

Constituents' Responses to Descriptive and Substantive Representation in Congress*

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Objectives: This article examines whether the descriptive representation of race and ethnicity influences how constituents respond to the substantive representation of their policy preferences. Hypotheses derived from theories of descriptive representation suggest that voters may overestimate policy congruence, or downplay its importance, while evaluating politicians who “look like” them. *Methods:* A unique sample of black, Hispanic, and white Americans was asked to evaluate a (fictitious) member of the U.S. Congress whose race/ethnicity and policy positions are randomly manipulated. *Results:* Regardless of their actual policy positions, blacks perceived greater substantive representation from black politicians. Also holding policy congruence constant, whites approved of white politicians at distinctly higher rates. Education moderates this effect, such that less-educated whites respond more negatively to representation by nonwhite legislators. *Conclusions:* Being represented by someone of the same race can diminish accountability for legislators' substantive records, an important cost of descriptive representation.

Standard models of democratic accountability assume that voters know how their representatives have acted in office, and use that information to support or oppose them (Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010; Hutchings, 2003). In this way, constituents are able to keep representatives “in step” with their policy preferences and ensure that government remains responsive to public opinion. While numerous studies have examined whether voters are capable of meeting these standards, few have considered that this model of accountability focuses on one “component” of representation, the substantive representation of constituents' policy preferences, in isolation.

Politicians represent their constituents in a multitude of ways beyond such policy representation (Eulau and Karp, 1977; Pitkin, 1967). The descriptive representation of demographic characteristics (e.g., race or ethnicity) is a significant part of the legislator-constituent relationship. Indeed, voters have more trust in, and perceive more responsiveness from, descriptive representatives (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 2004; Gay, 2002; Pantoja and Segura, 2003).

These effects may, however, diminish the extent to which constituents hold incumbents accountable for their substantive record. In this article, I derive hypotheses from these theories of descriptive representation that outline two ways in which a shared racial/ethnic identity might affect voters' responses to legislators' substantive records. First, voters may use descriptive representation as a heuristic for substantive representation, and erroneously

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perceive greater policy congruence with legislators who look like them. Second, voters may value descriptive representation as an intrinsic good, and overlook substantive representation when evaluating their representatives. In both cases, descriptive representation could reduce accountability for substantive representation.

Assessing whether descriptive representation does affect constituents' responses to substantive representation in these ways has eluded definitive study in the past for two key reasons. First, in the United States, the race and policy records of members of Congress (MCs) are often correlated such that it is difficult to distinguish voters' responses to the two using observational data (Abrajano, Nagler, and Alvarez, 2005; Highton, 2004). Second, national survey samples usually contain too few minorities to make reliable inferences about how nonwhite voters respond to legislators of different races, which means that our understanding of responses to legislators of different races and ethnicities is often limited to white voters alone (e.g., Terkildsen, 1993; Sigelman et al., 1995).

The current study is designed specifically to overcome these problems. To assess whether whites and minorities differ in their responses to descriptive and substantive representation, I use a unique survey sample stratified by race and ethnicity to include equal numbers of black, Hispanic, and white respondents. To disentangle the causal effects of descriptive and substantive representation, I designed an embedded experiment that manipulates both the race/ethnicity and policy positions of a (fictitious) MC. Together, these approaches allow us to fully assess the causal effects of descriptive and substantive representation on voters of different races and ethnicities.

The results illuminate how descriptive representation can shape constituents' responses to the substantive representation of their policy preferences. A shared demographic identity is often used as a heuristic for shared policy positions, and is often an intrinsically valued good by voters. These results vary across racial/ethnic groups and education levels, suggesting features of the voters moderate the effects of descriptive representation in important ways. In the next section, I begin by developing several hypotheses from theories of descriptive representation.

The Effect of Descriptive Representation on Responses to Substantive Representation

I derive two hypotheses about how descriptive representation affects responses to legislators' policy records. First, a shared racial/ethnic identity may act as a heuristic for shared policy preferences, leading voters to perceive greater congruence. Second, descriptive representation may be valued as an intrinsic good, leading voters to support such legislators regardless of their actual record.

Descriptive Representation as a Heuristic for Substantive Representation

Given low levels of political knowledge, it is perhaps to be expected that voters frequently rely on heuristics to make sense of the political world (Popkin, 1991). Alongside cues such as party affiliation or incumbency, voters may rely on race or ethnicity as a guide to legislators' records, inferring that representatives who "look like" them are likely to share their views (Bianco, 1994; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003; Gay, 2002; Graves and Lee, 2000). Indeed, theories of "minority empowerment" postulate that black voters feel more engaged and efficacious when represented descriptively because of "cues from political figures indicating likely policy responsiveness" (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990:379; see also Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 2004; Sanchez and Morin, 2011).

Studies of black MCs suggest that they are aware their constituents infer policy congruence from descriptive representation. Fenno (2003) documents what he terms “representational leeway on policy matters” for black representatives because black constituents assume they are being represented substantively. As Rep. Louis Stokes (D-OH) explained, he had considerable freedom in Congress because “everything they [his constituents] know about Lou Stokes tells them ‘he’s up there doing a good job for us.’ It’s a blind faith type of thing” (quoted in Fenno, 2003:3233).

Such “blind faith” may result in reduced accountability for substantive representation if descriptively represented voters assume greater policy congruence than actually exists (Mansbridge, 1999). Stated conversely, a *lack* of faith in nondescriptive representatives may lead constituents to assume their policy preferences have been poorly represented (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994). Taken collectively, these theories of descriptive representation thus suggest the first hypothesis.

