

RACE AND PEER EVALUATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LEGISLATORS

A CASE STUDY*

How open, receptive, and responsive state legislatures are to African American representation is one of the primary questions considered in this book. African American political incorporation, the subject of chapter 4, is one measure of institutional openness or responsiveness. Another equally important, albeit less tangible, measure of openness is how African American legislators are viewed by their colleagues. Previous studies have demonstrated that, because of their race, African American candidates for public office are often perceived and evaluated less favorably by voters (Baker and Kleppner 1986; Carsey 1995; Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Giles and Buckner 1993; Glaser 1994; Kinder 1986; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sigelman et al. 1995; Terkildsen, 1993). Some of this research has concluded that the perception of racial threat is instrumental in provoking negative reactions to African American candidates from whites (Giles and Buckner 1993; Glaser 1994; Key 1949; Pettigrew 1976; Wolfinger 1974). Does this dynamic continue once African Americans are elected and take their places in governmental institutions? That is, how are African American legislators viewed by their peers? Do they elicit a racially based negative reaction from within the legislature similar to what they might face out-

*The data and analyses used in this chapter are drawn from Haynie (1999).

side of it? This chapter addresses these questions by examining the role that race plays in other legislators' perceptions and evaluations of African American legislators in the North Carolina General Assembly.

The answer to these questions potentially has significant theoretical and practical political implications. For example, if African American representatives as a group are routinely perceived negatively, this could be an indication that they and any unique or distinctive interests that they represent may not be well received in an important and increasingly relevant policy-making institution. We know, for example, that African American legislators are the primary advocates of so-called black interest legislation (chapter 2; also see Bratton and Haynie 1992, 1999a; Haynie 1994; Hedge, Button, and Spear 1996; Miller 1990). Thus, if African American representatives are viewed unfavorably by their peers, it is possible that black interests will receive inadequate articulation and deliberation by policy-making institutions as a whole. Also, being perceived negatively could result in African American legislators' being unable to forge coalitions in support of their overall policy agendas. Moreover, such a finding would call into question any expectations, claims, or insinuations that American political institutions are inherently color-blind or race neutral.

LEGISLATIVE EFFECTIVENESS

Because, by their very nature, they involve subjective evaluations, studies of legislative effectiveness provide us with the data and means to assess whether legislators' race matters significantly with regard to how they are perceived. In the scholarly literature focusing on legislative effectiveness, variations in effectiveness have been measured and explained using individual attributes,¹ institutional positions, and behavioral indicators (e.g., Eulau 1962; Frantzich 1979; Hamm, Harmel, and Thompson 1983; Jewell 1969; Meyer 1980; Olson and Nonidez 1972; Weissert 1989).² For example, Katherine Meyer (1980) developed two causal models of legislative effectiveness using twelve explanatory variables. Her analyses found that education, prior political experience, seniority, and holding formal leadership positions were significantly related to a legislator's having a reputation for being effective. To this list, Carol Weissert (1989) adds the variable of whether or not a legislator is an attorney. The findings of a study by David M. Olson and Cynthia T. Nonidez (1972) suggest that it is through legislative activities like committee work and largely nonlegislative activities like casework that members of the U.S. House of Representatives gain

reputations for being effective. Stephen Frantzich (1979) equates legislative effectiveness with legislative success. Using three behavioral indicators of effectiveness—the number of bills that each legislator had passed by the House, the number enacted into law, and the percentage of their bill introductions that passed in the House—Frantzich found party affiliation, formal leadership positions, seniority, and electoral security to be important explanatory variables.

Surprisingly, this is one of the first studies to include the race of the representative as a variable with potentially significant consequences for perceptions of effectiveness. The omission of race as a possible factor in the previous literature is particularly noteworthy given that race is one of the most salient attributes in American politics, and given our knowledge of the role that racial considerations play in the evaluations of African American candidates.

Notwithstanding the variety of meanings and measures of legislative effectiveness found in the previous literature, my goal here is not to determine or assess whether African Americans are “in fact” more or less effective than other representatives. Instead, the primary concern of this chapter is to explore what, if any, effect race has on how black legislators are viewed by their peers. I am interested in evaluations of legislative effectiveness only as indicators or surrogate measures of perceptions.

