

Amid a moment of racial reckoning, it is important to study the inner workings of Congress as a racialized governing institution. There is considerable attention given to how Congress will respond to unprecedented protests against police brutality and systemic racism. However, there has been little focus on racial inequality within Congress itself and the far-reaching consequences of racial stratification among congressional staff. In the moment, legislative scholars can play a pivotal role by holding Congress and other legislatures accountable for legislative inequality. ■

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EVALUATING MUSLIM AMERICAN REPRESENTATION

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There is growing concern about the status of Muslims in the United States today. Anti-Muslim attitudes are pervasive (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009; Oskooii, Dana, and Barreto 2019; Panagopoulos 2006; Williamson 2019) and matter for shaping candidate (Kalkan, Layman, and Green 2018; Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019) and policy support (Dunwoody and McFarland 2018; Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018). The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that both anti-Muslim hate crimes and hate groups soared in response to the 2016 presidential campaign: in 2017, anti-Muslim hate groups grew for the third straight year to 114 chapters, and hate crimes increased by at least 19% from the previous year.¹

Even more troubling for the prospect of Muslim American inclusion is evidence of large-scale negative and explicit rhetoric about Muslims espoused by political elites, indicating perhaps

that Muslim political representation is greatly lagging. For example, scholarship has linked the xenophobic rhetoric that was spewed by the most powerful officeholder in the country—former President Trump—with increased anti-Muslim hate crimes across the country (Müller and Schwarz 2018). During the 2016 presidential campaign, politicians on both sides of the aisle frequently reminded the public that Muslims intrinsically differ from other Americans. Republicans called for the wholesale policing of Muslim neighborhoods, advocated for a ban on Muslims from entering the country, proposed a national database of all Muslims in the United States, and espoused the wholesale surveillance of mosques (Lajevardi 2020); Hillary Clinton characterized Muslims' utility as their ability to prevent terrorist attacks (Lajevardi 2020).²

In this heightened climate of hostility, Muslims perceived significant societal and institutional discrimination (Dana et al. 2019; Gillum 2018; Lajevardi et al. 2020; Oskooii 2016) and even retreated from visible spaces in response to heightened discrimination (Hobbs and Lajevardi 2019). Notwithstanding their seemingly worsening status, Muslims have remained a relevant group in American politics. Meanwhile, the US Muslim population is growing fast: from 2007 to 2017, it increased from 2.35 million to 3.45 million, and it is estimated to replace Jews as the nation's second largest religious group after Christians by 2040.³ Although they constitute about 1% of the US population, American Muslims regularly vote; some estimates were that more than 1 million turned out to vote in the 2020 presidential election.⁴ In fact, scholarship has pointed to mosque attendance as being an important factor in the political mobilization of Muslim congregants (Barreto and Dana 2010; Calfano 2018; Calfano and Lajevardi 2019; Chouhoud, Dana, and Barreto 2019; Dana, Barreto, and Oskooii 2011; Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barreto 2017; Jamal 2005; Ocampo, Dana, and Barreto 2018). Moreover, the votes that American Muslims cast appear to matter greatly in US elections because they are concentrated in battleground states such as Michigan, Florida, and Pennsylvania.⁵ In Michigan, for example, a state with 270,000 registered Muslim voters, Muslim votes matter a great deal: in 2016, Clinton lost the state by slightly more than 10,000 votes.⁶

Evaluating Muslim American Descriptive and Substantive Representation

Equally important in evaluating the status of groups such as Muslim Americans and their prospects for political incorporation in the United States is understanding how legislators represent them both descriptively and substantively (Collins 2018; Hayes and Hibbing 2017; Ocampo 2018). Political underrepresentation of minority groups yields negative democratic consequences (Mansbridge 1999), such as political alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003). The negative effects of political underrepresentation are particularly pronounced when groups that are descriptively underrepresented are ignored as constituents (Costa 2017), and research has shown that constituents value descriptive representation independently of substantive representation (Hayes and Hibbing 2017).