H1: *Voters will perceive greater policy congruence with MCs of the same race/ethnicity than with other MCs, given the same level of actual congruence.*

Descriptive Representation as an Intrinsic Good

Voters may also value descriptive representation as an intrinsic good, regardless of any (perceived) substantive representation that accompanies it. Although critical of descriptive representation’s instrumental policy value, Swain (1995 :217) notes that it fulfills a “host of psychological needs that are no less important for being intangible.” These benefits include greater trust and pride in descriptive representatives, as well as a greater sense of political inclusion and access (Fenno, 2003; Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Sanchez and Morin, 2011).

MCs certainly present themselves to constituents in ways that emphasize their shared descriptive characteristics, stressing that “I am one of you” (Fenno, 1978; Bianco, 1994). The resulting trust in descriptive representatives may lead voters to overlook any “out-of-step” policy votes they cast. As Fenno (1978 :240) observes, voters “may want good access or the assurance of good access as much as they want good policy. They may want ‘a good man’ or ‘a good woman’, someone whose assurances they can trust, as much as they want good policy.” Likewise, the ease of “shorthand communication” that results from the visible signs of shared life experiences may be valued as an intrinsic good even if it comes with reduced substantive representation (Mansbridge, 1999:641).

These theories hold that voters may value descriptive representation in and of itself, leading to more favorable evaluations of legislators. This could manifest either as a positive “main” effect, or as a negative effect on the importance of substantive representation for evaluations. I thus formulate two hypotheses.

H2a: *Voters will rate MCs of the same race/ethnicity more positively than other MCs, given the same level of policy congruence.*

H2b: *Voters’ ratings of MCs of the same race/ethnicity will be less dependent on policy congruence than their ratings of other MCs.*

Minority Empowerment and White Racial Resentment

These theories of descriptive representation were originally developed with reference to black voters. Two questions remain: Does the minority empowerment thesis apply to *other*

minority groups? And how should we conceptualize *white* voters' responses to descriptive representation?

The mechanism behind minority empowerment—accustomed to being marginalized, being descriptively represented is an empowering experience—is not logically limited to African Americans. Indeed, extensive evidence shows that Hispanics (and other minorities) are empowered by descriptive representation (Barreto, 2010; Graves and Lee, 2000; Sanchez and Morin, 2011). The racial heterogeneity of Hispanics might lead us to expect smaller effects of co-ethnic representation (Stokes-Brown, 2006). However, common experiences of discrimination may have activated a pan-ethnic identity (Barreto, 2010). Indeed, this is precisely what drives minority empowerment—descriptive representation is important to voters *because* of their shared political marginalization.

This thesis, however, cannot explain how whites respond to descriptive representation. Accustomed to being in the majority, whites are unlikely to feel “empowered” when their MC is white. Nonetheless, there is evidence that descriptive representation is as or more important to white voters as it is to minorities. Claudine Gay's work shows that whites react negatively and disengage from politics when represented by nonwhite MCs (Gay, 2001, 2002). These results are interpreted as a *negative* response to *nonwhite* politicians rather than the *positive* response minority voters have to *same-race* politicians (Hutchings and Valentino, 2004:395 note this asymmetry in their review of the literature), attributed to whites' continuing racial resentment and negative stereotyping of minorities (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994; Sigelman et al., 1995; Terkildsen, 1993). Although the hypothesized mechanisms differ—racial resentment among whites, feelings of empowerment among minorities—the theories predict the same empirical result, that voters of all races/ethnicities value descriptive representation for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons.

The Moderating Effects of Education and Ideology

Education and ideology are likely to moderate voter responses to descriptive representation in several ways. First, the effect of a politician's race/ethnicity is likely to be conditional on voters' education. Low-information, less-well-educated voters are more likely to rely on the cue of descriptive representation (Abrajano, Nagler, and Alvarez, 2005; Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 2004), and to downplay policy congruence (Tate, 2003:127) in evaluations, suggesting that the use of descriptive representation as a heuristic should be greatest among those with the least education. Further, less-educated whites are particularly likely to hold racially resentful views, and thus more likely to prefer same-race representatives (Matsubayashi and Ueda, 2011). For all voters, then, the effects of racial representation should be greatest among those with the least education.

A competing hypothesis to the descriptive representation theories outlined above suggests that voters use legislators' race as a cue of their ideology (rather than using descriptive representation as a cue of shared policy preferences) and perceive minority politicians as more liberal than whites (McDermott, 1998). Under this hypothesis, evaluations of legislators are driven by ideological stereotypes, not descriptive representation. If this is the case, then the voter's own ideology should moderate any effects, such that conservative voters perceive less congruence with nonwhite MCs than liberal voters, and rate their performance less positively than liberal voters do.

Finally, for voters to make these ideological inferences, they must have a certain degree of political knowledge. Knowing the stereotype (that nonwhite MCs are more liberal) and

successfully applying it may require information beyond that possessed by less-educated individuals (Koch, 2002).¹ Therefore, we might expect education and ideology to interact, so that the more educated voters (who are most aware of the ideological stereotype) respond to this cue the most.

