

Race and Representation in Congress: The Color of Constituencies

John Larson

The topic of race, redistricting, and minority representation in Congress has emerged as one of the most salient issues in contemporary political thought. The creation of so-called majority minority districts has been attacked as unfair and racially polarizing by some observers and ultimately struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The study of race in relation to American politics and institutions, and, in particular, to the institution of Congress, has produced a wealth of research and literature in recent years. This scope of budding research ranges from legislative activity and Congressional voting to the electoral process and campaigning. This study examines the effects of race in Congressional elections and campaigning, and will be primarily focused on constituent relationships with members of the House of Representatives. Through this research, a better understanding of the differences in constituent relationships and engagement between African American House members and their Caucasian colleagues will be reached. Based on the current literature and prevailing scholarly attitudes, one could likely conclude that African American Congress members, on the whole, develop closer and more personal relationships with their constituents than do white representatives.

This basis for this research requires further explanation. The rationale for excluding Senators from this study and for narrowing the focus exclusively to black House members reflects the difference in representation between House members and Senators. By studying House districts comprised of a smaller electorate, one can draw important conclusions about the constituency characteristics and the subsequent relationship with the member of Congress. Also important to note is that this study will primarily and purposely exclude both women and non-black minorities such as Hispanics. The exclusion of these groups is for the sake of clarity and focus; the topic of women and Hispanics and their effects on all aspects of American politics is deserving of concentrated studies separate from this one. In order to best present this argument, it is necessary to begin with an informative review of current and significant literature on the topic of the politics of race in the US Congress. This will provide a better understanding of the implications of race in Congressional constituencies. Following this literature review, a case study of four different House members and a comparison of their campaigning and constituency interaction will be presented.

History of Blacks in Congress

To comprehend the issue of racial redistricting and representation in Congress, it is important to have a good understanding of the basic historical and contemporary concepts involved. Currently, racial gerrymandering is defined as a process of creating heavily minority populated Congressional districts, or majority minority districts (Grofman 359). The purpose of these districts is to enfranchise and empower the black electorate through increased political representation in order to overcome a history of discrimination. Generally, a majority minority district needs 65% or more black voters in order to possess meaningful representative power and, more to the point, elect black representatives (Grofman 359). The process of racial gerrymandering has historically been used to weaken, rather than strengthen, black voting power. In time, the Justice Department began to move away from this negative use of racial redistricting, instead encouraging district lines to be drawn in order to empower minorities. Grofman explains by stating, "The 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made the issue of minority representation far more central in legislative redistricting after the 1990 census than it was ten years before" (360). Today, most majority minority districts have been created to encourage minority representation in Congress.

In recent years, however, supporters of majority minority districts created through racial gerrymandering have met with opposition from the Supreme Court. A string of Supreme Court cases questioned the constitutionality of majority minority districts created through racial redistricting and ultimately struck down several such districts. In the 1993 *Shaw v. Reno* decision, the Court majority

criticized irregularly shaped districts for not conforming to the "traditional standards of compactness and contiguity" (Whitby 118). In 1995, *Miller v. Johnson* resulted in the invalidation of the 11th district of Georgia, ruling further that districts must all be "narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling [state] interest" (Whitby 118). The Supreme Court went on to strike down three majority minority districts in Texas in the 1996 *Bush v. Vera* decision (Whitby 118). Despite these attacks on the practice of racial redistricting, it is important to understand that the constitutionality of redistricting on the basis of race has not yet been completely resolved.