Descriptive Representation

In evaluating the communication between members of Congress and federal agencies, scholarship on descriptive representation found that those elected officials who share background characteristics with their voters are more likely to represent their

substantive interests (Jones 2014; Juenke and Preuhs 2012). More recent evidence demonstrates that women, racial and ethnic minorities, and even veterans are more likely to work on behalf of constituents with whom they share similar identities (Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019). In the case of racial and ethnic minorities, the scholarship has found that minority legislators are more likely to endorse policies that are important to Black and Hispanic constituents (Bratton 2006; Griffin and Newman 2008)

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and that their presence on the ballot mobilizes minority voters (Barreto 2007; Hajnal and Trounstein 2005).

Nevertheless, empirical research on Muslim American descriptive and substantive representation is quite nascent. Evaluating the effects of descriptive representation on Muslims' feelings of belonging is made more difficult because Muslim candidates and elected officials are scarce and sometimes are difficult to identify. In 2007, Keith Ellison (MN-5) was the first Muslim to occupy a seat in the US House of Representatives, followed by André Carson (IN-7) in 2008. It was not until 2018 that a wave of political activism saw Muslims rush to vie for political office, with Rashida Tlaib (MI-13) and Ilhan Omar (MN-5) winning congressional offices. A record number of Muslims—more than 100—filed to run for political office that year, with many candidates reporting that their motivation stemmed from growing anti-Muslim sentiment around the country and Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies.⁷ Despite these record numbers, Muslim candidates faced tremendous backlash. Examples of Islamophobic attacks that candidates endured include (1) Abdul El-Sayed, who ran for Governor of Michigan, routinely being accused of ties to the Muslim Brotherhood; (2) Kia Hamadanchy, who ran for the CA-45 congressional seat, facing remarks such as “Nice try, but your first love is Satan (AKA Allah)”; and (3) Deedra Abboud, who ran for a senatorial seat in Arizona, facing harassment on Facebook and by right-wing extremist groups at campaign events (Pintak 2019).⁸

Despite a dearth of empirical work on the effects of descriptive representation on Muslims' feelings of belonging and representation, we can hypothesize that elected representatives who identify as Muslim can make a difference through the symbolic representation they afford. They can do this by espousing policies that Muslims support and by discussing and defending the rights of Muslim Americans in venues including websites, twitter feeds, and interviews (Lajevardi 2020). Both Omar and Tlaib were sworn into office on the Qur'an, a symbolic moment of representation and belonging for Muslims across this country who reported feeling represented in national politics.⁹ Since assuming office, the congresswomen have overtly espoused domestic and foreign policies that Muslims support¹⁰ and even hosted an iftar (i.e., the meal Muslims eat to break their fast after sunset during Ramadan) on Capitol Hill—an historic first.¹¹ Scholarly work, however, has begun to evaluate whether Muslim Americans are likely to gain descriptive representation by assessing whether the public is willing to vote for Muslim candidates. Candidate-evaluation

experiments have been used to isolate the causal link between racial bias and vote choice and to estimate whether racial bias affects evaluations of Black, Latino, and Asian American candidates. These experiments found that whites evaluate minority candidates more negatively than white candidates (McConnaughy et al. 2010; Sigelman et al. 1995; Terkildsen 1993; Visalvanich 2016). This body of work sheds light on the prospects for minority incorporation because the declination of citizens—especially whites—to vote for

minority candidates reveals not only much about their racial biases but also impacts the ability of stigmatized groups to gain representation (Lajevardi 2020).

Three published candidate-evaluation studies—Braman and Sinno (2009); Kalkan, Layman, and Green (2018); and Lajevardi (2020, ch. 4)—tested whether Muslim American candidates can successfully receive electoral support from the public and win elections in fictional races. All three studies, to varying degrees, found differences of support between Muslim and non-Muslim candidates. Braman and Sinno (2009) conducted an experimental study of 54 undergraduate students and found differences in the role that respondents assign to Muslim candidates in explaining political action. Kalkan, Layman, and Green (2018) conducted two candidate-evaluation experiments in 2007 and 2010 on the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, testing differences in respondents' ratings of white versus Muslim candidates with varying racial backgrounds. Lajevardi (2020) similarly examined differences in support between white and Muslim candidates, varying the partisanship and the race of the Muslim candidates. These studies also found that anti-Muslim sentiment shapes public support for Muslim candidates with differing racial backgrounds.

