

AGENDA-SETTING AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK INTERESTS

One of the most important consequences of the 1960s civil rights movement has been the increased presence of African Americans in elected positions at all levels of government. Many of those involved or associated with the civil rights movement recognized that in order to secure meaningful political rights, equal treatment before the law, and economic opportunity, and in order to maximize African Americans' potential to affect public policy, it was necessary for African Americans to compete for and win public office. As political scientists James Button and Richard Scher put it, "If they [African Americans] were to achieve true political capabilities, they could not remain on the outside looking in, but had to insure that blacks became a part of political decision-making processes at local, state, and national levels" (1984:184). Similarly, Charles Bullock, a long-time student of black politics, has argued:

While political participation may elicit concessions from white officeholders, they may respond racially when white and black interests conflict. . . . Moreover, even well-meaning white politicians may be unable to comprehend some black needs and therefore fail to introduce them into the policy-making arena. Consequently, adequate representation of black demands . . . requires that there be black officeholders to translate these demands into policy.

(Bullock 1975:727)

Thus, historically, African American legislators have been expected to change not only how legislatures look but also what they produce. The emergence and growth of African American representation in legislatures has raised considerable expectations that African American lawmakers would address issues of particular importance to African American citizens, whose interests may not have been adequately addressed in these institutions before there was a significant black presence. In other words, there has been the expectation and hope that African Americans serving in policy-making institutions would provide substantive representation for African American citizens.

To provide substantive representation means to act “in the interest of the represented in a manner that is responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967:209). Substantive representation is the degree of congruence between the actions and behavior of a representative and the policy preferences of her or his constituents. It concerns what the representative does rather than what or who he or she is. Substantive representation is often contrasted with descriptive representation, which simply focuses on the degree to which a representative reflects or mirrors the distinctive social characteristics of the constituents that he or she represents—characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender, social class, or religion. In the case of descriptive representation, the emphasis is on who or what the representative is, rather than on what he or she may actually do.¹

Academics, journalists, African American constituents, and other legislators have all presumed that black legislators would provide African Americans with substantive representation by articulating and advocating something called “the black interest,” and that these legislators would be agents of economic, social, and political advancement for *all* black citizens, regardless of where those citizens happened to reside (e.g., Barker and Jones 1994; Barnett 1975; Bratton and Haynie 1999a; Bullock 1975; Button 1989; Button and Scher 1984; Campbell and Feagin 1975; Conyers and Wallace 1976; McCormick and Jones 1993; McGriggs 1977). State Representative Dan Blue, an African American from North Carolina, put it this way: “As more minorities once again sit in the room where government decisions are made, their participation will give blacks a better chance at fair treatment in state policies. Their presence can help shape the state’s role in economic development and its response to social ills such as poverty, failing education programs, crime, and the lack of affordable health care.”² In other words, the prevailing presumption has been that African American elected officials would and perhaps should behave like the “race representatives” historically found in African American communities (e.g., Bratton and Haynie 1999a; Guinier 1991, 1992; Smith 1996; Walters 1992). Recall from chap-

ter 1 that race representatives are those leaders and officials whose primary goal is to advance the interests of the black community. When operating outside of their community, and especially when they serve in political or policy-making institutions, race representatives attempt to insure that a "black perspective" is articulated and understood (Drake and Cayton 1945).

Do African American state legislators meet these expectations? Can they be classified as race representatives? Have they articulated and advocated a race-based or race-related set of legislative issues? Is there in fact a connection between descriptive and substantive representation? This chapter addresses these questions by examining the bills that African American state legislators introduce. The aim of this examination is threefold: first, to determine whether African American state lawmakers have a noticeable and distinctive effect on legislative agendas; second, to determine if there is a significant correlation between descriptive and substantive representation; and third, to examine whether, in their agenda-setting behavior, the black legislators behave as prototype race representatives.

THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATIONS

The expectations that African American representatives would have a distinctive impact on legislative agendas and behave as race men and race women is not merely a reflection of symbolic politics. These expectations are also rooted in theories of political participation, group identity politics, and political representation. For example, it has long been a maxim in American politics that political participation results in rewards and benefits from the system. Since the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, there have been significant increases in African American participation in politics. Moreover, the gap between African American and white voter registration and turnout rates is smaller today than it was during the period immediately preceding the Voting Rights Act (e.g., Davidson 1992; Davidson and Grofman 1994; Grofman and Davidson 1992; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Lawson 1985; Reeves 1997). Thus it is reasonable to expect that black Americans would reap some tangible and substantive benefits from this increased involvement in the governmental process. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that increased African American political participation *is* responsible for gains in both descriptive and substantive representation of African Americans in government and public policy (Bullock 1975, 1981; Combs, Hibbing, and Welch 1984; Grofman and Handley 1989; Her-

ring 1990; Keech 1968; McClain 1990; Whitby 1985; 1987; Whitby and Gilliam 1991). Studies by Kenny Whitby and Franklin Gilliam Jr. (1991) and Mary Her-ring (1990), for example, found greater African American political mobiliza-tion to be related to increased legislative support of black interests.

