

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Sister Space: Collective Descriptive Representation and Black Women in Legislative Caucuses

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Black women in elective office in the United States have demonstrated how descriptive representative transforms democratic institutions. This transformation is most evident in previously uncrystallized interests, those new to the agenda or not yet owned by specific political groups (Mansbridge 1999), articulated in legislative communication and action. For instance, Black maternal health is an issue that addresses the disproportionately poor health outcomes among Black women, who face systemic barriers to equitable care (Crear-Perry et al. 2021). Congresswoman Lauren Underwood's (D-IL) 2021 Omnibus legislation included 12 bipartisan bills to address racial and ethnic disparities faced by mothers, children, and individuals who birth. Indeed, the creation of the Black Maternal Health Caucus (BMHC) demonstrates the legislative agency of Black women to form identity- and issue-based coalitions that suit the needs of Black women—needs often overlooked by Black men and white women.

Employing an intersectional lens, we use data gathered from Twitter to explore how Black women representatives utilize membership in caucuses to disavow a single-axis approach to policy making. Caucuses, which are voluntary associations of legislators, provide the social networking, information sharing, and work distribution necessary for success in polarized legislatures (Mahoney 2018). Memberships in legislative collectives prioritize singular aspects of political identity—namely, race within Black caucuses and gender within women's caucuses. Caucuses provide a unique opportunity to examine Jane Mansbridge's argument for the contingent value of descriptive representation. Mansbridge (1999, 638) suggests that under certain conditions, as with uncrystallized interests, descriptive representation is likely to lead to substantive representation.

Single-axis identity-based caucuses are structured in ways that prohibit Black women from advancing previously uncrystallized issues that are intersectional in nature. Crenshaw (1990, 1242) describes this exclusion as a practice that “relegate(s) the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.” Although legislative caucuses require Black women to choose either their race or gender as the primary lens through which to frame their advocacy, Black women draw from their intersecting, politically salient identities to work within or against single-axis caucuses. Their participation in and challenges to these caucuses, in addition to the creation of new intersectional ones, advances both individual and collective conceptions of representation. In this essay, we draw on tweets from Black congresswomen to demonstrate a commitment to intersectional policy interests that challenges single-axis caucuses. In sum, we find that Black women legislators link descriptive and substantive representation.

Black Congresswomen and Intersectional Representation

We explore how Black women represent marginalized groups through identity-based caucuses. As more Black women are elected to Congress, legislative and conceptual challenges to monolithic categories such as Black issues or women’s issues arise. This demand is perhaps most evident in the creation of the Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls (CCBWG), founded in 2016. The intersectional work this caucus undertakes was not assumed under the auspices of the Congressional Black Caucus or the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues. Black women’s roles in identity-based caucuses demonstrate the limitations of a single-axis view of descriptive representation.

Black Congresswomen and Legislative Caucuses

Caucuses are where pluralized group representation is organized (Hammond 2001). Members’ identity legitimization occurs in legislative caucuses by who is invited to join and who opts out of joining. Members use the caucus as a platform to speak as a collective, or not, demonstrating the legitimacy of the group to negotiate collective priorities and strategies to achieve a shared goal (King-Meadows and Schaller 2006). They also confer a sense of belonging and communal ties for members and seek to speak on behalf of others who share their identities (Clark 2019; Gertzog 2004; Sullivan and Winburn 2011). Finally, caucuses are spaces where marginalized members negotiate among themselves how to push back against institutions that constrain their ability to represent marginalized communities (Mahoney 2018).

We expect that Black women are positioned to be the preferable descriptive representatives that Dovi (2002) advocates for. Black women’s positionality as racial and gendered outsiders within legislatures allows them to relate to other dispossessed groups and advocate for issues of concerns outside of their specific group (Brown 2014). Finally, their lived experiences allow them to advocate for uncrystallized issues that were previously ignored by Black men and white women (Reingold, Hayne, and Widner 2020). The CCBWG and the BMHC speak

to the possibility that their creation was due to no caucus fully embracing Black women's policy preferences.

Data and Methods

To investigate Black women legislators' substantive representation of intersectional policy concerns, we center their voices. Social media enables politicians to circumvent the common barriers of traditionally mediated forms of communication like television, radio, and print with more individualized messaging (Golbeck et al. 2018). Tillery (2019) emphasizes the importance of studying Black politicians' messaging on Twitter given the website's heavy use within the Black community and provides evidence that Black Americans and politicians alike engage in racial discourse on Twitter. We collect tweets from Black women lawmakers since the start of the 117th Congress, using Twitter's application programming interface and the rtweet package within the programming software R (Kearney 2018). We examine these tweets, using congresswomen's words to identify the issues they are working on, who they are working with, and their motivations for doing so.