Therefore, it appears (at least anecdotally) from these studies that when they do run, Muslim candidates for elected office and elected representatives descriptively represent the interests of US Muslims. However, the challenge lies in garnering support from the public to vote for Muslim representatives.

Substantive Representation

Given that the prospects for Muslim American descriptive representation are negligible, another question remains: Do Muslims experience substantive representation from those elected officials who do not descriptively represent them? Extant scholarship reveals that elected officials substantively underrepresent minorities along racialized lines (Hajnal 2009; Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019; Wallace 2014). The scholarship also has begun to assess whether non-Muslims can represent the interests of their Muslim constituents. There are three ways that the scholarship examined the substantive representation of American Muslims: (1) policy alignment through roll-call votes, (2) responsiveness through audit studies, and (3) legislator speech about Muslims.

To our knowledge, only one published study to date examined the substantive representation of the group by assessing whether roll-call votes favor the Muslim community. Martin (2009) found

that elected representatives in the 109th Congress were responsive to the presence and number of Muslims in their district during roll-call votes and voted in line with the community's preferences on key domestic anti-terrorism bills.

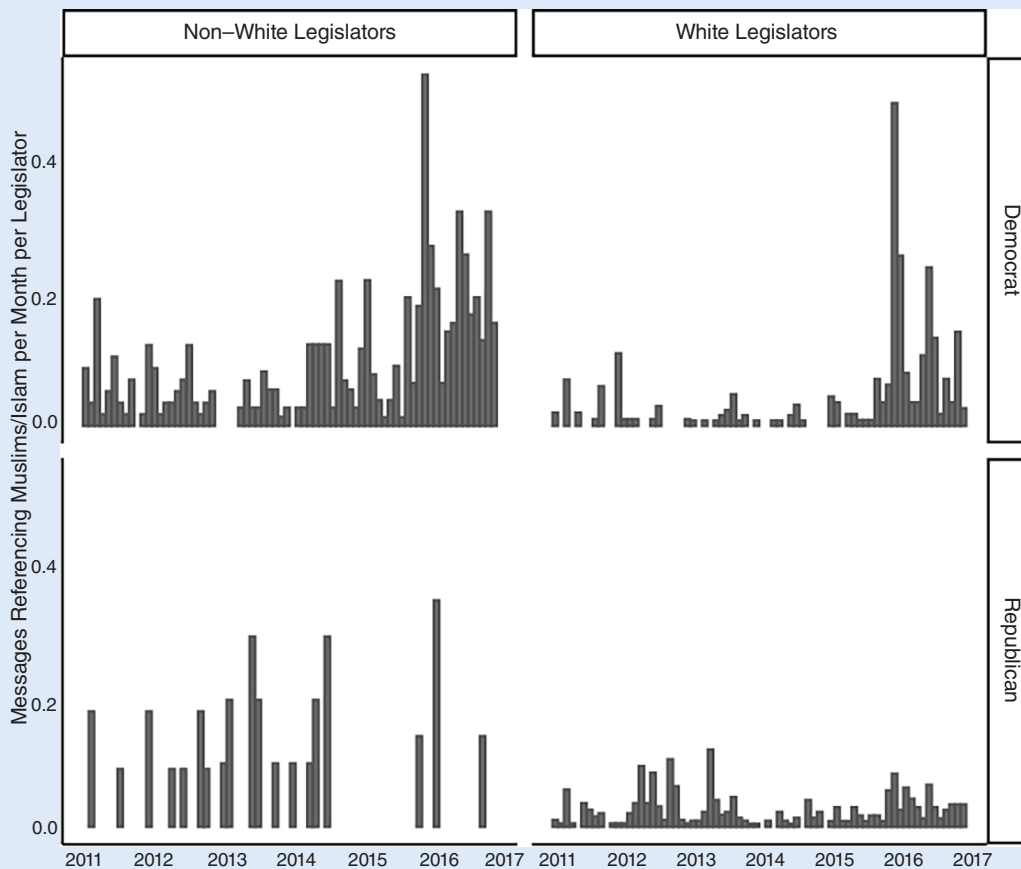
Second, similar to the scholarship testing responsiveness to constituents from other marginalized groups (Butler and Broockman 2011; Einstein and Glick 2017; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015), audit studies may reveal the extent to which legislators are responsive to Muslims. Lajevardi (2018), for example, explored the quality of Muslim American representation through two audit studies of state legislators. The first study tested whether recent Muslim college graduates can integrate and find work in America's political system. She found that elected officials across all 50 states were significantly less likely to respond to Muslim Americans compared to whites, regardless of where the Muslim person graduated from college (e.g., Harvard versus a community college) or the legislator's party identification, which suggests that even Democrats cannot be relied on to assist Muslim constituents. The second study explored whether leaders of Muslim congregations—or imams—have more success than pastors in obtaining a meeting for a legislative visit and an opportunity to advocate on