Data

Given their lower numbers in the population, most national surveys contain few minority respondents, leaving previous studies of the effects of racial representation to focus on whites alone (e.g., Terkildsen, 1993; Sigelman et al., 1995). To assess how descriptive representation affects voters of various races and ethnicities, I utilize a unique survey sample. In July 2011, Knowledge Networks (KN) selected a random sample of U.S. adults from its online panel that was stratified to create roughly equal numbers of black ($N = 623$), Hispanic ($N = 611$), and white ($N = 618$) respondents. Although the overall sample is obviously not representative of the adult population, within each race/ethnicity, respondents are representative of the broader group.²

In the real world, the race/ethnicity and policy positions of MCs are highly correlated, making it difficult to state whether voters are responding to descriptive or substantive representation. I embedded an experiment in the survey that manipulated an MC's race/ethnicity and his policy positions. The rest of this section explains its design; the online appendix provides full details.

Initial Items and Experimental Manipulation

The survey began by asking for respondents' opinions "about some of the main issues being discussed in politics today" (full question wording is in the online appendix). I selected four high-profile bills that *Congressional Quarterly* and the *Washington Post* identified as recent "key" votes in Congress, and asked the respondents if they favored or opposed: (1) the health-care reform of 2010, (2) the stimulus bill from 2009, (3) immigration reform creating a pathway to citizenship, (4) increasing taxes on those earning \$250,000 or more, and (5) the use of racial profiling by airport security officials. This final issue was not on the congressional agenda, but was included to assess whether responses were most pronounced on racial issues.

After several other questions, respondents were shown a screenshot of a website they were told was from an MC's official website.³ The screenshot was manipulated to present MCs of different races/ethnicities, whose policy positions were more or less congruent with the respondent's.

Respondents were randomly assigned to see a site for a (fictitious) black, Hispanic, or white MC. The names of the MCs were chosen to be distinctively associated with a particular racial/ethnic group. Using 2000 Census data (Word et al., 2000), I selected

¹Koch's research is focused on *gender* stereotypes, but his finding that more politically knowledgeable voters are most likely to apply stereotypes to politicians is still relevant here.

²Of particular concern with Internet samples is that respondents may be more politically sophisticated than the general population. Table A1 in the online appendix compares the educational attainment of respondents in the (unweighted) KN sample to the 2011 Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, and shows few differences.

³Reading about a legislator via his or her website is, of course, not the only way that constituents learn about their representatives' records. To maximize the internal validity of the experiment, and given the context of an online survey, this was the least obtrusive way of outlining his positions.

surnames that were overwhelmingly associated with one group: the black MC was named Joe Washington (in 2000, 90 percent of all adults with the surname Washington were black); the Hispanic MC was named Jose Gonzalez (94 percent of all those named Gonzalez were Hispanic); and the white MC was named Joe Mueller (97 percent of all those named Mueller were white). The website included a prominent image of the MC in the banner heading. Stock photos were used: in each case, the photo was a close-up shot of a smiling middle-aged man wearing a suit and tie (the online appendix includes all three screenshots).

The screenshot shown was of an “Issues and Legislation” page. I sampled the official websites of 20 House Democrats and 20 House Republicans, and designed the page to be as similar as possible. To ensure that the only cues respondents received about the MC were his race and policy positions, the screenshot did not include mention of the MC’s party. This is not unrealistic: none of the sites I sampled included the MC’s party on their issues/legislation page.

The text of the page read, “Congressman [last name] continues to work on the major legislation that matters most to our district, including,” followed by a list of his positions on five bills. These mirror the five policies respondents had given opinions on earlier. The MC’s positions (shown in the online appendix) were described in ways that actual MCs had done during congressional debate. Respondents were randomly assigned to an MC who agreed with them on one of the five policies (the “low” congruence condition), or an MC who agreed with them on four of the five areas (the “high” congruence condition). Which issues they agreed on, and their listed order, were also randomized.

Evaluations and Independent Variables

Following the screenshot, respondents evaluated the MC. *Job approval* was measured with the question: “Although Congressman [last name] is not your current Representative, do you approve or disapprove of the job he is doing as a Congressman?” This is coded as a categorical variable, with response options of strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither approve nor disapprove, somewhat approve, strongly approve. *Perceptions of policy congruence* were measured with the question: “Imagine a scale running from 0 percent to 100 percent that measures how often a politician represented your views on important policies. 0 percent would mean they never represented your views. 100 percent would mean that they always represented your views. Where on this scale would you put Congressman [last name]?” Responses were measured with an adjustable “slider” scale.

Before the screenshot, respondents were asked about the potential moderators discussed earlier. *Ideology* is measured with responses to: “One way that people think about politics is in terms of how liberal or conservative they are. Imagine a scale that runs from 0 to 100, where 0 would mean extremely liberal and 100 would mean extremely conservative. Where on this scale would you put yourself?” For clarity, this is labeled as “Conservative” in the results since higher values mean the respondent placed himself or herself further to the right. The highest level of formal *education* attained is measured on a 1–4 numeric scale, where 1 =Less than high school, 2 =High school, 3 =Some college, and 4 =Bachelor’s degree or higher (for a similar coding strategy, see Gay, 2002).

