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#### WHAT IS A DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIVE?

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What is a descriptive representative? The study of descriptive representation by ethnorace—that is, the presence of elected officials who reflect descriptive characteristics of their constituents (Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999; Pitkin 1967)—is a hallmark of American politics research (Brown 2014a; Butler and Brookman 2011; Canon and Posner 1999; Casellas 2010; Gay 2002; Grose 2011; Hardy-Fanta et al. 2016; Lublin 1999; Minta 2011; Minta and Sinclair-Chapman 2013; Rouse 2013; Swain 1993; Tate 2003).<sup>1</sup> Although the literature tends to treat ethnorace as a binary construct and focuses on intergroup diversity (e.g., Sen and Wasow 2016, but see Bejarano 2013; Brown 2014b; Hardy-Fanta et al. 2016), there are abundant opportunities to pursue agendas that focus on intragroup diversity and consider the wide variation within ethnoracial categories. Examining such diversity serves two purposes: (1) it un-essentializes members of group categories (Haywood 2017; hooks 1991); and (2) it more accurately reflects the malleability of "ethnorace" (Davenport 2020; Masuoka 2017; Sen and Wasow 2016).

I argue that amid conversations about electorate diversity, increasing inter-ethnoracial marriage, legislative organizational diversity, and attacks on the relevance of ethnorace to policy making and scholarship, future research on representation must engage this question. Without considering this question in studies of ethnorace and legislative politics, our work neglects the hierarchies that exist within ethnoracial groups (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Hunter 2007; Nadal 2019) and sidesteps questions about why those hierarchies exist at all (Haywood 2017; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Omi and Winant 1994; TallBear 2013, 31–61). Ethnoracial categories and processes are a part of everyday "common sense"—you

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know someone's ethnorace when you see it (Omi and Winant 1994)—yet ethnoracial logics, such as notions of ethnoracial purity and ethnorace mixing, actually make little sense (Spencer 1999; Spickard 1992). I contend that scholars often flatten the non-sense of ethnorace in the study of descriptive representation—from theorizing the meaning of descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967), to conceptions of descriptive representatives as unidimensional (Griffin 2014), to the coding of who counts as a descriptive representative (Shah and Davis 2017).

This article reviews my interventions in this area by focusing on mixed legislators, Black women candidates, and Black members of Congress. I show that critically examining intragroup diversity raises questions about exactly what is a descriptive representative, and I invite more research in this area. Like many

### *What is a descriptive representative if others question one's ethnoracial group membership based on one's descriptive characteristics? What is a descriptive representative if some mixed legislators, particularly those belonging to two nonwhite categories, can strategically leverage multiple ethnoracial caucuses?*

scholars of legislative politics, Fenno (1978) influenced my work. I take a multimethod approach to this question among different ethnoracial groups. A few years ago, I conducted one-on-one interviews with state legislators and legislative staff (Lemi 2018). Using a most-similar-cases design, I sought to compare legislators who were similar in gender, partisan affiliation, and district composition but who differed in ethnoracial background—categorized in either one ethnorace (non-mixed) or at least two ethnoraces through parentage (mixed). My goals were to allow the potential choice of ethnoracial identity among legislators to vary and to discern whether mixed legislators were distinct from their non-mixed counterparts. I found that mixed legislators may leverage their ethnoracial background by joining multiple ethnoracial caucuses—potentially amassing individual power within the legislature by drawing on their heritage. However, questions surrounding belongingness and loyalty were apparent for mixed Black legislators. For example, one lighter-skinned legislator was asked to clarify his ethnorace. At the same time, people in the Capitol wondered about a darker-skinned legislator's status in the Latino caucus. These questions did not emerge acutely for non-Black mixed legislators. Issues of securing policy support did not occur, and this finding suggests that mixed legislators may leverage multiple racial backgrounds to create coalitions. Nevertheless, their relationships within those identity-based caucuses may be tenuous. This research illustrated that despite the widespread expectation that the United States will be post-ethnoracial as the mixed population grows, the legacy of the American system of ethnoracial stratification via classification remains rigid for Black legislators (Lee and Bean 2010). Incorporating mixed legislators into sampling procedures and studies of representation thus reveals consequential intragroup dynamics that otherwise would be missed. What is a descriptive representative if others question one's group membership based on one's descriptive characteristics? What is a descriptive representative if some mixed legislators, particularly those belonging to two nonwhite categories, can strategically leverage multiple ethnoracial caucuses?

Although the traditional one-on-one interview yields deep insights into legislators' thoughts and feelings about representation, they do not allow the researcher to observe the interpersonal conflicts that occur in legislative settings (Brown 2014b; Tyson 2016). Focus groups permit this observation (Krueger and Casey 2014; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). Recently, Nadia E. Brown and I worked with the Texas-based Black Women's Political Action Committee to conduct a focus group with current, former, or potential candidates for political office—or current and future lawmakers. We intended to gather information on the styling choices that Black women make on the campaign trail; however, we observed organic conversations unfold between different age cohorts of participants on how newcomers should best package their candidacies to gain access to political networks (Brown and

Lemi 2020). Using the focus group and exploring heterogeneity among Black women, we observed another layer of intragroup nuance in the study of ethnorace and legislative politics that is less considered: intergenerational differences (but see Fenno 2003). What is a descriptive representative if the representatives themselves do not agree on a single standard for feminized self-presentation standards of descriptive characteristics that communicate identity and ethnoracial group membership (e.g., hairstyles) (Lemi and Brown 2019; Sims, Pirtle, and Johnson-Arnold 2020)?

Despite emphasizing descriptive characteristics in theories of representation (Mansbridge 1999), few studies consider how descriptive representatives substantively represent their group differently based on actual descriptive characteristics related to their social and political experiences (e.g., skin tone and colorism) (but see Burge, Wamble, and Cuomo 2020; Lemi and Brown 2019; Orey and Zhang 2019). In a working paper, Jennifer R. Garcia, Christopher T. Stout, and I examine the relationship between the skin tone of Black members of the 114th Congress and their substantive representation of Black interests through bill introductions and press releases (Garcia, Lemi, and Stout 2020). What is a descriptive representative if representatives within descriptive groups look differently *and* may behave differently?

My research shows the complexity of descriptive representation that previously was masked by a monolithic understanding of ethnoracial-group membership. Considering this diversity encourages us to shift from asking whether members of marginalized groups should represent their own along a single dimension (Mansbridge 1999) and who is most preferred to represent their own among multiple dimensions (Dovi 2002) to asking: What is a descriptive representative when we seriously interrogate the non-sense of ethnoracial logics? Future scholarship may move beyond phenotype, mixed status, and gender to examine how other markers of intragroup ethnoracial membership may matter for the effects of descriptive representation on substantive representation. ■

NOTE

1. Following García Bedolla (2014, 5), I use “ethnorace.”

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AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION IN STATE LEGISLATURES

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The 2020 US Census unfolded against a contentious national political backdrop marked by protests seeking racial justice, unstable immigration policies, partisan rancor, and growing distrust in government institutions. Under these conditions, the power and potential long-term effects of upcoming battles over redistricting loom large. At the same time, within the halls of almost every American state legislature where these debates will occur, there is scant descriptive evidence that large-scale population changes have occurred since the late 1990s. The stagnant character of the race and gender composition of most state legislatures runs counter to widely espoused ideals of political