In examining race, representation and constituent relationships, it is important to have a general understanding of the African American influence in the institution of Congress. Prior to the rise of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1971, black Congress members were largely unsuccessful in substantial and consistent policy making influence due to the weak coalition building skills of black members as well as high electoral turnover rates (Singh 49). Singh contends that "black legislators influence in the 1960s was crucially dependent on the existence of very favorable external factors" (Singh 49). In considering the CBC members' way of interacting with constituents in their districts, Singh stresses the point that, despite socioeconomic similarities among CBC member districts, CBC members should not be labeled as a homogenous black group, but rather as representatives who interact with constituents differently and develop distinctive "home styles" (Singh 111). One could conclude from this assertion that CBC members require a considerable degree of independence in order to satisfy the demands of their home districts. However, there have been notable instances in which internal tensions within the CBC have spilled over into members' districts. One concrete example of such an occurrence is when Representative Mike Epsy was trying to ignore a district labor dispute for political reasons, and a CBC member "conducted hearings on the dispute and brought some of the strikers to Congress to testify, thus breaching the unwritten rule that a member does not enter the district affairs of his colleagues" (Singh 164). This provides an example of the CBC becoming a hindrance to a black member's constituent relationship.

In discussing the CBC and its legislative agenda, there is another important question that must be raised: what exactly are black interests? Singh argues that blacks, in general, lean toward a liberal ideology. It is important to comprehend, however, that this similarity in black interests and liberal leaning ideology is not monolithic. Moreover, it is not accurate to label black interest and ideology as exclusively liberal. In fact, Swain challenges Singh's generalization, asserting that there is a gap between the black political leaders and African Americans as a whole. According to Swain, black leaders were more vocal in their support of affirmative action than average African Americans, pessimistic of black socioeconomic conditions and opposed to the confirmation of Clarence Thomas, then were the overall black public opinions on these issues (12). Furthermore, Swain argues that "there is also an increasingly visible group of black conservatives and moderates who do not automatically accept the positions of the leading black and liberal interest groups" (13). In bringing to light this public opinion gap, Swain also considers the quality of representation provided by black leaders in historically black districts, stating that representatives who use language such as representing "the black community" and "voting my conscience as a black man" tend to represent their constituents through a "trustee" style, while white representatives more often adopt a "delegate" style (72-73). To be clear, a trustee form of representation is one in which the representative gives less consideration to the opinions of the constituents, instead making policy based on his or her own judgment. Conversely, in a delegate style of representation, the representative largely bases his or her policy-making and voting patterns on the popular opinion of their constituents.

Literature Review

Political science literature about race and representation has often centered around two basic types of representation: descriptive and substantive representation. Fenno defines descriptive representation as a similarity in distinctive and defining characteristics between the voter and the representative, with the idea being that a black voter will be represented best by someone sharing his or her characteristic of race (Going Home 4). Substantive representation, on the other hand, is representation in which the voter and the representative share policy interests and ideology, regardless of the ethnicity. Fenno, however, finds these two basic forms to be too restrictive in regards to the reality of political representation. He contends that

even where descriptive representation is present in the form of symbolic activity, it does not encompass all representative constituent interaction. Substantive representation centers on the representative's policy activity, particularly Congressional voting, and these matters do not dominate daily constituent interaction ([Going Home 4](#)).

Fenno's case study included former members of Congress Louis Stokes from Cleveland and Barbara Jordan from Houston, as well as current representatives Chaka Fattah from Philadelphia, and Stephanie Tubbs Jones from Cleveland. Fenno described Stokes strategy of representation as group-intensive rather than policy intensive, explaining that his dominant goal "was to promote and protect the interests of one particular group--the group he calls 'the black community'" ([Going Home 16](#)). Stokes clearly identified the black population of his district as his most important constituents, explaining, as quoted by Fenno, "I need a black base...I don't mind having whites in the district, so long as I have enough black support to start with" ([Going Home 19](#)). Fenno determined Stokes to be "less enthusiastic" about person-to-person constituent relationships and attendance at district events ([Going Home 45](#)). Fenno quoted Stokes as referring to constituent trust in his actions as a "blind faith type of thing" ([Going Home 33](#)). It is important to note that Stokes's view of representation coincides with Swain's theory of blacks from historically black districts adopting a trustee rather than delegate style of representation.