To assess the effects of these moderators, the analyses use several model specifications. I include interactions for respondents’ education, to assess whether voters with different levels of education are more or less likely to support descriptive representatives. Similar to McDermott (1998) and others, I include interactions for the respondent’s conservatism

TABLE 1

Perceptions of Policy Congruence by the Race/Ethnicity of the Respondent and the MC

	Black Respondents	Hispanic Respondents	White Respondents
Black MC			
Mean	46.57	44.30	41.25
SD	20.90	22.59	22.54
N respondents	218	200	202
Hispanic MC			
Mean	44.33	43.36	41.71
SD	21.14	23.64	23.41
N respondents	199	200	207
White MC			
Mean	46.83	44.88	46.06
SD	23.59	23.92	23.79
N respondents	210	207	200

NOTE: Shaded cells indicate descriptive representation.

to assess whether voters used ideological stereotypes to evaluate them. Finally, I include interactions between ideology, education, and the MC's race/ethnicity to assess whether the use of ideological stereotypes is more common among the most educated. To ease interpretation of these coefficients, I center education and ideology around their sample mean.

Descriptive Representation and Perceptions of Substantive Representation

I begin by assessing whether perceptions of policy congruence varied across MCs. Table 1 presents the average level of perceived policy congruence in each condition.

Table 1 suggests only one significant difference in respondents' views of substantive representation. Black respondents perceived greater congruence with the black MC than the white MC (means of 46.6 percent and 41.3 percent, respectively). Consistent with theories of minority empowerment, blacks perceived greater substantive representation from the legislator who looked like them. There is no evidence for an equivalent effect among Hispanic and white voters, however. For example, Hispanic respondents perceived statistically indistinguishable levels of congruence with Hispanic (43.4 percent) and white (41.7 percent) MCs. Likewise, whites perceived the same levels of congruence with black (46.8 percent) and Hispanic (44.9 percent) legislators as with white (46.1 percent) MCs.

To assess the effects of policy congruence, education, and ideology, I fit a series of OLS regressions that predict these perceptions. For each group of respondents, I estimate two models: first, a basic model that includes as predictors the race of the MC and the actual congruence condition (marked as "a" in Table 2); second, a more complex model that interacts these variables with the respondent's education and ideology (marked as "b").⁴

⁴Randomization checks did not suggest any imbalance across conditions, but I fitted models controlling for the respondent's gender, age, interest in politics, and region. None of the effects reported here are altered. These models are in Tables A3 and A4 in the online appendix.

TABLE 2
OLS Regression Models Predicting Perceptions of Policy Congruence, by the Race/Ethnicity of the Respondent

	Black Respondents		Hispanic Respondents		White Respondents	
	Model 1(a)	Model 1(b)	Model 2(a)	Model 2(b)	Model 3(a)	Model 3(b)
Intercept	35.30 (1.79)***	36.14 (1.83)***	36.92 (1.79)***	36.49 (1.83)***	36.59 (1.77)***	36.28 (1.89)***
Black MC	4.54 (2.17)*	4.50 (2.24)*	0.97 (2.28)	2.48 (2.34)	0.99 (2.18)	-0.88 (2.37)
× Conservative		0.13 (0.11)		-0.22 (0.10)*		-0.02 (0.10)
× Education		3.13 (2.31)		6.86 (2.43)**		2.60 (2.36)
× Conservative × Education		-0.18 (0.11)		0.08 (0.11)		-0.02 (0.09)
Hispanic MC	3.41 (2.22)	4.42 (2.30)^	-0.07 (2.28)	0.02 (2.24)	-1.46 (2.21)	-1.12 (2.31)
× Conservative		0.29 (0.12)*		-0.12 (0.09)		-0.13 (0.10)
× Education		2.74 (2.44)		0.44 (2.37)		1.56 (2.34)
× Conservative × Education		-0.10 (0.12)		0.08 (0.09)		0.13 (0.10)
High policy congruence	12.26 (1.79)***	12.54 (1.83)***	11.95 (1.87)***	13.47 (1.88)***	19.60 (1.80)***	18.03 (1.93)***
× Conservative		-0.17 (0.09)^		-0.05 (0.08)		-0.09 (0.08)
× Education		3.11 (1.90)		4.35 (1.95)*		6.96 (1.92)***
× Conservative × Education		-0.08 (0.09)		-0.12 (0.08)		-0.06 (0.08)
Conservative		0.17 (0.10)^		0.43 (0.08)***		0.32 (0.08)***
Education		-4.60 (1.86)*		-5.70 (2.00)**		-3.83 (1.94)*
Conservative × Education		0.07 (0.10)		-0.05 (0.09)		-0.08 (0.08)
N	567	548	557	541	581	570
R ²	0.08	0.15	0.07	0.20	0.17	0.23
AIC	5,077.97	4,878.26	5,026.21	4,813.39	5,228.36	5,096.53

NOTE: Excluded experimental conditions are white MC and low policy congruence. Ideology and education are both centered around their sample means. ^ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The basic models mirror Table 1: blacks perceived around 4.5 percentage points greater congruence with the black than the white MC ($\beta = 4.54$, $SE = 2.17$ in Model 1(a)).

Unlike in previous studies, education does not appear to moderate the effect of descriptive representation. The interactions between education and MC are mostly insignificant: less-educated voters were no more likely to infer policy congruence from the race/ethnicity of the MC than well-educated voters, with one exception. Model 2(b) shows that better educated Hispanic voters saw the black MC as more congruent than the white MC ($\beta = 6.86$, $SE = 2.43$). There is no evidence, though, that descriptive representation *per se* is what matters: white and Hispanic MCs were perceived as equally congruent with Hispanic voters.