Regarding representation theory, from the vast body of research on the rep-resentative-constituency relationship, we know that in general there is a con-vergence between the interests of constituents and the behavior of representa-tives. This is particularly true with the most salient issues (Erickson 1978; Fenno 1978; Jewell 1983; Miller and Stokes 1963; Stone 1979).³ For example, re-garding two issues that have long resonated widely among the general public—civil rights and welfare issues—Stone (1979) found high correlations between constituency opinion and the roll-call behavior of members of Congress. These findings and the larger representative-constituency literature suggest a con-stituency representation model in which race or other descriptive characteris-tics of a representative has little independent impact on legislative behavior (e.g., see Bratton and Haynie 1999a:658–59). Yet, given that the overwhelming majority of African American legislators represent majority black districts, this model, nevertheless, yields the logical and reasonable expectation that they will provide their African American constituents with race-based substantive representation.⁴

In his 1994 book, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Poli-tics*, Michael Dawson develops what he calls a “black utility heuristic”—a sociopsychological theoretical framework for analyzing black politics that re-lates the political beliefs and behavior of individual African Americans to their perception of racial group interests. Dawson demonstrates that there are high levels of cohesion and consistency among African Americans on public opin-ion and policy preferences, and he argues that the link between an individual black person’s perception of his or her own interests and the same individual’s sense of the racial group is the key to this seemingly politically solitary black community.⁵

Whitby (1997) suggests that a logical conclusion of Dawson’s *black utility heuristic* is the expectation that an overwhelming majority of African Ameri-can elected officials will behave in a manner that is similar to the race represen-tatives described earlier in this book. Whitby argues that, based on Dawson’s model, most African American officeholders

will have a strong sense of racial identity, which will lead them to support policies of interests to black constituents. In some sense a spontaneous form

of representation will emerge because of the development of a unique racial consciousness and belief system that makes black representatives predisposed to vote the way most blacks in the district would want the legislator to vote anyway. In essence their support for black policy preferences should be unparalleled . . . because what's in the best interest of the black masses is also in the best interest of black policymakers. (Whitby 1997:83)

As the above brief sketch suggests, the combined existing literature exploring black political participation, group identity, and legislative representation provides a strong theoretical basis for the expectation that African American legislators will behave as race men and women by advancing a race-based legislative agenda and providing substantive representation for black interests. Before turning to an empirical examination of this conjecture, however, a discussion of "black interests" is in order.

WHAT ARE BLACK INTERESTS?

Because *interest*, in social science usage, is a contested concept (that is, it has no single widely agreed upon meaning), then determining or designating a group's interests is usually a complex and complicated undertaking.⁶ Nevertheless, social scientists routinely seek to identify, measure, and evaluate such interests. Most estimates of a group's interests involve both objective and subjective elements. Measurable socioeconomic phenomena like unemployment, poverty rates, income, and educational levels are often used as "objective" indicators of a group's interests (Sargent 1991; Swain 1993; Whitby 1987). Subjective interests are less observable and more difficult to evaluate because they involve the feelings, emotions, and temperaments of the individuals or group in question. Surveys and public opinion polls, however, provide useful tools for identifying the subjective interests of groups.

Determining *black interests* may be a much simpler task than defining the interests of other groups. Notwithstanding the fact that blacks are not monolithic in their attitudes, beliefs, and values, a shared culture, the legacy of slavery, and the historical significance of race in the United States provide African Americans with many common political interests and goals. In fact, on questions of public policy, ideology, and candidate choice, African Americans have been the most cohesive and consistent political subgroup in U.S. politics (Bullock 1984; Dawson 1994; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Lewis and Schnei-

der 1983; Tate 1993). Using objective and subjective components, I will offer a definition of “black interests” as they have commonly been perceived by both researchers and African American citizens.

OBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF BLACK INTERESTS

Annual reports of the socioeconomic conditions of African Americans repeatedly show that black Americans have relatively low and unequal socioeconomic status when compared to whites (Dewart 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991; Tidwell 1992). These reports indicate that over the last two decades of the twentieth century, there have been few consistent improvements in the relative economic position of the African American population as a whole. This is not to say that the economic situation for all African Americans has remained the same. In fact, many studies reveal a growing black middle class and demonstrate that some individual African Americans fare better than others (Dawson 1994; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; U.S. Department of Commerce 1992). It remains the case, however, that African Americans as a group are less well-off than the white majority.