behalf of their community. The experimental results indicated that efforts by Muslim leaders to gain access to politics often are ignored by legislators. However, in instances in which they are not ignored, imams are significantly more likely than their Christian counterparts to be offered an opportunity to meet with elected representatives. This rather counterintuitive finding provides optimism that Muslim community leaders can be afforded opportunities to integrate themselves and their community into politics to obtain meaningful representation.

Substantive representation also can be measured by evaluating legislators' speech. The rise of social media is an opportunity to communicate not only with their constituents but also the public more generally. Every day, politicians and their offices make strategic statements on social media to reinforce their brand. When legislators perceive that publicly positioning themselves with or against a racialized group is politically expedient, they will do so. Legislators may make positive statements in an effort to engender trust and signal attentiveness (for further discussion, see Spangler 2020). Conversely, legislators may make negative statements about Muslims as a means of positioning themselves in ways that foster the support of voters who harbor anti-Muslim animus.

Figure 1

Volume of Tweets about Muslims/Islam by Legislator Race and Party



Standardized by the total number of legislators in that category during that time period regardless of whether they send a message referencing Muslims and/or Islam.

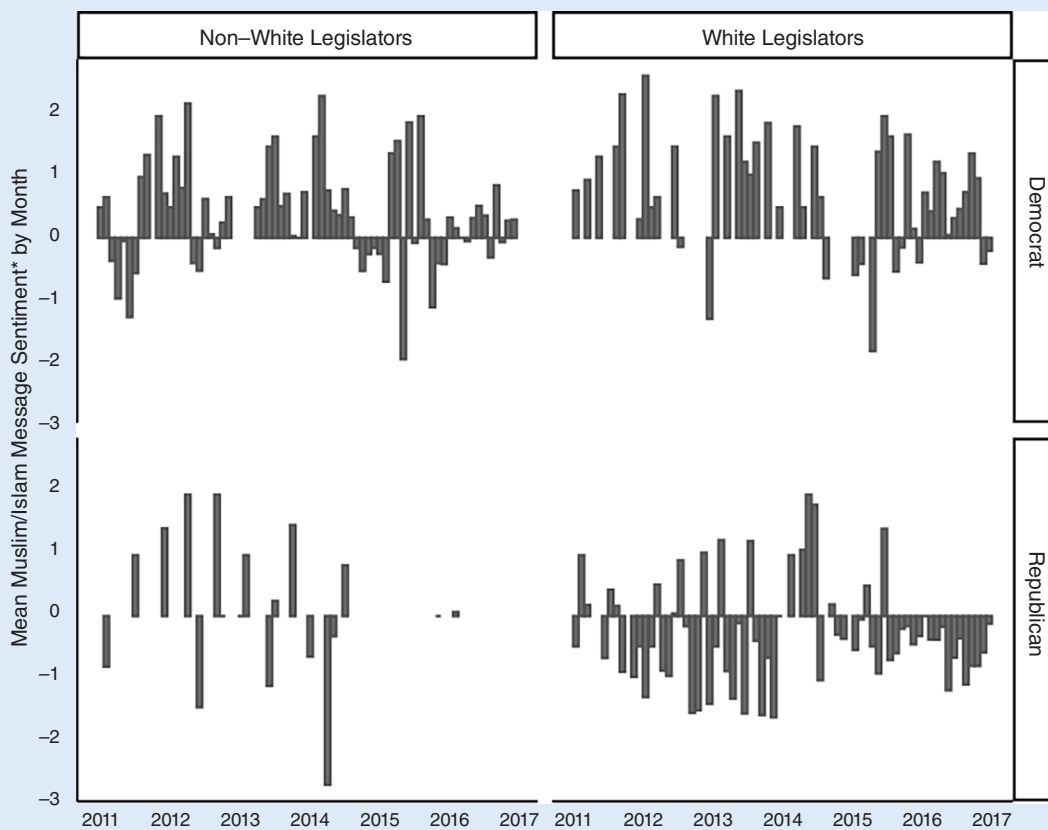
Given the current electoral and political climate, we might expect that Democratic legislators will find it more politically strategic to reference Muslims more positively than Republican legislators. In this way, Democrats can signal attentiveness and cultural competence to their stake-holding constituents through their positive communication. In doing so, those legislators who speak to issues relating to Muslims offer them a form of representation through recognition and acknowledgment. Similarly, Republicans may choose to signal attentiveness to their constituencies through negative statements about Muslims; a negative tone of messaging has been a substantial feature in discussions around immigration policy for many Republican legislators through their more frequent use of dehumanizing language (e.g., “illegals”) relative to Democrats. We also may expect Republican legislators to exhibit relatively numerous references to Muslims given the centrality of Muslims in the 2016 Republican presidential campaign. Overall, we may expect volume to be higher and sentiment to be more positive when Muslims appear in tweets by nonwhite legislators than white legislators, insofar as nonwhite legislators may treat Muslim Americans as a group that they broadly represent. Overall, the descriptions of when, how