Evidence that voters stereotype nonwhite MCs as liberal is mixed. On one hand, there are no discernible differences in how liberal and conservative whites perceived white and black ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.10$) or Hispanic ($\beta = -0.13$, $SE = 0.10$) MCs, suggesting little use of such stereotypes. On the other hand, the ideology of black and Hispanic voters does affect perceptions of different MCs. More conservative blacks perceived greater congruence with the Hispanic MC than the white MC ($\beta = 0.29$, $SE = 0.12$), and more conservative Hispanics perceived greater congruence with the white MC than the black MC ($\beta = -0.22$, $SE = 0.10$). This suggests blacks stereotyped Hispanic MCs as more conservative than white MCs, and Hispanics stereotyped black MCs as more liberal than white MCs. Why *whites'* evaluations are not influenced in the same way is not clear from these data. There is no evidence that such stereotyping is more common among more educated voters, either: the three-way interaction between ideology, education, and MC is insignificant every time.⁵

These limited effects are not immediately attributable to respondents' lack of engagement with the stimuli. Seeing an MC with congruent positions on four (as opposed to one) of the five policies increased perceptions of congruence by between 12 and 20 percentage points. There is some evidence that the MC's positions had a greater impact on whites' perceptions than blacks' or Hispanics' (for whites, $\beta = 19.60$, $SE = 1.80$; compared to $\beta = 12.26$, $SE = 1.79$ for blacks or $\beta = 11.95$, $SE = 1.87$ for Hispanics). This is consistent with Griffin and Flavin's (2007) finding that blacks' perceptions of MCs are driven by their legislator's actual stances less than whites' perceptions are. Regardless, the positions the MC took were a strong predictor of perceptions for voters in all groups—indicating that respondents did engage with and learn from his website.

In sum, the descriptive representation of race can have a significant, if limited, impact on perceptions of substantive representation. Over and above the actual positions the MC took, black voters believed that a black legislator would represent their views better than a white MC in the same positions. In contrast, Hispanic and white voters are unaffected by descriptive representation, perceiving equal levels of policy congruence no matter the MC. Now I move from perceptions to the effect of this congruence on approval ratings.

Descriptive Representation and Accountability for Substantive Representation

To explore the structure of approval ratings, I estimate ordered logistic regression models shown in Table 3 (the full distributions of responses are shown in the online appendix,

⁵Across all groups, the respondent's ideology is significant: conservatives perceived greater congruence with the MC than liberals (for black voters assessing white MCs, $\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.10$; for Hispanic voters, $\beta = 0.43$, $SE = 0.08$; for white voters, $\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.08$). It is not clear why this is the case. Perhaps after being told the legislator was a current MC, they inferred he was more likely to be a conservative than a liberal, given GOP control of the House at the time. Testing this hypothesis would require additional data taken from a period of Democratic control; as such, it is merely speculation for now.

TABLE 3
 Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Job Approval of MC by the Race/Ethnicity of the Respondent

	Black Respondents		Hispanic Respondents		White Respondents	
	Model 1(a)	Model 1(b)	Model 2(a)	Model 2(b)	Model 3(a)	Model 3(b)
Black MC	0.11 (0.27)	0.20 (0.29)	0.08 (0.26)	0.01 (0.30)	-0.33 (0.25)	-0.61 (0.28)*
x High congruence	0.13 (0.37)	-0.16 (0.42)	-0.23 (0.37)	-0.09 (0.42)	0.42 (0.36)	0.67 (0.42)
x Conservative		0.01 (0.02)		-0.04 (0.01)*		0.02 (0.01)
x Education		0.65 (0.30)*		0.23 (0.32)		0.59 (0.29)*
x Conservative x Education		0.02 (0.02)		-0.03 (0.02)^		-0.03 (0.01)*
x High congruence x Conservative A		-0.02 (0.02)		0.02 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.02)
x High congruence x Education		-0.05 (0.44)		0.37 (0.44)		-0.65 (0.41)
x High congruence x Conservative x Education		-0.02 (0.02)		0.04 (0.02)*		0.04 (0.02)*
Hispanic MC	0.21 (0.27)	0.42 (0.29)	0.00 (0.27)	-0.01 (0.30)	-0.30 (0.27)	-0.58 (0.30)*
x High congruence	-0.09 (0.38)	-0.23 (0.44)	-0.23 (0.38)	-0.19 (0.42)	0.32 (0.37)	0.58 (0.42)
x Conservative		0.03 (0.02)^		-0.02 (0.01)^		0.00 (0.01)
x Education		0.37 (0.30)		0.02 (0.32)		0.78 (0.30)**
x Conservative x Education		0.03 (0.02)^		-0.02 (0.01)		-0.02 (0.01)
x High congruence x Conservative		-0.01 (0.02)		0.02 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)
x High congruence x Education		0.29 (0.47)		0.27 (0.44)		-0.89 (0.42)*