In our analysis of 10,073 tweets, we identified two themes: lived experience as the basis for advocacy frames and the public promotion of coalitional politics. Overall, our data demonstrate that Black women advocate for intersectional policy solutions that challenge representation based on a single-axis identity.

Black Maternal Health as a Previously Uncrystallized Issue

Representative Alma Adams (D-NC), the co-chair of the BMHC, tweeted, "For decades, the US maternal mortality and morbidity rates have gotten worse for all mothers, but especially for Black women whose health outcomes are further compounded by systemic and structural racism." Making a claim for policy intervention, Robin Kelly (D-IL) tweeted, "Maternal mortality is on the rise and the rates are even higher for women of color. Under the #RescuePlan, states can now extend Medicaid coverage for one year postpartum. Regardless of income, all women deserve access to care when they need it."

For several Black congresswomen, Black maternal health is also a personal issue. Representative Cori Bush (D-MO) tweeted, "My son spent the first days of his life on a ventilator, in an incubator, fighting for his life. He just celebrated his 21st birthday, but so many Black children, so many Black mothers, haven't survived." Similarly, Representative Gwen Moore (D-WI) tweeted, "As a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Black maternal health is personal to me. That's why for years, I have worked to eliminate the maternal health disparities Black women face by expanding access to quality and culturally competent care. #BlackMaternalHealthWeek." These tweets serve as vertical communication (Mansbridge 1999), informing constituents that Black congresswomen understand their experiences firsthand. Rather than abstractly discussing policy preferences, these legislators share their personal connection to racialized/gendered health disparities to ground their legislative solutions.

Further, Representative Bush tweeted, “Black birthing people matter. Black women matter. Black trans people matter. Black mothers matter.” Here, Bush incorporates LGBTQ+ individuals, a dispossessed subgroup, bolstering our claim that Black women provide representation for a more inclusive set of groups than simply those with whom they share descriptive characteristics.

Coalition Politics Via Twitter

Social media may be a new frontier for lawmakers to form, maintain, and cultivate political coalitions—horizontal communication (Mansbridge 1999). Representative Kelly, a founding member of the CCBWG, tweeted, “I, along with my colleagues @RepYvetteClarke & @RepBonnie are excited for next week’s release of the first-ever report on Black women and girls. We’re making sure Black women are not left behind but kept in mind. Watch my Facebook and Twitter feeds for the release.” The next month she tweeted, “Black women and girls are often moved to the back of the line when we talk about opportunity and empowerment, but now, we are focused on issues and barriers that have been left unaddressed for generations. @CBWGCAUCUS.” Together, these tweets demonstrate that Black congresswomen are working together to advocate for issues that affect the lives of Black women.

By tagging House members in their tweets, Black congresswomen exemplify coalitional politics, identifying who they are working with through the BMHC. For instance, Representative Terri Sewell (D-AL) tweeted, “Every Black woman deserves access to maternal healthcare. That’s why I’m introducing the Maternal Vaccination Act to increase maternal rates & reduced vaccination disparities cc: @RepUnderwood @RepAdams @RepRobinKeyll @SenBooker @timkaine.” Similarly, Representative Underwood tweeted, “In the richest nation on the earth, American moms are dying at the highest rate in the developed world. Today, I’m leading the fight in Congress with @RepAdams and @SenBooker to introduce the Black Maternal Health #Momnibus act to save lives and end disparities. #Momnibus.” These tweets showcase the coalitional work of the BMHC to advance legislation benefiting Black birthing individuals.

Black Women as Collective Descriptive Representatives

The expectation of single-axis identity-based representation through legislative caucuses has left Black women butting up against institutional norms that marginalize their contributions and delegitimize their ability to rule. Caucuses centered on Black women’s issues are models of institutional change that matter beyond Congress. This may be a model for other minoritized congresswomen. Mansbridge’s fundamental question and answer, “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes,’” invites us to push the bounds of representation as a concept. By naming uncrystallized intersectional issues, Black congresswomen embody the connection between descriptive and substantive representation that Mansbridge’s theory suggests.

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