What effect should we expect the race of black legislators to have on perceptions of their legislative effectiveness? Studies of American race relations and the theoretical literature on racial attitudes and elections offer three possible answers to this question. One potential answer is that (everything else being equal) African American legislators will be perceived as less effective than other representatives. This expectation is rooted in the long history of racism and discrimination against blacks in the United States, and is a logical extension of the conclusions reached in several studies of voter attitudes. For example, as previously mentioned, many studies have shown that African American candidates are often evaluated less favorably than nonblack candidates by white voters because of their race (Baker and Kleppner 1986; Kinder and Sears 1981; Pettigrew 1976; Sears, Citrin, and Kosterman 1987; Sigelman et al. 1995; Terkildsen 1993).³

A second possible answer is that the race of black legislators will have no effect on perceptions of their legislative effectiveness. This expectation is reasonable given the reported decline in racist and nondiscriminatory attitudes among whites (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Smith 1995). In this post-civil rights era, nonblacks may now be more inclined to view African Americans as equals.

The third answer suggested by the scholarly literature is that the effects of race are conditional. That is, African American legislators will be evaluated positively when they possess desirable attributes such as leadership positions and seniority. As I previously mentioned, earlier research (e.g., Meyer 1980; Weissert 1989) found such characteristics to be positively correlated with perceived legislative effectiveness. This expectation is consistent with the “extremity effects” concept discussed by Carol Sigelman et al. (1995). The extremity effects concept suggests that there is a tendency for people to form “especially positive impressions of competent or attractive outgroup members and especially negative impressions of incompetent or unattractive outgroup members” (247). Seniority, leadership positions, and prestige committee assignments are among the desirable or attractive attributes for legislators. Thus it is reasonable to expect that when African American lawmakers possess such qualities, their colleagues will tend to have positive impressions of them.

In sum, the previous literature suggests three possible effects of race on the evaluation of African American officeholders: the impact is significant and negative; it is nonexistent; or the impact of race is conditional. I examine the applicability of these three alternatives below.

DATA AND METHODS

In my examination of how black legislators are viewed by other legislators, I use data from only one of the five legislatures—the North Carolina General Assembly. Ideally, this analysis would include data from the other four legislatures discussed in this book, and it would be comparative in approach in order for the findings to be somewhat generalizable. However, as is often the case with state-level studies, cross-state comparisons are not possible because comparable data do not exist. Although some type of effectiveness ratings takes place in some of the other states, the criteria, methods, and dependent variables used to assess “effectiveness” vary significantly from state to state. For example, in Arkansas the effectiveness assessments are conducted solely by capitol newspaper reporters, and legislators are judged based on their intelligence and the degree to which they have an open mind. The criteria used for some states evaluates effectiveness in terms of a members’ integrity, fairness, and willingness to put the public interest ahead of partisanship and personal ambition. In still others, effectiveness, energy, flexibility, and potential are among a list of independent variables used to rank legislators from “best to worst.”⁴ Because of these vast

differences in criteria and methods, the ideal of cross-state comparisons is not feasible.

Data on legislative effectiveness collected by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NCCPPR) will be used to address the question of what role race plays in the evaluation of African American legislators. After each legislative session since 1977, the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research has conducted a survey to assess how effective state senators and representatives are considered to be. Lobbyists who are registered with the legislature, members of the press corps who regularly cover legislative events, and all legislators are asked to rate, on a scale from one to ten, every member of the General Assembly in terms of their effectiveness. Among the criteria that respondents are asked to use in making their assessments are the legislators' participation in committee work, their skill in guiding bills through floor debate, their expertise in special fields, the political power they hold (either by virtue of formal office, longevity, or personal attributes), and their ability to sway the opinion of their fellow legislators (NCCPPR 1978:4). An average effectiveness score is computed for each legislator based on survey results from each of the three respondent groups (i.e., legislators, lobbyists, and media). The effectiveness ratings for the North Carolina General Assembly from 1983, 1985, 1987, and 1989 are the dependent variables in this study. These four legislative sessions were selected because of the availability of data, and prior to 1983, there was the largest number of African Americans to serve in any one session of the assembly.

