

Research on Race and Ethnicity in Legislative Studies

A MESSAGE FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

Tiffany D. Barnes, *University of Kentucky, USA*

Christopher J. Clark, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*
DOI:10.1017/S104909652100161X

The contributions in this spotlight of “From the Sections” were published in the Legislative Studies Section (LSS) newsletter, *The Legislative Scholar* in the Fall of 2020. This spotlight explores research on racial and ethnic politics (REP) as it applies to legislative studies. Few REP scholars in political science identify as legislative scholars or maintain membership in the LSS, yet so many do important and timely research on legislative politics. Therefore, our goal is to highlight cutting-edge research at the intersection of REP and legislative politics—illuminating and reinforcing connections between the two areas of scholarship.

It is a critical time to examine the intersection of REP and legislative studies. By the year 2040, the United States is expected to become a majority-nonwhite country; today, a few states already are. This suggests that moving forward, more nonwhites will serve in legislatures across the country and in multiple levels of government (i.e., federal, state, and national). Moreover, this increased diversity should influence the way in which white legislators behave, given that the composition of a legislator’s district has been shown to affect legislative behavior. Thus, the study of race and ethnicity in legislative studies is critical for understanding the current and future state of representation in America’s democracy.

This spotlight showcases a range of scholarship that directly engages questions that are relevant to both minority representation and legislative studies. In reviewing this research, two observations are clear: (1) there already is copious research being conducted at the nexus of legislative studies and REP; and (2) these scholars’ creativity, insights, and cutting-edge approaches are the foundation for an exciting stream of future work in this area. It is important to draw explicit attention to work that spans these two fields. Even though this research exists, many scholars tackling questions at the confluence of these fields tend primarily to identify with and speak to only one of the two fields. Yet, the LSS would be much stronger, have a wider reach, and be of greater relevance if more scholars working at the nexus of legislative studies and REP identified with the section.

Research at the Nexus of Legislative Studies and REP

Much of the foundational research on legislative studies takes a rational-choice approach to studying legislatures and institutions. We typically assume that legislators are self-interested utility maximizers who seek chiefly to retain office. In the past several decades, this simplifying assumption has revealed copious

insights regarding the causes and consequences of legislative institutions. However, models that adopt this assumption are not perfect predictors of political phenomena. There is ample room to improve our models, perhaps by relaxing or altering assumptions or considering variation in actors’ utility functions. We rarely consider, for instance, how the identities of the individuals who comprise these institutions influence their utility function; instead, we assume a constant utility function across all groups.

At the same time, much of the research on identity politics tends to emerge from a behaviorist tradition. As a result, REP scholars often focus less on institutions than on individuals. It is critical to consider the racial attitudes of people, how these attitudes are linked to membership in political parties, and the different rates at which racial and ethnic groups participate in political activities—to name a few topics of research. In fact, to assess the health of any democracy, it is imperative to understand how people relate to one another—which is shaped by the racial attitudes of people, among other factors—and it is critical to consider whether certain groups face greater obstacles when it comes to engaging in political acts such as voting. That said, an emphasis on behavior often comes at the expense of considering the role that race and ethnicity play within (and outside of) institutions.

This does not mean that research on legislatures never takes identities seriously or that work on identities never takes institutions seriously. We are aware that there are scholars who have made major strides on this front. In fact, many of the scholars featured in this spotlight have dedicated their career to scholarship at the nexus of institutions and identities. They stand on the shoulders of pioneering scholars—for example, Rodney Hero, Gary Segura, Katherine Tate, and the late Hanes Walton—who paved this path. Yet, the point remains that, by and large, institutions are not at the center of research on race and ethnicity, just as race and ethnicity are not at the center of work on institutions. This spotlight is an opportunity for us to take a closer look at the overlap between identity politics and institutions.

Cutting-Edge Research on Legislative Studies and REP

This spotlight consists of 11 articles that cover a variety of topics. Some articles discuss Congress, others focus on state legislatures. Some articles discuss intersectionality, others do not. Contributions are from scholars in all stages of their career, from graduate students to full professors—a sociologist even makes a contribution.

Kelly Dittmar, Catherine Wineinger, and Kira Sanbonmatsu describe how in the book, *A Seat at the Table*, it is shown that the presence of women of color in Congress matters for understanding substantive representation. These scholars point to women of color recognizing the diversity present within the communities they represent and being willing to bring their own lived experiences to bear in Congress, especially when serving on committees.