Continued

TABLE 3
Continued

	Black Respondents		Hispanic Respondents		White Respondents	
	Model 1(a)	Model 1(b)	Model 2(a)	Model 2(b)	Model 3(a)	Model 3(b)
x High congruence x Conservative Education	1.19 (0.27)***	-0.02 (0.02)		0.03 (0.02)^		0.00 (0.02)
High policy congruence x Conservative Education	1.47 (0.32)***	0.00 (0.02)	1.53 (0.27)***	1.77 (0.30)***	1.62 (0.26)***	1.38 (0.29)***
x Conservative Education	0.26 (0.33)	0.01 (0.02)		0.40 (0.32)		0.01 (0.01)
x Conservative x Education	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)		-0.03 (0.01)^		0.89 (0.29)**
Conservative Education	-0.59 (0.21)**	-0.02 (0.01)^		0.04 (0.01)***		-0.02 (0.01)*
Conservative x Education	-0.02 (0.01)^	-0.02 (0.01)^		-0.49 (0.23)*		0.00 (0.01)
Threshold 1	-1.85 (0.22)***	-1.89 (0.24)***	-1.55 (0.20)***	0.02 (0.01)*	-1.52 (0.20)***	0.02 (0.01)*
Threshold 2	-0.76 (0.20)***	-0.69 (0.21)***	-0.65 (0.19)***	-1.52 (0.23)***	-0.46 (0.18)*	-1.77 (0.22)***
Threshold 3	1.67 (0.21)***	1.81 (0.22)***	1.72 (0.20)***	-0.56 (0.21)**	1.81 (0.20)***	-0.65 (0.20)**
Threshold 4	4.16 (0.29)***	4.46 (0.31)***	3.80 (0.26)***	1.87 (0.22)***	4.01 (0.27)***	1.66 (0.22)***
N	612	558	596	556	613	578
Log-likelihood	-749.47	-664.67	-760.69	-694.26	-785.96	-727.16
AIC	1,516.93	1,383.34	1,539.38	1,442.52	1,589.92	1,508.33

NOTE: Excluded experimental conditions are white MC and low actual policy congruence. Approval of MC is coded as 1 (Strongly disapprove), 2 (Somewhat disapprove), 3 (Neither approve nor disapprove), 4 (Somewhat approve), 5 (Strongly approve). Ideology and education are both centered around their sample means. ^ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A5). The basic models (labeled as “a”) include the race of the MC (to assess H2a), policy congruence, and the interaction between the two models (to assess H2b). The more complicated models (labeled “b”) interact all of these variables with the respondent’s education and ideology.

Descriptive representation has no direct impact on black or Hispanic voters, as indicated by the insignificant coefficients for the MC in Models 1(a)–2(b). In contrast, white voters are revealed to have a distinct preference for same-race legislators. Model 3(b) suggests that whites give lower ratings to black ($\beta = -0.61$, $SE = 0.28$) and Hispanic ($\beta = -0.58$, $SE = 0.30$) MCs than the white MCs. To convey the substantive significance of these effects, I simulate the regression results and predict whites’ ratings of the MC (ideology and education are set to their mean values, congruence to “low” for now). Whites are predicted to disapprove or strongly disapprove of black (probability = 0.49) or Hispanic (0.48) MCs more than white MCs (0.34). Indeed, predicted net approval ratings for black and Hispanic MCs are about twice as negative (–0.39 and –0.38) than for white MCs (–0.18).

This disapproval of nonwhite MCs among white voters is, however, substantially moderated by education. In Model 3(b), the interaction between education and MC is positive for both black and Hispanic MCs ($\beta = 0.59$, $SE = 0.29$ and $\beta = 0.78$, $SE = 0.30$, respectively), while the effect of education is negative for those shown a white MC ($\beta = -0.65$, $SE = 0.21$). In other words, better educated whites approved of nonwhite MCs more, and of the white MC less, than less-educated whites did. Figure 1 shows predicted approval ratings for each MC, organized by the voter’s education. Plots (a)–(c) in the top row show predicted approval ratings of black, Hispanic, and white MCs by whites with no high school diploma. Plots (d)–(f) show approval by whites with a college degree.