One advantage of using the North Carolina legislature as the object of analysis is the overall quality of the available data. For example, unlike the case in other states, the NCCPPR evaluations have only one dependent variable—effectiveness. Furthermore, a relatively recent study of the ratings methods and procedures used in various states concluded that the effectiveness analyses conducted by the NCCPPR are the most systematic, objective, and most widely respected (Mahtesian 1996).

Whatever the limitations of a single case, one case is clearly preferable to none at all. Moreover, here the shortcomings of the single-state sample are in part mitigated by the inclusion of data and analyses from multiple legislative sessions.⁵ An additional advantage of using North Carolina's data is the fact that the legislature is in general not atypical of state legislatures for the time period studied. Although it is difficult to generalize about state legislatures, and "no state legislature can be said to 'represent' state legislatures in the sense of a

sample representing the population” (Weissert 1989:17), it is important to note that on most dimensions, North Carolina’s legislature does not differ significantly from other state legislatures.

Like all other states (except Nebraska), it has two houses, and most of its legislators are male lawyers, businessmen, or farmers. Its members introduce approximately the same number of bills as the national average and give up their seats at approximately the same rate. Session length in North Carolina is typical of many states. Most or all [*sic*] members of the North Carolina legislature and the nation are part-timers, and like most states, have only very limited access to professional staff. . . . Salaries of North Carolina legislators are in the lower range, but not the lowest. And as in other states, the legislative agenda is dominated by spending issues for schools, highways, health care for the poor, welfare and a variety of judicial issues.⁶ (Weissert 1989:17)

Table 5.1 gives the mean, standard deviation, and range for the dependent variable. These data reveal that the average overall effectiveness rating is relatively stable over the four sessions, and that there is considerable variation in effectiveness ratings with at least a 63-point spread between the most and least effective legislator in each of the sessions. Over the four-session period, twenty-five different African Americans served in the House, with only two of them appearing in all five sessions.

A pooled-analysis ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model is employed to examine the relative effects of race on perceptions of effectiveness. Pooling of the data has the virtue of providing a more substantial data base, and providing a single estimate for the effect of each independent variable over

TABLE 5.1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE—
LEGISLATIVE EFFECTIVENESS

	1983	1985	1987	1989
Mean	45.9	44.6	45.1	46.0
Standard deviation	13.6	14.9	15.8	13.2
Range	22-90	20-90	19-93	22-85
No. of African Americans	11	13	14	13
N*	116	115	116	110

*N = Number of legislators rated

the eight-year period. However, pooling does require assuming that the model is consistent across the years. To enhance that potential, I include dummy variables for *year* to allow for differences in evaluation across sessions caused by ebbs and flows in perceptions of effectiveness not captured by the independent variables in the model. More importantly, however, when sufficient data are present, I replicate the pooled analyses with session-specific analyses. These allow the more general pooled results to be directly compared with those of the specific sessions, eliminating any risk that information is lost or distortion occurs via pooling.⁷

Because each may be important in shaping one's perception of who is or is not an effective legislator, I include individual attribute, institutional position, and behavioral variables as controls. Specifically, the following variables, along with the race of the legislator, are included in the regression models.

FORMAL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS Members who are part of the formal leadership are often viewed, by virtue of the powers inherent in their positions, as being more effective legislators than the rank and file. This is precisely the finding of studies by Meyer (1980) and Weissert (1989). Thus the expectation here is that being a formal leader is positively correlated to perceptions of effectiveness. Leadership positions include the speaker, majority and minority leaders, and chairs of each of the standing committees.

PARTY AFFILIATION Because they are more likely to have their initiatives passed, and because they are more likely to hold formal leadership positions (e.g., Frantzich 1979; Hamm, Harmel, and Thompson 1983), it is reasonable to expect representatives from the majority party to be thought of as more effective. All the African Americans who served in the North Carolina General Assembly during the four sessions under investigation were Democrats. The Democratic Party was the majority party in each of the sessions.