In comparison to Americans of European descent, African Americans experience substantially lower economic status throughout the income distribution [and] . . . relatively well-off blacks are much less well-off than well-off whites, and relatively poor blacks are much poorer than poor whites.
(Swinter 1992:61).

Table 2.1 contains unemployment statistics for selected years between 1980 and 1990. While on a downward trend, black unemployment remained high throughout the entire period. Moreover, in each of the years, the African American unemployment rate is more than twice that of whites.

Income levels are directly related to unemployment rates. Table 2.2 contains

TABLE 2.1
BLACK AND NONBLACK UNEMPLOYMENT RATES, 1980–1990

	1980	1984	1986	1988	1990
Black	14.3%	15.9	14.5	11.7	11.3
White	6.3%	6.5	6.0	4.7	4.7

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1991: table 635.

TABLE 2.2
 MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 1970–1990 (IN 1990 DOLLARS)

Year	Black	White	B/W Ratio
1970	\$18,652	\$30,644	60.8
1975	17,997	29,978	60.0
1977	18,164	30,781	59.0
1979	18,242	31,071	58.7
1981	16,261	28,977	56.1
1983	16,368	28,915	56.6
1985	18,000	30,255	59.4
1987	18,031	31,591	57.1
1989	19,060	32,049	59.5
1990	18,676	31,231	59.8

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1991: table 635. (B/W ratio [black to white ratio] calculations done by author.)

data on median household income. In 1990, African American households had a median income of \$18,676. This was a \$384 decrease from 1989 and only a \$24 increase over the 1970 amount. On the other hand, white household median income increased \$587 between 1970 and 1990. Overall, black family income has been flat since 1970 and was generally lower during the 1980s than it was in the 1970s.

As the B/W (black to white ratio) index in table 2.2 indicates, household income inequality increased during the twenty years covered. For example, in 1970, African American median household income was 60.9 percent of the median household income of white families; by 1990 it was 59.8 percent.

Income disadvantages and inequalities contribute to African Americans' experiencing significantly higher levels of poverty than whites. Every year between 1970 and 1990, nearly one-third of all African Americans were impoverished (table 2.3).⁷ The statistics on black poverty are more dramatic when we look at poverty among children (table 2.4). In 1990, 44.2 percent of all African American children lived in poverty. Moreover, the poverty rate for African American children was at least three times the poverty rate for white children in all but two years (1983 and 1990) during the 1970–1990 period. In these two years, however, the poverty rate for black children was still more than twice the rate for white children.

Education is often touted as a means to avoid or escape poverty and as a pri-

TABLE 2.3
PERSONS BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL, 1970–1990

Year	Black	White
1970	33.5%	9.9%
1975	31.3	9.7
1977	31.3	8.9
1979	31.0	9.0
1981	34.2	11.1
1983	35.7	12.1
1985	31.3	11.4
1987 ^a	32.4	10.4
1989	30.7	10.0
1990	31.9	10.7

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1991: table 717.

^aBeginning in 1987, percentages are based on revised processing procedures and the data are not directly comparable with prior years.

TABLE 2.4
CHILDREN BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL, 1970–1990

Year	Black	White
1970	41.5%	10.5%
1975	41.4	12.5
1977	41.6	11.4
1979	40.8	11.4
1981	44.9	14.7
1983	46.2	17.0
1985	43.1	15.6
1987 ^a	44.4	14.7
1989	43.2	14.1
1990	44.2	15.1

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1991: table 718.

^aBeginning in 1987, percentages are based on revised processing procedures and the data are not directly comparable with prior years.

TABLE 2.5
PERCENT OF POPULATION, 25 YEARS OLD AND OLDER
(WITH LESS THAN 12 YEARS OF SCHOOL AND WITH 4 OR MORE
YEARS OF COLLEGE), 1970–1990

	<12 Years of School			4 or More Years of College		
Race	1970	1980	1990	1970	1980	1990
Black	68.6%	48.8	33.0	4.4	8.4	11.3
White	45.5%	31.2	20.9	11.3	17.1	22.0

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1991: table 222.

mary vehicle for African Americans to move into the middle and upper classes. While there were significant improvements during the two-and-a-half decades cited, educational achievement among African Americans continues to lag woefully behind that of whites. For example, the data in table 2.5 show that in 1990, one-third of all African Americans had completed fewer than twelve years of school and only 11.3 percent had completed four or more years of college. For whites the numbers were 20.1 and 22.2 percent, respectively.

SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF BLACK INTERESTS

Opinion polls and surveys provide some information about what policies and programs African Americans desire. Such data serve as indicators of the subjective interests of blacks. For example, the 1984–1988 National Black Election Panel Study found that 88 percent of African Americans agreed that the government should work to improve the position of blacks, and 82 percent favored increased government spending for job creation. This study also found that 79 percent of African Americans were in favor of more spending for Medicare and 50 percent favored increased support for food stamps (see Dawson 1994:190–91; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson:88). Similarly, when asked in a 1992 study, “Which one or two issues mattered most in deciding how you voted?” African Americans ranked the economy first, health care second, and education third (Keene et al. 1993:93).

It is important to note that African American public opinion on policy preferences is consistent across social classes. In one of the most thorough examinations of African American political attitudes and policy preferences, Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson write that

the most important conclusion to be drawn from our analyses is that this was a solidary electorate in two senses: blacks from all walks of life had similar political goals and policy preferences and also felt a sense of racial solidarity. There was certainly no evidence that middle-class blacks were dissociated from problems of the black community.⁸ (1989:117)

Similarly, Michael Dawson (1994) concludes that

within the realm of mainstream American partisan politics, African-American political behavior remains powerfully influenced by African Americans' perceptions of group interests. What is perceived as good for the group still plays a dominant role in shaping African-American partisanship, political choice, and public opinion. *Perceptions of group interests are not associated with economic status.* Within the confines of mainstream American politics, *individual economic status plays a small role in shaping African-American political choice.*⁹ (1994:204–205; emphasis added)

With information like the above socioeconomic and public opinion data, it is possible to define “black interests” in a way that takes into account both its objective and subjective components. These data depict an economically and socially disadvantaged African American community, and they provide some insights into how blacks themselves view their situation. Thus it is reasonable to posit that improving their economic and social conditions is in the interests of African Americans. To this end, *black interests*, as used in this book, will be defined as support for legislation and policies favoring social welfare, economic redistribution, and civil rights issues. Specifically, laws that prohibit discrimination in voting, housing, education, and unemployment, and laws that support unemployment compensation, jobs programs, food stamps, and educational assistance are considered to be black interests.

INTRODUCTIONS OF BILLS AND LEGISLATIVE AGENDA-SETTING

Proposing new laws is one of the most basic functions that legislators perform. Introducing legislation provides legislators with the opportunity to place policy initiatives on legislative agendas. Legislative agendas are the sets of issues and policy initiatives debated by the legislature as a whole. They are the various issues at the center of controversy at any given time (see, for example, Cobb

and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1984; Sinclair 1981; and Walker 1977). Making a contribution to and having an effect on the agenda-setting process is of considerable importance to legislators.

The choice of issues for debate is of central importance in any political system. By deciding what they will decide about, legislators also establish the terms and the most prominent participants in the debate and, ultimately, the distribution of power and influence in the society. (Walker 1977:423)

Similarly, E. E. Schattschneider (1960) argues that “*the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power*. . . . He [or she] who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts and the choice of conflicts allocates power” (68; italics in original). Thus through their bill introductions, African American legislators have the opportunity to make a noticeable and distinctive impact in state legislatures, and to exert substantial influence on state policy-making by placing black interest issues on legislative agendas.

R. Douglas Arnold (1990) has argued that analyzing legislators’ bill introductions is often superior to a reliance on roll-call votes for attempting to establish a linkage between constituency interests or preferences and the legislative behavior of representatives. Like Schattschneider, he suggests that “the power of the electoral connection may actually be greater at earlier stages of decision making, when legislators are deciding which problems to pursue or which alternatives to consider, rather than at the final stages, when legislators are voting on particular amendments or on a bill’s final passage” (269). To illustrate and support this assertion, Arnold chronicles parts of the legislative histories of the nuclear freeze resolutions that were considered in the U.S. House of representatives in 1982 and 1983, as well as the 1986 congressional debate over tax reform. He concludes: “Unfortunately for those who assess constituency influence by analyzing roll-call votes, virtually all of the relevant decisions were made early in the legislative process, behind closed doors, and without recorded votes” (271).¹⁰

Bill introductions from the 1969, 1979, and 1989 legislative sessions of the lower house of the Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and North Carolina legislatures provide the data for this analysis.¹¹ Again, bill introductions are important because, unlike roll-call votes, they detail what representatives actually add to the policy agenda. And getting items on legislative agendas for serious debate is a prerequisite for getting them enacted. Moreover, bill introduc-

tions can serve as a thermometer for gauging the intensity of commitments to particular interests (Di Lorenzo 1997).