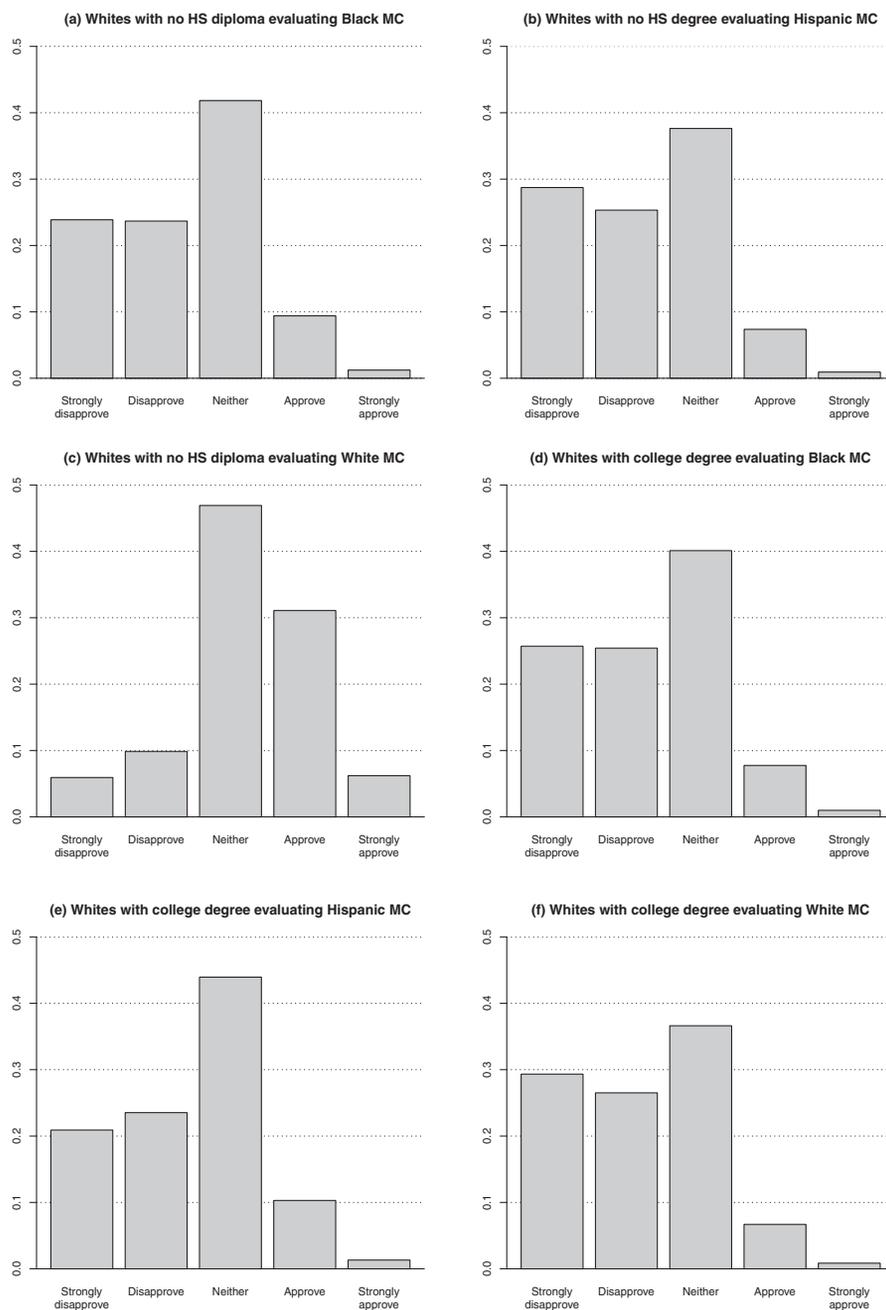
Figure 1 highlights the diverging evaluations given by voters with different levels of education. As shown in plots (a)–(c), whites with no high school diploma approve more of the white MC than the nonwhite MCs. When evaluating a nonwhite MC, they are more likely to disapprove than approve (probability = 0.23 vs. 0.10 for the black MC; 0.26 vs. 0.07 for the Hispanic MC). When evaluating a white MC, however, these probabilities flip: voters are more likely to approve (0.29) than disapprove (0.11). Even though policy congruence is held constant, low-education whites viewed the white MC much more favorably than the black or Hispanic MCs. In contrast, whites with a college degree respond similarly to all three MCs, as shown in plots (d)–(f). For example, highly educated whites are as likely to disapprove of the white MC (probability = 0.26) as the black (0.25) or Hispanic (0.23) MC (the other response probabilities are also indistinguishable across MCs).

These predicted probabilities are for an MC who took mostly noncongruent policy positions. Simulating approval ratings for an MC with mostly congruent positions reveals the tradeoff that low-education whites perceive between descriptive and substantive representation. Their probability of approving of a white MC who agrees with them on just one of the five policies is 0.29. This is statistically indistinguishable from their probability of approving of a black or Hispanic MC who agrees with them on *four* of the issues (0.32 and 0.32, respectively). Less-educated whites are as likely to approve of a white MC who rarely agrees with them as they are to approve of a nonwhite MC who agrees with them almost always. For these voters, being represented by someone of the same race appears as important as being represented by someone with the same policy views.

There is no evidence that voters weigh the policy record of MCs of different races in different ways, as H2b predicted. Across each of the models, the interactions between the MC and policy congruence are insignificant. This is *not* because voters are unresponsive

FIGURE 1

Predicted Approval Ratings from White Respondents, by Level of Education and Race/Ethnicity of MC



NOTE: Predicted approval ratings are simulated from Model 3(b) in Table 3, setting policy congruence to the "low" condition and ideology to its mean. Plots (a)–(c) are for white respondents with no high school diploma; plots (d)–(f) are for white respondents with a college degree.

to the MC's substantive record. On the contrary, the coefficients for policy congruence are positive and significant in every model: a shift from low to high is predicted to result in an increased probability of the voter approving of the MC of 0.24 for blacks, 0.26 for Hispanics, and 0.21 for whites (these are simulated from Models 1(b), 2(b), and 3(b), and are for evaluations of a white MC, the modal value in the real world of U.S. politics). Descriptive representation does not alter the weight given to substantive representation for job evaluations. Rather, some voters simply prefer same-race representatives, over and above the degree of policy congruence between them.

Stereotypes about the liberalness of nonwhite legislators have small effects that do not alter the main conclusions. More conservative Hispanics were somewhat less likely to approve of the black MC than the white MC ($\beta = -0.04$, $SE = 0.02$), suggesting that they saw the black MC as more liberal. However, black and white voters showed no such effect. The results suggest that well-educated voters are more aware of and likely to use these stereotypes. For example, among well-educated whites, conservatives disapproved of the black MC more than liberals did (the interaction between a black MC, conservative, and education is $\beta = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$). However, the other three-way interaction terms for education and ideology do not present strongly significant results.

These results show that the descriptive representation of race *is* viewed as an intrinsic good, regardless of the substantive representation that accompanies it—but only by certain groups of voters. Less-educated white voters in particular approve of the white MC much more than the nonwhite MCs—and are willing to “trade off” low levels of policy congruence for a legislator who looks like them. These intrinsic benefits are not as powerful in shaping nonwhite voters' evaluations, however, suggesting that descriptive representation matters most for white voters, similar to findings in previous research (Gay, 2001, 2002).