frequently, and with what tone that legislators discuss Muslims in the current political climate provide a cursory yet unique view at how legislators seek to represent Muslim Americans.

To descriptively explore these hypotheses, we reviewed the volume and sentiment of US House members’ tweets that reference Muslims.¹² The data used are a subset of a larger near-universe corpus of tweets from US House members’ official (i.e., non-campaign) handles from 2011 to 2017. This subset was created by identifying those tweets that explicitly mentioned the terms “Muslim” and/or “Islam.” This produced a corpus of 1,196 tweets spanning the period. The volume of tweets (figure 1) is standardized by dividing the number of tweets by the number of legislators who belong to the same race and party category. This strategy allowed for a better comparison across legislators in different parties and racial and ethnic groups. The sentiment of a given tweet (figure 2) is calculated by creating a sentiment score for each of the three primary sentiment dictionaries (i.e., Hu and Liu, AFINN, and the National Research Council). The sentiment score displayed in the figures subtracts the number of negative words from the positive words and then averages across the three sentiment scores calculated for the tweet.

Figure 2

Sentiment of Tweets about Muslims/Islam by Legislator Race and Party



Sentiment values are measured by calculating positive words minus the negative words in each tweet for each of the three primary sentiment dictionaries: Hiu & Lu, AFinn, and NRC. The dictionary-specific sentiment scores for each tweets score then averaged together. The values on the y-axis represent the monthly mean of these tweet-level mean sentiment scores.

Figure 1 has four takeaways regarding the volume of tweets. First, the discussion of Muslims increased for Democratic legislators leading up to the 2016 election. This finding is substantiated further by the scholarship that found that Muslims' media portrayals increased in the news during a similar period (Lajevardi 2021). Second, Democrats mention Muslims more than Republicans, and this was most apparent after the 2016 election. Third, among Democrats, nonwhite legislators are more likely to discuss Muslims than white legislators. Nonwhite Democrats persist in their discussions longer than white Democrats. Fourth, and perhaps contrary to expectations, white Republicans exhibit relatively consistent low levels of explicit discussion of Muslims.