The various state legislative journals were used so that all the bills introduced in these five states during the three legislative sessions could be coded and categorized based on their substantive content.¹² Many bills were placed into more than one category. For example, a bill to provide for the increased desegregation of a state university system was coded as both an education and civil rights issue. Any bill that, in the judgment of the author, hindered the social, political, or economic progress of African Americans was excluded from all categories. Although bills could have multiple sponsors, only primary sponsors are included as introducers.

Based on the definition of black interests given above, the primary focus is on bill introductions in five broad categories: education, health care, poverty/social welfare, civil rights, and children's issues. The education bills category includes all proposals that regulate, finance, or improve a state's system of public schools, and laws that pertain to the administering of colleges and universities. Legislation involving scholarships and student financial aid programs are also included in this category. Health care bills include a variety of bills relating to the physical and mental welfare of citizens, as well as public health issues like contagious disease control, occupational illnesses, and environment-related health hazards. In the social welfare category are proposals that are intended to alleviate poverty. This includes measures that provide monetary subsidies and programmatic services like jobs training, food stamps, low-income housing, and medical assistance to the poor or otherwise disadvantaged. Minimum-wage legislation is also included in the social welfare category. Civil rights legislation constitutes laws that expressly prohibit discrimination on account of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, national origin, or sexual orientation. Finally, among children's issues are bills that provide child and youth services (e.g., recreation, jobs programs, etc.), and laws that seek to protect minors from various forms of abuse.

ADVOCACY OF BLACK INTERESTS

Who promotes black interests in state legislatures? Table 2.6 contains data comparing black interest bill introduction activity by African American and nonblack legislators. In each of the three legislative sessions, a majority (from 55 to 82 percent) of African American representatives introduced black interest

TABLE 2.6
COMPARISON OF BLACK INTEREST BILL INTRODUCTIONS BY RACE

	% of African Americans Who Introduce a Black Interest Bill	% of Whites Who Introduce a Black Interest Bill
1969	82	39
1979	55	7
1989	82	22
Total	74	23

Source: Bratton and Haynie 1999a.
Note: As used in this table, black interest bills include introductions in civil rights, education, health care, and poverty/social welfare issues as well as children’s and women’s issues. The percentages are based on data pooled from each of the five states.

legislation.¹³ In only one year, however, did more than a quarter of nonblack legislators introduce at least one black interest bill. In each instance, at least twice as many African Americans than nonblack legislators introduced black interest legislation.

In table 2.7, I compare African American and other legislators in terms of the percentage of their total number of bill introductions that was devoted to black interest legislation. These data are reported by state and year. North Carolina’s 1979 and 1989 legislative sessions are the only cases in which black interest bills are a majority of African Americans’ total introductions. However, in all but one of the legislative sessions (New Jersey 1969), the proportion of bills that African American legislators dedicated to black interest issues was greater than that of nonblack representatives. The differences are statistically significant in thirteen of the fifteen legislative sessions.

The data in tables 2.6 and 2.7 clearly show that African American state legislators are the primary advocates for black interests. In each of the sampled states and years, a majority (55–82 percent) of African American representatives introduced at least one piece of black interest legislation. These data also show that African American legislators do not focus exclusively on racial issues. In fact, it was in only two out of the fourteen legislative sessions considered that a majority of the bills introduced by African Americans focused on such issues. Yet when a black interest bill *is* introduced, it is at least twice as likely to be introduced by an African American legislator than by a nonblack one. Also,

TABLE 2.7
BLACK INTEREST BILL INTRODUCTIONS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL
BILL INTRODUCTIONS

State/Year	Proposed by		Difference
	Blacks	Nonblacks	
Arkansas			
1979	20.8	19.5	1.3
1989	39.4	23.5	15.9*
Illinois			
1969	27.5	9.1	18.4*
1979	30.8	17.4	13.4*
1989	39.6	9.8	29.8*
Maryland			
1969	46.6	18.5	28.1*
1979	28.6	25.3	3.3
1989	37.7	29.2	8.5*
New Jersey			
1969	14.8	16.1	-1.3
1979	31.6	18.1	13.5*
1989	37.9	23.9	14.0*
North Carolina			
1969	40.0	13.1	26.9*
1979	75.0	16.9	58.1*
1989	53.1	26.3	26.8*

*Black-white difference significant at the .01 level.

African American legislators tend to devote a greater proportion of their introductions to black interest issues than other representatives.

IS IT RACE THAT EXPLAINS THE DIFFERENCE?