The three scholars also argue that moving forward, studies that take an intersectional approach should factor in the role of party identity in understanding the behavior of lawmakers.

LaGina Gause describes how protest by lower-resourced groups actually is effective, shaping the behavior of reelection-

Nazita Lajevardi and Liesel Spangler examine the tweets of US House members over multiple years, looking for mentions of Muslims. They find that Democrats mention Muslims more often but that white Republicans are more likely to use a negative tone when referencing Muslims, especially after 2016. Their work

Thus, the study of race and ethnicity in legislative studies is critical for understanding the current and future state of representation in America's democracy.

minded lawmakers. She argues that because protest is costly for racial and ethnic minorities, it becomes clear to lawmakers that the issues protested are salient to nonwhites. As a result, lawmakers are inclined to address the problems identified by protest. In an ongoing book project, Gause even shows that protest can lead to white Republicans representing minority interests. Gause's work points to protest—albeit costly—as an act that can exert a positive impact on minority representation in Congress.

Matthew Hayes and Bryce J. Dietrich explore symbolic politics in the US House of Representatives, giving particular attention to race. They find that Black members mention civil rights far more often than their white peers; however, white members of Congress from districts with larger Black populations discuss civil rights more in their speeches than co-ethnic peers from districts with

examines an underrepresented and politically marginalized group, highlighting the need for additional scholarship on the representation of Muslim Americans across all levels of government.

Danielle Casarez Lemi encourages us to critically examine intragroup diversity when conducting studies on race and legislative politics, in particular when examining multiracial legislators. Lemi's research urges scholars to recognize that racial identity is far more complex than it often is treated in extant studies. Lemi's work on Black women (co-authored with Nadia Brown) shows that intergenerational differences exist among this subset of the population, especially concerning how to present one's self on the campaign trail.

Christian Dyogi Phillips describes findings from a forthcoming book that examines how Latinos and Asian Americans attain state

Yet, the LSS would be much stronger, have a wider reach, and be of greater relevance if more scholars working at the nexus of legislative studies and REP identified with the section.

smaller Black populations. Moreover, Blacks admonish white members of Congress that misuse civil rights symbolism in their speeches, an important finding as it relates to the constituency-legislator relationship.

James R. Jones considers the experiences of Black congressional staffers, pointing to their overall underrepresentation in Congress yet their overrepresentation on the staffs of minority legislators. He highlights the irony that congressional staff are exempt from laws governing workplace equality because those

legislative office. Most important, her research provides an intersectional approach and, in the process, shows that majority-minority districts help men of color more than women of color. This finding reshapes how we think about the link between race-based districting and the descriptive representation of marginalized groups. Phillips's research is critical, shedding light on the need for intersectional research to become the standard in the discipline, as opposed to an approach that only a subset of scholars use.

We hope that these articles about the newest research at the intersection of legislative studies and REP will spark new and exciting ideas for legislative studies and REP scholars alike, leading to opportunities for scholars in these two subfields to connect.

very laws are the creation of Congress. Moreover, Jones emphasizes how the lack of Black staff in Congress matters not only for how policy is made within Congress but also impacts how political power is exercised outside of Congress—former congressional staff often go on to work in think tanks and as lobbyists. Jones's research illuminates the importance of racial inequality within the walls of the same institution tasked with remedying the ill effects of systemic racism nationwide.

Beth Reingold describes findings from her pathbreaking Oxford University Press book, *Race, Gender and Political Representation*, which is co-authored with Kerry Haynie and Kirsten Widner. Reingold mentions that when women of color are centered (i.e., an intersectional approach is adopted), they emerge as distinct from men of color and white women. In particular, women of color behave differently regarding bill sponsorship. The take-away point is that it is clear that single-axis approaches—those that

look at only race or gender—are incomplete, failing to reveal the ways in which race and gender simultaneously explain legislator behavior.

Jamil Scott discusses campaign finance, giving particular attention to Black women state legislators. Compared to other women, Black women rely more on PAC money, yet they lag women of other races in total contributions. That said, incumbency advantages Black women, making them no different from other women in terms of total contributions. Scott's research examines a key topic: money. Understanding how Black women raise money is critical for gaining insight into one of the key determinants of whether candidates win any office, especially higher-profile offices such as US representative, senator, and governor.