Discussion and Conclusions

Research on how constituents hold their elected representatives accountable has tended to focus on just one component of representation, the extent to which legislators' substantive records are congruent with voter preferences, in isolation. This study shows the value of exploring the interactive effects of different components of representation—and in particular demonstrates the ways that a shared racial/ethnic identity with a legislator can impact constituents' responses to his or her policy record.

First, as predicted by H1, there is evidence that black voters use a shared racial identity as a heuristic for shared policy positions. Descriptive representation increased perceptions of substantive representation by around 4.5 percentage points, over and above actual congruence. Second, consistent with H2a, whites were more likely to approve of white legislators than nonwhite legislators with identical policy records. This is particularly true for those with the least education: whites with no high school diploma were just as likely to approve of a noncongruent white MC as of a highly congruent black or Hispanic MC. There is no evidence, however, to support H2b, the hypothesis that voters downweight policy congruence when evaluating descriptive representatives.

These results show that descriptive representation is, in different ways, of importance to black and white voters. Hispanics, however, appear unaffected. This null finding suggests that theories of minority empowerment, developed largely with reference to African Americans, may not apply to Hispanics. Exploring why is beyond the scope of this article, although scholars have suggested that heterogeneity in ancestry and racial-ethnic identification creates a fractured group identity (Stokes-Brown, 2006) that requires explicitly ethnic appeals by politicians to become unified (Barreto, 2010). The effect of

descriptive representation may be conditional on politicians taking certain positions on racialized issues, for example.

Although not shown here due to page limitations, further analysis to assess whether descriptive representation affects responses to MCs' positions on racial matters particularly strongly did not provide any strong evidence. I replicated the models in Tables 2 and 3, including congruence on each policy individually rather than the aggregated low/high conditions. If descriptive representation matters most for issues of race, then the interaction effect between the MC and his position on racialized issues included on the survey (immigration reform and racial profiling) should be significantly larger than the interaction between the MC and positions on other issues. This was, however, not the case. With one exception that actually went in the opposite direction as predicted—Hispanics placed *less* weight on immigration policy when evaluating the black MC—his race/ethnicity made no differences to the importance of racial issues for evaluations. More details and full regression results can be found in the online appendix.

The survey sample and experiment used here gives greater confidence in these conclusions than previous studies. Stratifying the sample by race allows analysis of all voters, not just whites. And randomly manipulating the MC's race/ethnicity and policy positions separates the causal effects of descriptive and substantive representation, which are highly correlated in observational studies. At the same time, as with any study, there are important limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, although the MC's website, policy agenda, and positions were carefully based on those of actual MCs, one criticism is that voters in the real world rarely evaluate politicians on such little information as given here. Further, constituents are almost never asked to evaluate an MC from a district other than their own. Limiting the amount of information respondents had about the MC, and presenting him as from another district, however, maximizes internal validity of the experiment, and allows for clear estimation of the causal effects of race. Further, this low-information scenario may not actually differ too substantially from the real nature of representation, given the public's general lack of knowledge about and interest in Congress.

Second, the experiment is limited to manipulating a single descriptive characteristic, racial-ethnic identity. All the MCs were middle-aged males. Theories of descriptive representation show that the intersection of political identities can produce distinctive voter responses (e.g., Philpot and Walton, 2007). Future work could manipulate the MC's gender *and* race/ethnicity to assess how their intersection affects voters.⁶ Similarly, other heuristics, like party, could be explored, as in the work that explores gender stereotypes within and between parties (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2009).

Finally, the causal mechanisms underpinning these results are left somewhat ambiguous by the experiment, although they are consistent with previous work. The commonality that minorities feel with same-race legislators (Barreto, 2010; Tate, 2003) and lingering racial resentment among whites (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994) probably drive these effects. Proving this cannot be done with the data at hand, however; feelings of commonality or resentment were not measured in the survey to avoid cuing voters into the study's aim and priming them to think about the MC in racial terms (Mendelberg, 2008:116–17, discusses similar concerns). Future experiments could randomly prime feelings of commonality and

⁶As a primitive test of this, I estimated models that interacted the experimental conditions and the respondent's gender. These did not reveal any substantial differences in how men and women of different races responded to the (male) MCs. Table A6 in the online appendix presents these initial results; more direct tests await future research.

resentment immediately prior to the stimulus, and assess differences in responses, although this would obviously require significantly more respondents and statistical power.

Although there is ample room to replicate and extend on this study, the results here illuminate the significant role that descriptive representation plays in shaping constituents' responses, both as a heuristic signaling greater substantive representation and as an intrinsic good in and of itself. Voters' perceptions of legislators' records and subsequent evaluations—central to standard models of accountability—can be shaped in important ways by descriptive representation. Previous theories of descriptive representation have focused primarily on the positive benefits—increased trust, improved access, greater efficacy—it brings for constituents. Along with these benefits are not insignificant costs, if voters give greater “representational leeway on policy matters” (Fenno, 2003) to legislators who look like them. The diminished accountability for substantive representation shown here suggests the need to reevaluate the normative value of descriptive representation, and highlights the importance of assessing multiple “components” of representation simultaneously to fully understand the legislator-constituent relationship.

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