128)	-0.633*** (0.199)	-1.355*** (0.255)	-1.438*** (0.268)
Percent Black		0.892** (0.383)	-0.539 (0.446)	-0.294 (0.455)
Steve Cohen		1.241* (0.634)		0.230 (0.649)
Democrat		1.523*** (0.430)		1.413*** (0.426)
DW-Nominate		1.712*** (0.407)		1.623*** (0.404)
Seniority		0.033*** (0.011)		0.027** (0.011)
Male		-0.178 (0.143)		-0.112 (0.142)
South		0.051 (0.144)		-0.015 (0.140)
Election Year		0.051 (0.061)		0.050 (0.061)
White MC × Percent Black			3.395*** (0.674)	3.038*** (0.707)
<b>Random Effects</b>				
MC	0.388 (0.623)	0.320 (0.565)	0.326 (0.571)	0.296 (0.543)
N <sub>1</sub>	2,064	2,063	2,064	2,063
N <sub>2</sub>	434	434	434	434
Log Likelihood	-1,601.776	-1,581.609	-1,586.088	-1,572.760
AIC	3,209.551	3,185.217	3,182.177	3,169.520

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Coefficients are from a multilevel Poisson regression with a random intercept for each MC. Dependent variable is the # of symbolic speeches. Offset included for the # of civil rights speeches. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01.

We found the exact same results when we re-estimated the models reported in Table 2

including a dummy variable for Steve Cohen. These models can be found in Table S6. Again, both the main and interactive effects of race and the proportion of African-Americans in the district is nearly identical in Table S6 as compared to the same coefficients in Table 2. While AIC is smaller for Model 6, the AIC is slightly higher for Model 8, suggesting isolating the “Steve Cohen” effect may not be appropriate in the latter. Either way, it is clear our substantive results cannot be attributed to the one and only – Steve Cohen.

## S6 Robustness Checks

### S6.1 Does Symbolic Rhetoric Affect Turnout?

For these analyses, we turn to the Cooperative Congressional Election Study’s (CCES) cumulative data file, which covers the years 2006-2018 and includes a total of 452,755 respondents (and 49,162 Black respondents). The CCES includes both respondent self-reported and validated turnout information as part of its common content. Using validated voter turnout provides us with a highly accurate count of how many respondents cast a ballot in each election year.

As the CCES is designed to be nationally representative (rather than representative within each Congressional district), there are unequal numbers of respondents across each congressional district election. For example, California’s 21st District provided only 65 respondents to the 2016 CCES, compared to 354 from Pennsylvania’s 5th District, and we do not have observations for each congressional district for each year in the data. Due to this data structure, we cannot directly compare the proportion of respondents turning out to vote across congressional district elections using the raw CCES data.

Instead, we constructed a bootstrapped measure of turnout in each congressional district election based on the number of respondents who appear in the CCES from that district. To do this, we identified the number of respondents in each congressional district. We then created 10,000 bootstrap samples of that size from each other congressional district appearing the CCES that year to provide us with an estimate mean number of voters turning out, as well as a measure of the uncertainty in that estimate. We use these bootstrapped samples to construct a Z-score for turnout in each congressional district, and standardized that score relative to the minimum and maximum within the data.

For example, the 2016 CCES included 155 respondents from North Carolina’s 1st District, which was represented by G. K. Butterfield (then Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus), 85 of whom self-identified as Black or African American. In that congressional district election year, 48 Black respondents reported voting, representing a turnout of 56.4%. To determine whether this turnout rate was higher than expected, we constructed 10,000 bootstrapped samples of size 155 from all other congressional districts, and computed the mean Black turnout in that bootstrapped sample. We then used this mean to compute a Z-score of for Black turnout in North Carolina’s 1st district.

Since our goal is to estimate if changes in symbolic references can boost turnout, we construct a change score in the number of symbolic speeches about civil rights given by each

member of Congress. To do this, we count the total number of civil rights speeches a MC gave in a 2-year Congress that used any of the symbolic references we identified in our hand coding above, and divide that by the total number of civil rights speeches given by that MC to give us the percentage of speeches that included civil rights symbolism. We then construct an identical measure for the preceding Congress, and compute the change in percentage of symbolic speeches as our key independent variable in Table S7.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to our main predictor, we include random effects for members of Congress to capture the potential for symbolic speeches to matter more for particular legislators or districts. We also include controls for the party and gender of the member of Congress. To investigate whether white MCs who successfully invoke symbolism receive a greater benefit than Black MCs who do so (as suggested by our experimental results), we also include a dummy variable capturing the race of members of Congress (1 for white MCs, 0 for Black MCs), and interact this dummy variable with our key explanatory variable of symbolic speeches.

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<sup>3</sup>Note that members of Congress who gave 0 civil rights speeches are coded as a 0 in these data.

Table S7: Symbolic Speech Increases Lead to Increases in Black Turnout

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Black Turnout <sub>t</sub> –	Black Turnout <sub>t-1</sub>
	(1)	(2)
<b>Fixed Effects</b>		
Constant	−0.072*** (0.028)	−0.106** (0.042)
Symbolic Speeches <sub>t</sub> – Symbolic Speeches <sub>t-1</sub>	0.705*** (0.101)	0.705*** (0.101)
White	−0.029 (0.030)	−0.023 (0.327)
Democrat		0.018 (0.023)
Male		0.023 (0.028)
White × Symbolic Speeches <sub>t</sub> – Symbolic Speeches <sub>t-1</sub>	0.057 (0.109)	0.058 (0.109)
<b>Random Effects</b>		
MC	0.293 (0.008)	0.293 (0.008)
N <sub>1</sub>	2,847	2,847
N <sub>2</sub>	564	564
Log Likelihood	−2,291.397	−2,290.839
AIC	4,594.794	4,597.677

*Note:* Unit of analysis is a MC in a given term. Models 1 and 2 are multilevel linear regressions. All models include a random intercept for each MC. Levels of significance are reported as follows: \*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01. Standard errors are reported in the parentheses.

Our results 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 observed minimum to maximum proportion of symbolic speeches is associated with a boost in Black turnout that is approximately 71% of the total range in turnout. Unlike our experimental results, however, we do not find evidence of differential effects of speeches by Black and white MCs. The interaction term in Table S7 is substantively negligible and statistically insignificant. This can be interpreted as suggesting that changes in symbolic speeches have similar effects for Black and for white MCs.

## S7 Congressional Speech API

In order to make our data and congressional speeches more widely available, we also made and Application Programming Interface (API) for this project which we call the *Congressional Speech API*. The API and all the necessary instructions can be found here:

The speeches are posted on one of the author's website. URL removed for blind review.

As explained on our website, scholars can easily read and query text from all congressional speeches delivered between 1996 and 2014 using the API. Important metadata is also embedded within the search engine, like the speaker's party and Congressional Biography ID. Unfortunately, the *Congressional Words Project* is no longer publicly available and we hope our API will serve as a useful replacement. Please contact the corresponding author for additional details.

## S8 Replication Materials

To reproduce all the tables and figures found in the paper. Please download the following ZIP file from this URL:

The ZIP file is posted on one of the author's website. URL removed for blind review.

Within the zip file, you will find a corresponding folder for each table and figure, including those that are found in the Supplemental Information. The only code we have not included is the code we used to find the archetypal civil rights speeches from black and white MCs. We executed this routine on Amazon's EC2 servers. From start to finish, it took several weeks to run even when using 25 nodes. If you would like to replicate this portion of the paper, please contact the corresponding author.