Paru Shah, Eric Gonzalez Juenke, and Bernard L. Fraga discuss an often-overlooked topic: the presence of racial and ethnic minority candidates in state legislative elections. They discuss two noteworthy findings. First, there is more of a supply problem than a demand problem. In other words, it is less about voters in majority-white districts being unwilling to vote for nonwhite candidates and more about these candidates being less willing to run in such districts. Second, when racial and ethnic minority candidates are on the ballot for higher-level offices, electoral benefits are observed for those candidates for down-ballot offices. Shah, Juenke, and Fraga also describe the Candidates Characteristics Cooperative (C3), a database that provides information on state legislative candidates in 2018. The C3 is a rich resource that others should take advantage of and it is publicly available.

In a reflective article, Walter Clark Wilson makes the point that scholars interested in Latino representation must go beyond traditional approaches to the topic—that is, move past looking at the link between Latino representatives and their constituents. Wilson makes a compelling point that moving forward, interest groups must play a central role in studies on Latino representation. In the same way that organized interests affect the behavior of legislators more generally, we should expect these entities to shape the behavior of Latino lawmakers. Wilson also highlights another important point: as it now stands, only one party seeks to represent Latino interests as they typically are defined: the Democratic Party. Such asymmetry often is not recognized, in part because—unlike African Americans—there are several Latino Republicans in Congress.

Concluding Thoughts

We hope that these articles about the newest research at the intersection of legislative studies and REP will spark new and exciting ideas for legislative studies and REP scholars alike, leading to opportunities for scholars in these two subfields to connect. One possibility is that coauthoring relationships will be created, with members from both sections collaborating to produce new knowledge that is more creative, insightful, and accurate than what otherwise would have been produced. Political science is increasingly producing research based more on the lab model. Regardless of whether this trend is a fad or a sign of things to come, we are confident that our research will be stronger and answer more interesting questions as more scholars from different perspectives engage with one another's work. ■

STUDYING LEGISLATURES AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE: THE VIEW FROM THE 114TH CONGRESS

Kelly Dittmar, *Rutgers University–Camden, USA*

Catherine Wineinger, *Western Washington University, USA*

Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Rutgers University–New Brunswick, USA*

DOI:10.1017/S1049096521001608

Whereas the racial or gender background of legislators is commonly used to interrogate the representational relationship, research located at the intersection of the two categories is infrequent.¹ Our interviews with women in the US Congress from diverse racial backgrounds revealed (1) the significance for legislative studies of attention to race and gender, and (2) the significance for public policy and American politics broadly of the presence of women of color in legislative office. We were fortunate at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) to have an opportunity to study these relationships with in-person interviews with most of the women serving in the 114th Congress (2015–2017). This research is reported in the CAWP report, *Representation Matters: Women in the U.S. Congress* (Dittmar et al. 2017), and our book, *A Seat at the Table: Congresswomen's Perspectives on Why Their Presence Matters* (Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, and Carroll 2018).² This article provides a few examples from our semi-structured interviews that attest to the value of scholarly attention to the ways that gender and race simultaneously shape legislators' experiences, behavior, and influence. With the rise of women of color serving in Congress (currently 50 of the 144 total women), legislative scholars would be wise to incorporate intersectional analyses in their research agendas.³

The women we interviewed were cognizant of the need to unpack the “women of color” category, emphasizing the ways that race and ethnicity contribute to differences in members' personal and legislative experiences as well as representational responsibilities. Being present in the institution matters. For example, both Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) and Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) reported the impact of being in Congress as it affects their colleagues' understanding of racial and ethnic categories—observations that reminded us of Mansbridge's (1999) concept of horizontal deliberation. Women legislators also bring attention to aspects of policy discussions and debates that otherwise might go unaddressed in their absence. Representative Linda Sánchez (D-CA) shared an example of how she intervened in a debate over childcare access and affordability in a Ways and Means Committee hearing. Explaining the myopic view of some privileged white men on the committee, she pointed out the need for them to hear from individuals who have had different life experiences and familial situations. She concluded, “I feel like my role as a woman on the committee is very important because I don't just speak for myself. I speak for many similarly situated women and if I were not there, that perspective [would be] totally absent from the debate.”

Representative Sánchez's sense of responsibility to similarly situated women was common among the women—and, more specifically, women of color—that we interviewed, reflecting the surrogate representation that they offer to those individuals and communities living outside of their district lines. Representative