We next evaluated the sentiment of the discourse when legislators mention Muslims in their tweets by the race and party of the legislator. Figure 2 demonstrates that when white Republicans explicitly mention Muslims, they do so with a more negative than positive tone. This was particularly the case after the 2016 election, when all of the explicit mentions of Muslims harbored a negative tone. Democrats across the board discuss Muslims more often with a positive than negative tone, except during the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. However, given that legislators across the aisle made disparaging remarks about Muslims during this period (Lajevardi 2020), it is perhaps unsurprising.

Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

As a whole, the scholarship so far presents nuanced findings about the current prospects of Muslim American political representation. Descriptive representation is rare and difficult to achieve, given the public's reluctance to elect Muslim candidates. However, when it does occur, Muslim candidates appear (at least anecdotally) to provide immense descriptive representation and to enhance Muslims' feelings of belonging. Future work should test this hypothesis through observational data and survey experiments.

Regarding substantive representation, Muslims appear to encounter responsiveness and inclusion from Democratic legislators in certain contexts. Specifically, Muslims experience political inclusion on social media by Democratic legislators, regardless of race—although they are discussed more by nonwhite Democrats. Nevertheless, much less is known about whether Muslims' political preferences—especially regarding immigration and foreign policy—are substantively represented by their elected officials. Future work would be well served to answer this important and pressing question. One question remaining for future work is to systematically evaluate whether Muslim representatives behave differently or similarly as other descriptive representatives. On the one hand, we might expect Muslim representatives to behave similarly and represent the substantive interests of their Muslim constituents, given shared experiences of discrimination in American politics. On the other hand, the diversity of the Muslim population may complicate a Muslim representative's ability to fully represent the interests of the group. We also have yet to learn whether the size of the Muslim population in a given legislator's district matters for their representation outcomes. For example, Republican elected officials from a district with a larger Muslim population may be more inclusive toward Muslims (Lajevardi 2018). Similarly, Democrats from a district with a smaller Muslim population might be electorally incentivized to be less inclusive of Muslims in their online speech. Certainly, questions about the quality of Muslim American representation are fertile ground for future research.

Data Availability Statement

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IA87LQ>. ■

NOTES

1. See www.splcenter.org/news/2018/04/24/trumps-anti-muslim-words-and-policies-have-consequences.
2. See <https://qz.com/814438/presidential-debate-hillary-clinton-contributes-to-anti-muslim-bias-in-the-way-she-talks-about-american-muslims>.
3. See www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow.
4. See www.cair.com/press_releases/breaking-news-cair-exit-poll-shows-american-muslims-vote-in-record-numbers-69-voted-for-biden.
5. See www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/14/muslim-americans-poised-for-potential-2020-electoral-impact.
6. See www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/14/muslim-americans-poised-for-potential-2020-electoral-impact.
7. See www.npr.org/2018/07/18/630132952/muslim-americans-running-for-office-in-highest-numbers-since-2001.
8. Considering that Muslims are concentrated in few states, opportunities for descriptive representation are likely limited to those jurisdictions. As Lajevardi (2020, 106) noted, as of 2010, only eight states reported having 100,000 or more Muslims.
9. See www.post-gazette.com/news/politics-nation/2019/01/03/Muslim-women-Ilanh-Omar-Rashida-Tlaib-sworn-in-Quran-Congress/stories/201901030196.
10. For example, <https://muslimadvocates.org/2020/03/chu-omar-tlaib-carson-urge-house-passage-of-no-ban-act> and www.washingtlaib-blast-israel-for-blocking-their-visit/2019/08/19/6c0ffda6-c2b9-11e9-850e-coef81a5224story.html.
11. See www.theroot.com/ilhan-omar-and-muslim-members-of-congress-host-his-toric-1834925195.
12. Data are from Spangler (2020).

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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).¹ 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