Fenno's next case study was of Representative Barbara Jordan. Jordan represented a district in Texas that, despite being majority minority, was not majority *black*. Therefore, speeches referring to Stokes' "black community" would be too exclusionary, and so Jordan worked towards racial inclusiveness ([Going Home 76-77](#)). It is important to understand Jordan's representational strategy was an influence-intensive strategy. Fenno explained, "In her view, the best way to represent her constituents was to become an influential player inside the legislature and, from that position, to gain recognition and to shape legislation in ways beneficial to them" ([Going Home 71](#)). Jordan was similar to Stokes in that she did not like to campaign through personal contact and handshaking, opting instead to convey her message through group speeches ([Going Home 88](#)).

The first of the contemporary representatives that Fenno studied was Chaka Fattah. Fattah's district as being comprised of about 60% black with some of the poorest as well as some of the most affluent sections of Philadelphia ([Going Home 121](#)). Fattah's strategy of representation is policy-intensive and policy driven ([Going Home 120](#)). The effects of this policy-intensive strategy seemed to be beneficial: "His biracial political support, together with his own policy goals, combine to give Fattah more of a citywide presence than either Stokes or Jordan seemed to have" ([Going Home 125](#)). Fattah is similar to Stokes in his apparent unenthusiastic view of personal constituent contact, however, he attends much more home events and activities than did Stokes (Fenno, [Going Home 153](#)).

Finally, Fenno concludes with the case study of Stephanie Tubbs Jones. To begin with, it is noteworthy that Tubbs Jones was the successor to Stokes' seat in Congress and that her style of representation was person-intensive ([Going Home 203](#)). This strategy of personal interaction with constituents is a stark contrast to that of Tubbs Jones' predecessor. Fenno described Tubbs Jones as working toward racial inclusiveness, explaining: "She was deeply embedded in the black community and the black experience. But, in a changed context, she did not make 'the black community' the measure of all things" ([Going Home 207](#)). Furthermore, Tubbs Jones actually perceived her district's African American population to be less than census statistics suggested, offering further proof of her attempt to create biracial support through personal constituent interaction.

The Case Study

Fenno's case study of four African American Congress members serves as a useful starting point for this case study to expand upon. In order to meet the specific needs of the thesis in this body of research, it is necessary to deviate from Fenno's case study formula in a few important ways. Like Fenno, this study will consist of four Congress members with a focus on their relationships with constituents; this however, is where the similarities end. Where Fenno studied four African American Congress members, this case study will examine two black members and two white members, all with differing demographic district situations.

The subjects of the study are John Conyers Jr., a black member from a majority minority district, Sanford Bishop Jr., a black member from a majority white district, Eliot Engel, a white member from a majority minority district and, Jerry Weller, a white member from a majority white district. The selection of subjects for this study stress diversity not only in terms of race but also geographic representation. Finally, in contrast to Fenno's study, all four Congress members in the study are current members.

Representing the fourteenth district of Michigan, Conyers, a Democrat, was first elected to Congress in 1964 and is currently the second most senior member in the House of Representatives. He represents a majority black district in Detroit with blacks making up 61% of the population compared to the 32% white population (Hawkins and Nutting 500). During his time in Congress, Conyers earned a reputation as an outspoken liberal and supporter of civil rights issues. CO's Politics in America described Conyers, stating: "In the House, Conyers has often seemed less interested in legislative brokerage than in being a liberal voice of protest" (531). Conyers, an influential co-founder of the CBC, has pursued policies such as making Martin Luther King's birthday a national holiday, banning racial profiling and creating a commission to investigate the issue of slave reparations (Barone and Cohen, The Almanac of American Politics 2002 812).