SENIORITY Seniority not only contributes to and enhances a member's expertise in certain policy matters, senior members also tend to be more knowledgeable of legislative rules and procedures. Therefore, they may be more effective in negotiating the legislative process (Meyer 1980; Weissert 1989). More senior members may also be more likely to hold leadership positions.

BILL INTRODUCTIONS Proposing new laws is among the most basic functions that legislators perform. Bill introductions have often been used to gauge a representative's level of activity and to measure his or her commitment

to their legislative responsibilities (Hamm, Harmel, and Thompson 1983; Haynie 1994; Rosenthal 1981). The expectation here is that the more bills legislators introduce, the more positively they will be perceived by their peers. Only substantive bills (i.e., bills that are intended to change the law or public policy) in which the legislator was a primary sponsor are counted as introductions. In other words, nonbinding resolutions and memorials were excluded from the analyses.

BEING AN ATTORNEY In her study, Weissert (1989) found that being a lawyer had a significant impact on effectiveness. She argues that “serving as an attorney is particularly important since attorneys are trained in an area essential to the legislative process—bill drafting” (50). Because of this presumed skill in bill drafting, lawyers may be more active in bill introductions and, consequently, considered by their colleagues to be more effective legislators.

MEMBER OF THE APPROPRIATIONS OR RULES COMMITTEES Legislative scholars have long recognized the importance of standing committees to the legislative process (e.g., Clapp 1963; Eulau and Karpis 1977; Fenno 1973; Grier and Munger 1991; Rhode and Shepsle 1973; Stewart 1992). The conventional wisdom is that within a legislature, there are a small number of important committee assignments that are thought to confer power and influence to legislators. These assignments almost always include those committees that deal with appropriations, taxation, or budgeting, as well as the committees responsible for the rules that govern legislative procedure (Francis 1989; Smith and Deering 1984). Membership on these committees should enhance the perceived effectiveness of legislators.

RESULTS

One expectation suggested by the extant literature on racial attitudes was that (everything else being equal) African American legislators would be perceived as less effective than other representatives. The OLS regression results in table 5.2 suggest that this indeed was the case. The pooled results indicate that because of their race, African American legislators who served in the North Carolina House between 1983 and 1989 received effectiveness ratings from their peers that were, on average, 5.9 points lower than nonblack representatives. The separate year results provide additional evidence for the effect of race on African American legislators’ reputations for effectiveness. Being African American

TABLE 5.2
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PERCEIVED LEGISLATIVE EFFECTIVENESS
(DEPENDENT VARIABLE = RATINGS BY *LEGISLATORS*)

Independent Variables	Pooled	1983	1985	1987	1989
Intercept	29.4** (1.3)	24.6** (2.2)	30.0** (1.7)	22.7** (1.9)	38.4** (3.4)
Race	-5.8** (1.8)	-5.7* (2.5)	-8.9** (2.6)	-2.5 (2.5)	-8.3* (2.9)
Party	3.9** (1.4)	9.3** (2.3)	4.6** (2.1)	5.2* (2.3)	1.6 (2.3)
Seniority	1.2** (.20)	1.6** (.37)	1.0** (.31)	1.7** (.39)	1.4* (.44)
Lawyer	9.2** (1.3)	10.4** (1.8)	9.0** (1.8)	8.9** (1.9)	10.1** (2.3)
Leadership	3.3** (1.2)	3.3 (2.1)	3.2 (2.1)	5.3* (2.3)	1.0 (2.5)
Bill introductions	0.3** (.05)	0.2** (.07)	0.3** (.07)	0.3** (.07)	0.1 (.09)
Rules committee	6.6** (1.1)	6.9** (1.7)	7.6** (1.6)	5.1** (1.8)	5.8* (2.2)
Appropriations Committee	0.9 (0.9)	0.5 (1.4)	1.8 (1.5)	0.3 (1.6)	-0.7 (1.7)
Speaker	35.4** (2.4)	31.8** (7.8)	33.9** (8.4)	33.8** (9.5)	34.9** (8.4)
Year85	9.4 (1.2)	—	—	—	—
Year87	-2.0 (1.1)	—	—	—	—
Year89	2.2* (1.1)	—	—	—	—
N	465	118	117	118	112.
Adjusted R ²	.68	.72	.72	.74	.41