The finding that African American legislators tend to disproportionately introduce black interest legislation gives rise to an interesting and important question: are these differences in agenda-setting behavior in any way attributable to the legislators' race? That is, is there a significant correlation between the descriptive presence of African Americans in the legislature and the substantive representation of black interests?

In an earlier study, Kathleen A. Bratton and I (Bratton and Haynie 1999a), examined the effects of gender and race on legislative agenda-setting. Using data from the same data set and some of the analyses from that earlier study, here I focus exclusively on the impact of race. Regression analysis is used to assess what effects, if any, race has on bill introductions. The unit of analysis is the individual legislator, and the dependent variable is the number of bills introduced in a particular category in a given year and state. Because the dependent variable is an event count, using negative binomial regression is in order (see King 1988, 1989).¹⁴

In addition to the race of the legislator, *gender*, *party affiliation*, and *seniority* are also included as explanatory variables. Democrats and women tend to have more liberal attitudes than Republicans and men toward social and economic policies and government spending in general, and therefore party affiliation and gender might influence the substantive content of a legislator's bill introductions (Jacobson 1992).¹⁵ Because seniority is a likely contributor to expertise in certain policy areas, and because more senior legislators are more likely to have greater skill at navigating the legislative labyrinth (Hibbing 1991, 1993; Meyer 1980; Weissert 1989), I include seniority as a potential explanatory variable. Seniority is measured as the number of consecutive years in the legislature.

Because districts with high percentages of blacks may be more likely to elect a representative who will be supportive of black interests regardless of his or her race, I control for the racial composition of the district, measured as the *percentage of blacks in the district logged*. There is also a control for *whether or not the district is majority black*.¹⁶

Given the distinctive set of socioeconomic problems that disproportionately affect urban areas (e.g., high unemployment, concentrated pockets of poverty, higher rates of HIV/AIDS, etc.), legislators from urban districts might be inclined to introduce legislation related to these policy areas regardless of their race. Thus *urbanness* is included as an explanatory variable.¹⁷ Recognizing that predominantly African American districts in urban areas might be different from mostly white urban districts and predominantly black districts in rural areas (Combs, Hibbing, and Welch 1984; Whitby 1985), I also control for the interaction between urbanness and the percentage of blacks in the district.

Standing committees are the principal organizational units in legislatures. Not only do they have disproportionate power over the policy areas in their respective jurisdictions, committees also have significant influence over the entire legislative process (e.g., Fenno 1973; Francis 1989; Grier and Munger 1991; Hedlund and Powers 1987; Keefe and Ogul 1993; Rhode and Shepsle 1973; Ro-

senthal 1974; Shepsle 1988; Smith and Deering 1984). Because of the central role that committees play, I include *membership on relevant committees* as an additional explanatory variable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the question of whether there is a connection between a descriptive presence of African Americans in legislatures and the substantive representation of black interests, the regression results in table 2.8 demonstrate that the answer is an unequivocal yes. These data show that the race of the representative has a powerful and statistically significant effect on the introduction of traditional civil rights legislation. That is, African Americans, all else being equal, were significantly more likely than nonblack legislators to introduce bills that prohibited racial discrimination in education, employment, and housing, and laws that expressly advanced the socioeconomic well-being of African Americans. Furthermore, *race* was a significant factor for the introduction of bills in two of the other four black interest categories—education and social welfare policy. In both cases, the regression coefficient for race was the largest in terms of magnitude of effect.

Gender, membership on relevant committees, and party affiliation are other personal characteristics that influenced whether a legislator introduced black interest bills. Having an assignment on a committee whose jurisdiction included black interest issues had a significant positive effect on a representative's propensity to introduce these bills. Women and Democrats were more likely than men and Republicans to propose such legislation. It is interesting and important to note that, as opposed to the findings of two previous highly regarded studies which relied predominantly on roll-call vote analysis to investigate the effects of race on the representation of black interests (Swain 1993; Whitby 1997), the results here show that, when agenda-setting behavior (i.e., bill introductions) is examined, a legislator's race tends to have a stronger effect on substantive representation than does a legislator's party membership.¹⁸ The data in table 2.8 also indicate that districts with a majority black population had no significant impact on whether legislators representing such districts introduced black interest legislation. Moreover, the percentage of blacks in legislative districts had a significant positive effect on bill introductions in only one of the five categories of black interests legislation: civil rights issues.