In examining Conyers' impressive tenure in Congress, one would think that there would be a wealth of information on the topic of Conyers' campaigning; however, this is not the case. Since his election in 1964, Conyers has consistently experienced landslide electoral victories. The only real electoral challenge that Conyers has faced was in the Democratic primary of 1994, and this was a reaction to his disastrous attempts to run for Mayor of Detroit in both 1989 and 1993 in which he garnered only 18% and 3% of the vote, respectively. Detroit Monthly put the failed mayoral campaigns in perspective, stating, "Few cities have ever witnessed an embarrassment like Conyers' second mayoral kamikaze campaign" (20). With such humiliating defeats and poorly run campaigns, Conyers faced substantial primary opposition in which opponents attacked his poor attendance record, attempting to convince voters that Conyers was out of touch with his constituents (Groppe 52: 28, 1952). Despite facing considerable challenges in the face of such embarrassing losses, Conyers emerged victorious with 51% of the vote, going on to easily win in the general election (Barone and Cohen, Almanac 812).

This paints an interesting picture of constituent relations in Conyers' 14th district. One can conclude that the majority black population allows Conyers to pursue controversial racial issues such as slave reparations. Further evidence of Conyers constituent linkage with civil rights is the fact that civil rights leader Rosa Parks was among his staffers for years (Barone and Cohen, Almanac 812). What can one discern about the closeness of constituent interaction in the 14th district? There is not a wealth of material to be found on the details of Conyers' constituent interactions. However, his remarkably lackluster performances in the 1989 and 1993 elections demonstrate a lack of general campaigning ability and effectiveness. Furthermore, Conyers had been able to muster consistently impressive general election victories of well over 85% because the nature of his constituency has allowed it. Moreover, a close and personal relationship with constituents was unnecessary. Conyers' symbolic and descriptive representation shares similarities with that of Stokes, and more importantly, it seems that the study of Conyers presents a challenge to the argument that black representatives hold close relationships with all of their constituents.

Sanford Bishop, representing the 2nd district of Georgia, differs greatly with his colleague from Michigan. Bishop began his rise to Congress by forcing white incumbent and fellow Democrat Charles Hatcher into a runoff primary, and eventually defeating him. Two factors contributed to Bishop's victory in the primary. First, Hatcher was one of the most egregious offenders in the House Overdraft ethics scandal, something Bishop stressed to voters, and second, the 2nd district had just been redrawn into a newly black majority district with about 52% black voting age population (Ines Pinto 50: 30, 2203). What sets Bishop apart from many other black representatives elected to black majority districts is that from the beginning he was thinking in terms of inclusiveness and worked to cultivate a biracial support base. By winning the Congressional seat in the general election with only a 52% black majority, it was necessary that Bishop win white as well as black votes (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 50: 42, 3377). Another important component that differentiates Bishop from many fellow black Congress members, particularly outspoken liberals like Conyers, is that he has worked to shed the label of liberal, earning instead a conservative

reputation. Perhaps the best proof of this conservatism is Bishop's membership as the one of the only black members in the Blue Dogs, a group of conservative Democrats (Sherman 4D).

Bishop's conservatism was important in building a biracial coalition of support and even more important in sustaining it after a Federal court had his district redrawn in December 1995, creating a newly white majority in the 2nd district (Spaid 88:15, 4). This action by the court cast doubts on Bishop's reelection for his third term, making Bishop potentially vulnerable. Taking advantage of this geographic shift and increase in conservative white constituency, Republican Darrel Ealum ran his 1996 campaign describing Bishop as "shockingly liberal" and an ally of Senator Edward Kennedy (Sherman 4D). Bishop successfully refuted this inappropriate label by not only drawing attention to his reputation as a Blue Dog, but also by highlighting his impressive constituent services record.

Bishop, in representing a constituency heavily dependent on peanut farming, received a spot on the Agricultural Committee, a committee of which his predecessor Hatcher had also been a member (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 51: 3, 75). By being a member of the Agriculture Committee, Bishop was able to serve a vital part of the constituency and build a biracial coalition. On top of this committee assignment, Bishop demonstrated more willingness to engage in personal constituent interaction. An excellent example of this is when Bishop skipped a CBC convention that attacked the recent court redrawing, choosing instead to attend a meeting with constituents regarding veterans' benefits (Grann 215: 19, 18). Bishop explained why his style of representation was successful: "Because I go back to my district every weekend and am in touch with the needs of my constituents..." (qtd. in Grann 215: 19, 18). Bishop worked hard on making personal contact with constituents; he attended many different events in his district and sought to expand his support to whites as well as blacks, while Conyers, by contrast, neither sought biracial support nor needed it.