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

N = Number of legislators evaluated

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

TABLE 5.3
OLS REGRESSION OF PERCEIVED LEGISLATIVE
EFFECTIVENESS WITH INTERACTION TERMS

Independent Variables	B Values
Intercept	29.3** (1.4)
Race	-4.8 (3.6)
Party	3.8** (1.5)
Seniority	1.3** (.21)
Lawyer	9.8** (1.5)
Leadership	3.8** (1.3)
Bill introductions	.28** (.06)
Rules Committee	6.1** (1.1)
Appropriations Committee	1.2 (.98)
B senior	-1.4 (1.2)
B lawyer	-2.6 (2.5)
B leader	-2.1 (3.5)
B intros	.21 (.14)
B Rules Committee	5.8 (3.8)
B Appropriations Committee	-1.4 (2.9)
Year85	1.0 (.79)
Year87	-1.9 (1.1)
Year89	2.5 (1.2)
N	464.
Adjusted R ²	.68

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

had a statistically significant negative effect in three of the four legislative sessions.

Our second hypothesis, which stated that due to the apparent decline in racist and discriminatory attitudes among whites, the race of African American legislators would have no impact on perceptions of their effectiveness, is obviously not supported by these results. These data show that racial considerations influenced evaluations of legislative behavior, and that these considerations had negative consequences for African American representatives.

The data in table 5.2 confirm that characteristics like holding leadership positions, having seniority, serving on prestigious committees, and being a lawyer are important contributors to perceptions of effectiveness. The third expectation posited that the race of the representative would have either a positive impact or no impact at all on how black legislators are evaluated when they possessed these characteristics. To test for this, I created six interaction terms that combined the race variable with each of the other independent variables and reran the pooled regression model (table 5.3).⁸

None of these six interaction terms had a statistically significant effect on perceptions of effectiveness. Being African American and a lawyer, African American and a leader, African American and more senior, and so on had no impact on the evaluations of black legislators. Thus, negative perceptions of black legislators appear not to be mitigated by their possessing characteristics that otherwise contribute to positive evaluations, and that tend to be sources of actual power and influence in legislatures.

Given the relatively small number of African Americans in each of the legislatures, it is possible that these apparent negative effects of race are due to the presence of a particularly ineffective African American legislator who is in the legislature throughout the entire period. To check for this possibility, I estimated additional pooled regression models, excluding the lowest-rated African American representative who served in all four legislative sessions. The results were not significantly different than those of the original models. Thus it is unlikely that the results reported here reflect some outlier effects.⁹

CONCLUSION

Based on the perceptions of their members, the data and analyses presented in this chapter suggest that state legislative institutions may not be as open to the participation and influence of African Americans as might otherwise appear.

The findings here provide evidence that, like African American political candidates in general, African Americans elected to state legislatures are perceived and evaluated negatively because of their race. Specifically, being black contributed to African American legislators in the North Carolina General Assembly being perceived by their colleagues as less effective than their nonblack peers. Moreover, the African American legislators did not reap any significant benefits from possessing characteristics and attributes that ordinarily enhance a legislator's reputation for effectiveness. That is, even when African American legislators were lawyers, members of the assembly's leadership, had seniority, or were in the majority party, they were still evaluated as less effective than other representatives.

These findings indicate that African American representatives are not viewed by their colleagues as equal participants in the deliberation and debate over matters of public policy. The classifications and racial considerations that abound in civic life appear to have also permeated important policy-making institutions. Consequently, policies and programs important to African American citizens may be less likely to receive serious consideration or enactment into law.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings here suggest that American political institutions are not race neutral or color-blind in their policy-making processes. If this is in fact the case, there are potentially serious implications for both the perceived and the de facto legitimacy of the governmental and representative process. I discuss this point in more detail in chapter 6.