Given that traditional civil rights issues have historically been and remain

among the most prominent black interest areas, it is noteworthy that the presence of African Americans in legislative districts seems to influence the bill introduction behavior of representatives on these matters. Today, however, as we move into the twenty-first century, education, health, and social welfare issues are arguably just as important, if not more so, for the well-being and advancement of African Americans. In fact, one could argue that most traditional civil rights challenges like voting rights, fair and equal access to housing and public accommodations, and antidiscrimination legislation have for the most part been met. The percentage of blacks in the district had no significant impact on the propensity of a representative to place bills in these other important black interest areas (i.e., education, health, and social welfare) on the legislative and policy agendas. In these instances, the race of legislators appears to be a more important factor in black interest representation than the racial makeup of legislative districts. This suggests that there is indeed a connection between how legislatures look (descriptive representation) and what they produce (substantive representation).

CONCLUSION

The central question in this chapter asked whether African American representatives in state legislatures have behaved, as has been widely expected, like race representatives in their bill introduction and agenda-setting behavior. Race representatives are those women and men who assume leadership positions, either elected or unelected, in the African American community, and whose main objective is to advance the interests of black citizens. In political institutions like legislatures, race representatives seek to insure that a black perspective is articulated, understood, and advanced.

Relying on data from five state legislatures and three legislative sessions, the analyses here yield significant evidence that African American legislators do indeed behave as race representatives in their agenda-setting behavior. In each of the legislative sessions studied, a majority of the African American legislators introduced black interest bills. In contrast, in only one instance did the total number of nonblack representatives to do so exceed 25 percent. Also, of all the bills that African American legislators collectively introduced, the proportion that they devoted to black interests was greater than the proportion that their white counterparts devoted to these issues. Moreover, African Americans were twice as likely as nonblacks to introduce this type of legislation in the first place.

TABLE 2.8
EFFECTS OF RACE ON BILL INTRODUCTIONS

Independent Variable	Parameter Estimates (Standard Errors in Parentheses)					
	Black Interests	Women's Interests	Education Policy	Health Care	Children's Policy	Welfare Policy
Intercept	-3.82** (.53)	-3.21** (.34)	1.44** (.22)	-4.74** (.18)	-2.50** (.27)	-1.19** (.33)
Race	2.06** (.21)	.66** (.22)	.28* (.15)	-.08 (.14)	.09 (.20)	.39* (.18)
Gender	.45* (.21)	1.51** (.12)	.18** (.08)	.31** (.08)	.53** (.11)	.32** (.13)
Black woman	-.86* (.52)	-.62* (.35)	-.24 (.23)	-.13 (.30)	.14 (.31)	-.08 (.29)
Republican	-.71** (.14)	.13 (.09)	-.05 (.05)	-.11* (.05)	-.19* (.01)	-.36** (.08)
Seniority	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02** (.00)	.01** (.00)	-.02** (.01)	.01 (.01)
% Black in district (logged)	.07* (.04)	.08** (.03)	-.00 (.02)	.02 (.12)	.00 (.03)	.04 (.03)
Majority black district	.65 (.47)	.22 (.40)	-.11 (.18)	-.09 (.23)	-.41 (.37)	.18 (.33)
Size of largest city (logged)	.15** (.05)	.08** (.03)	-.06** (.02)	.05** (.01)	.11** (.02)	.07** (.02)
Largest city and Majority black district	-.41 (.49)	-.24 (.45)	-.00 (.22)	.18 (.24)	.14 (.38)	.28 (.37)

While it is clear that the African American state legislators from the five states included in this study were the primary advocates for black interests within their respective legislatures, it is also the case that these representatives did not focus exclusively on race matters. In fact, black interest legislation made up a majority of the bills that African American legislators introduced in only two of fourteen legislative sessions (tables 2.6 and 2.7). This finding provides evidence and reasons for us to consider these African American state legislators as characteristic of David Canon's "balancing perspective." With the balancing perspective, black legislators may make special efforts to articulate and pursue a race-based or race-related set of issues, but they also devote some time to working on legislative issues that have no race-specific content (Canon 1999:47–49). In the final analysis, when it comes to substantive representation, we can say with some significant degree of certainty that when African Americans are present in the legislature, they are more likely to pursue black interests than their nonblack counterparts.

In light of these findings, the speculation by Charles Bullock (1975) that I included at the beginning of this chapter merits repeating. Bullock suggested that it is possible that "well-meaning white politicians may be unable to comprehend some black needs and therefore fail to introduce them into the policy-making arena. Consequently, adequate representation of black demands . . . requires that there be black officeholders to translate these demands into policy" (727). Because assessing the motives of white legislators is beyond the scope of this study, I am not in a position to comment on their intentions relative to black interests. However, consistent with Bullock's conjecture, the evidence here indicates that there is an important link between descriptive and substantive representation. The race of the representative is linked to the kind of responsiveness African American citizens get from legislative institutions. This finding of a powerful and significant connection between descriptive and substantive representation is particularly noteworthy in light of the mounting theoretical, legal, and political challenges to the creation of majority-minority or minority-influence legislative districts—the type of districts from which most African American legislators are elected.