Eliot Engel, representing the 17th district of New York, finds himself in a situation similar to that of Bishop. Engel, a liberal white Democrat, represents a district that is 41% white, 30% black and 20% Hispanic (Hawkings and Nutting 677). Though this is not a majority black district, it is a majority minority district, making the interests of Engel's constituents diverse. The Almanac of American Politics 2002 describes Engel's interaction with constituents at home, stating: "At home, Engel is a relentless constituency service congressman...he is known as 'the mayor' in the north Bronx because of his persistent attention to local problems" such the alleged arson of southern black churches (1090). An interview with Pete Leon, a staff member at Engel's Washington office, gave further evidence of the close relationship between Engel and his racially diverse constituents. Leon said that Engel returns home "all of the time" and "almost every weekend" (Leon, personal interview). Leon went on to emphasize the importance of casework done for constituents by Engel and his staff, adding that Engel has a very good relationship with his constituency, stressing an "open door" policy at his offices (personal interview).

Engel's Congressional election history began when he defeated the scandal ridden Democratic incumbent Mario Biaggi in the Democratic primary and then again in the general election as Biaggi was then the Republican nominee (Barone and Ujifusa, Almanac of American Politics 1998 1012). The most notable electoral challenge came during the 2000 primary in which Engel was challenged by African American state Senator Larry Seabrook. The primary contest became racially charged, with both Engel and Seabrook claiming that the other was making race an issue (Selfman 13). In the primary, Engel stressed the importance of building coalitions and being effective (Buffa, 20). Engel was ultimately victorious in the primary, capturing 50% of the vote compared with the 41% Seabrook received (Barone and Cohen, Almanac of American Politics 2002 1091). This primary clash goes beyond a simple political election; rather, the primary fight with Seabrook represents Engel's broader problem of descriptive representation, or more appropriately, lack thereof. Moreover, if African American and Hispanic populations continue to rise in the 17th district, Engel can expect more competitive primaries (Barone and Cohen, Almanac of American Politics 2002 1091).

Republican Jerry Weller, representing the 11th district of Illinois, is a white representative in a majority white district. CQ's Politics in America 2004 estimates Weller's racial demographics to be 84% white, 8% black and 7% Hispanic. Since winning election in 1994, Weller has earned a reputation as a

politically savvy insider (Barone and Cohen, Almanac of American Politics 2002 531). Weller is a member of the Ways and Means Committee and has made it clear that he intends on furthering his insider status by vying for the job of chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee (Erickson A6). Weller's spokesman, Ben Fallon, contends that this position would be important to his constituents (Erickson A6).

In an interview, Fallon stated that Weller returns home often, attending a variety of events and political functions (Fallon, personal interview). When asked if there was any part of the 11th district in which Weller could improve constituent relations, Fallon responded, saying that Weller does a good job of representing all his constituents, adding that Weller recently made an effort to reach out to Hispanic voters (Fallon, personal interview). Further evidence of this Hispanic outreach is Weller's recent Spanish lessons, in which he and other Republicans began taking Spanish lessons on Capital Hill ("Weller spurs GOP's Spanish-language education" 1-2). Tari Renner, Weller's Democratic opponent in his upcoming 2004 bid for reelection, described Weller's communication with constituents as one of photo opportunities and media attentiveness (Renner, personal interview). In considering Weller's drive for insider influence, it is questionable how much of his attempt at Hispanic outreach is actually intended to affect the very small Hispanic population in the 11th district and how much of this symbolic outreach is intended to increase his status within the Republican party, which has made it a goal to court Hispanics nationwide.

Case Study Conclusions

In concluding the case study, it is appropriate to begin with Weller because, of the four subjects within this study, his particular case study did not yield much in the way of substance. However, this is not problematic because Weller, as a white member representing a majority white district, served mainly as a counterbalance to the other three representatives in the case study. This is not to say that there are not some important conclusions to be drawn from his electoral and representative experience. Weller's emphasis on insider influence within the Republican party is similar to that of Jordon's representational strategy due to the fact that both stressed insider influence as the best way of representing their constituents. Overall, despite Weller's media attentiveness, he does not have a remarkably close relationship with his constituents.

The study of Eliot Engel demonstrates the salience of the normative debate between descriptive and substantive representation. Engel, representing the racially diverse and heavily Democratic Bronx in New York, finds his most difficult challenges to be during the primary elections, where the focus is on race, rather than legislative activity or ideology. One can conclude that Engel, as one of the few non-minority members of Congress to represent a majority minority district, tries to overcome issues of racial differences by creating closer ties with constituents. Proof of this comes from Engel's status as "the mayor" for his attention to local issues in addition to his frequent trips home. The racial character of the *constituents*, rather than the representative, has set the tone for the representative-constituent interaction of this district.

The study of Sanford Bishop produced the most substantive qualitative data. Bishop, though originally elected in a majority minority district, was forced by judicial action to represent a majority white district. Despite the worries of civil rights activists and racial gerrymandering supporters, Bishop won reelection in his newly white dominated district. He achieved this goal by cultivating a biracial coalition and focusing on issues which were central to the concerns of constituents, both black and white. It is also notable that Bishop's reputation as a conservative Democrat refuted the liberal label that electoral challengers tried to pin on him. Perhaps more important than Bishop's moderate ideology was his relationship with constituents, which was a close and personal one. Bishop's style of representation, similar to Tubbs Jones', is marked by constant person-to-person interaction with constituents. It is also important to point out the similarities between Bishop's and Engel's representation. They have both developed close constituent relationships.

Conyers, on the other hand, with his reputation as an outspoken liberal, has a style of representation very similar to Stokes' group intensive style, in that they both speak for "the black community." Conyers, with his dependable base of black support, has no need to build biracial coalitions, and therefore has not done so. Conyers' seemingly electoral invincibility, even in the face of his embarrassing mayoral runs in

1989 and 1993, suggests that he is out of touch with his constituents. The fact that the majority black 14th district of Michigan has consistently voted for Conyers despite his disastrous misadventures and apparent lack of contact with constituents is evidence that these voters value descriptive over substantive representation. This premium on descriptive representation removed virtually all accountability or electoral concern, meaning Conyers did not need to establish a close and personal relationship with constituents. Therefore, it seems that after examining the findings of this case study, the previously held hypothesis that black representatives develop closer relationships with constituents is unsupported by evidence.

This study of race and constituent relationships was based on the hypothesis that African American Congress members develop and maintain closer relationships with their constituents. The study of Conyers, however, has presented evidence to the contrary. Conyers, a senior black member, does not hold a close relationship with constituents; in fact, it seems as though Engel holds a more intimate relationship and style of interaction than does Conyers. In formulating the hypothesis that black representatives correlate with closer constituent relationships, political scientists have adhered to the theory of descriptive representation, believing that the race of a member of Congress, in itself, would affect the nature of his or her style of representation. However, my findings indicate that the more appropriate factor to observe in predicting representational behavior is the racial diversity of the district in comparison to the race of the representative. Moreover, both Bishop and Engel face racially heterogeneous districts with a majority demographic whose race they do descriptively represent. Bishop and Engel have overcome problems of racial differences by stressing substantive rather than descriptive representation and by building and maintaining biracial and personal relationships with their constituents. In conclusion, it is not the racial characteristics of the representatives that dictate the nature of constituent relationships; rather, it is the racial diversity of districts which colors the style of representation.

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