Miller v. Johnson (1995) and *Bush v. Vera* (1996) are just two examples of relatively recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions that exemplify the political and legal challenges to majority-minority districts.¹⁹ The Court ruled in *Miller* that states could consider race in redistricting decisions, but race could not be the "predominant factor." In *Bush* the Supreme Court reaffirmed its decision in *Miller* by finding three majority-minority districts in Texas to be unconstitu-

tional because race was the predominant factor used in drawing the district boundaries. Supreme Court decisions such as these are likely to lead to a decrease or, at the very least, stagnation in the number of African Americans elected to legislatures. If this is indeed the outcome, given my findings above, a likely consequence will be less substantive representation of black interests in important political institutions like state legislatures.

In her landmark 1993 book, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*, Carol Swain provides one of the most compelling theoretical challenges to the purposeful drawing of districts specifically designed to elect a racial or ethnic minority. She argues that the presence of African Americans is not a prerequisite for the adequate (i.e., substantive) representation of black interests. Comparing the roll-call behavior of African American members of the 100th Congress to white members who represented significant numbers of black constituents, Swain concludes: "Descriptive representation of blacks guarantees only black faces and is, at best, an intangible good; substantive representation is by definition real and color blind. . . . Many white members of Congress perform as well or better on the indicators used in this book than some black representatives" (Swain 1993:211). To this she adds:

What difference does the race of the representative make for the representation of black policy preferences? If the mean interest-group scores of white and black Democrats on two of the indicators of black interests are contrasted, there is only a shade of difference between white and black Democrats. . . . Similarly, in a multivariate regression analysis that includes the race of the representative as one of the independent variables, race is statistically insignificant. (Swain 1993:212).

These conclusions are clearly challenged by the data and analyses presented in this chapter. With regards to agenda-setting, an extremely important legislative function, I find that there is indeed a connection between the presence of African Americans in legislatures and the substantive representation of black interests.²⁰ The data and analyses here show that black state legislators are the primary advocates for black interests. For example, African American representatives, all else being equal, are significantly more likely than nonblack legislators to introduce bills that prohibit racial discrimination in employment and housing, and laws that advance the educational and social welfare interests of black citizens. Moreover, these analyses indicate that for the substantive repre-

sensation of African American interests, a legislator's race matters above and beyond the effects of constituency characteristics and political party membership. In other words, black faces in legislatures *do* matter for black interest representation. Thus while super-majority black legislative districts in and of themselves may not be necessary to achieve substantive representation of black interests, they are important precisely because African American representatives are significantly more likely to be elected from such districts.

Several relatively recent studies on race and representation in the U.S. Congress have reached conclusions about the link between descriptive and substantive representation that are consistent with the ones reached here (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Canon 1995, 1999; Grofman, Griffin, and Glazer 1992; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997). For example, Whitby, in his book *The Color of Representation: Congressional Behavior and Black Interests*, finds that the race of the representative indeed matters and is a significant predictor of responsiveness to black interests, and that race is an important factor even when controlling for the strong impact of party and region (Whitby 1997:109).

The findings presented here have potentially important political consequences. There is more to the election of African Americans than symbolism or the color of skin. *The color of Congress has implications for the quality of substantive representation for African Americans.* The high level of support among black lawmakers is unmatched by any other cohort in the assembly.
(Whitby 1997:112; emphasis added)

Similarly, Canon's book, *Race, Redistricting, and Representation: The Unintended Consequences of Black Majority Districts*, finds that African American legislators have distinctive representational styles that matter. Canon concludes that

African American members of the House *are* more attentive to the distinctive needs of the black constituents than are their white counterparts who represent substantial numbers of blacks. . . . *The race of the representative has important implications for the type of representation that is provided to a district with a significant number of black constituents.* Black members do a better job walking the racial tightrope and balancing the distinctive needs of black voters and the general interests of all voters, black and white alike. White members tend to have a more exclusive focus on nonracial issues.
(Canon 1999:244–45; italics in the original)

The findings of these two books and those from this chapter have important

implications for legislative redistricting and for the procedures that we use to choose our elected representatives. If it is in fact true that African American representatives are the primary and most important advocates and supporters of black interests, then it is essential that efforts are undertaken to increase, enhance, and sustain African American representation in state legislatures, as well as in other policy-making arenas. Failure to do so runs the risk of not only once again excluding African Americans from a physical and descriptive presence in American political institutions; it is likely to diminish substantive governmental responsiveness to their concerns as well.

