

CONCLUSION

This book has analytically examined several issues related to the nature and consequences of an African American presence in state legislatures. The preceding chapters have provided several empirical findings that should prove useful in future attempts to develop theories of African American elite behavior in general, and African American legislative behavior in particular. The overarching question guiding this study has been, what does it matter whether or not there are African Americans serving in state legislatures? In an effort to provide some initial answers to this question, this study has examined such issues as whether African American representatives have a noticeable and distinctive effect on state legislative agendas, whether they have achieved significant levels of incorporation and integration into the legislative process, and how African American legislators have been perceived by their peers. This concluding chapter summarizes the findings and discusses some of their implications for African American representation in state legislatures, as well as implications for African American politics more broadly speaking.

The book began with the proposition that African American legislators are the most prominent political examples and manifestations of W. E. B. Du Bois's duality dilemma. The argument is simply that any attempts to explain and understand the behavior of African American legislators and other black public officials must begin with a framework that takes into account that African

American representatives are expected to simultaneously be what St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945) called race representatives and what Nicholas Masters (1961) labeled “responsible legislators.” That is, we need to be cognizant of the fact that the behavior of African American legislators is shaped, to a significant degree, by the pressures that arise as they undertake the precarious and difficult task of becoming incorporated into legislative institutions, while at the same time trying to transform these institutions and the policies that they produce. This requires that we not simply note the existence of the duality dilemma as many prior studies have done, but that we actively integrate the implications of its existence into our explanations of political behavior.

While all legislators at times must contend with competing or conflicting demands from various constituency groups, I have suggested that these pressures are not as profound as those associated with the duality dilemmas faced by African Americans. The facts and circumstances related to how African Americans first came to be in North America, the experiences of confronting pervasive and entrenched beliefs in the inherent inferiority of black people, a long history of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination and segregation, and the reoccurring general economic subjugation and political disenfranchisement of blacks—together these factors have contributed to both the creation and perpetuation of an omnipresent feeling of alienation from the larger American society, and the stimulation and reinforcement of strong racial group identity within the African American community (e.g., Anderson 1997; Dawson 1994; Massey and Denton 1993; Morris 1984; Pinderhughes 1987). Both of these considerations (i.e., the widespread alienation and strong racial group identity) are key components in what Michael Dawson (1994) calls the “black utility heuristic.” Dawson’s black utility heuristic is the phenomenon of individual African Americans using their perception of the condition of African Americans as a group as a proxy for their own personal standing (Dawson 1994:61). In other words, there is a tendency for “African Americans [to] evaluate events not only as Americans but also as a group that has been historically exploited in American society” (161–62). African American elites and elected officials are likely to share this strong sense of racial identity, which often places them in situations where they must choose between being race representatives or so-called “responsible legislators.” The pressures for non-African American representatives, both men and women, to address and satisfy conflicting or competing demands rarely, if ever, results in the “double-consciousness” that is so often a consequence for African Americans.¹ If and when it exists, the need for non-African Americans to be race or gender representatives is episodic or temporary.

This process is [for African Americans], in many respects, similar to what the Irish, Jews, Italians, and other ethnic groups have undergone. All of these groups have had their race men [and women] at certain times in their histories, but as the groups' fortunes have risen, the need for their respective race men [and women] has declined and other individuals have emerged who are increasingly more interested in their professions and class positions. These individuals don't necessarily forget their roots, but often the needs of the profession win out, and class issues take precedence over public displays of ethnic and racial particularism. This is what we have come to expect as a normal consequence of upward mobility in the United States. *The exception* is that of race and the nature and complexity of racism that blacks face.

(Anderson 1997:118; emphasis added)

The "new black politics" era, which began in the mid-1960s, is most noted for the movement of African American political behavior away from an almost exclusive reliance on pressure or protest politics toward a much greater reliance on electoral participation. It is clear that these changes reconfigured the appearance of American political institutions. This transition in African American political behavior contributed to a monumental growth in the number of African American elected officials at all levels of government. Yet the mere presence of black faces in public policy-making institutions was never intended to be an end unto itself. Rather, the hope was that the inclusion of African Americans would lead to tangible substantive outcomes and benefits for black people.

The civil rights movement began as an effort to secure the most basic political rights—the right to vote and the right to equal treatment before the law—but rapidly expanded in scope to demand governmental action to end discrimination in employment, public education, housing, and public facilities generally and to alleviate poverty and reduce unemployment, expand health care to blacks and other low-income groups, and gain other government benefits.²

(Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984:2)

The evidence reported in this book indicates that the presence and growth of African American representation in government has indeed had noticeable and meaningful policy consequences. I have shown that there is a powerful and significant connection between descriptive and substantive representation. African American state legislators tend to provide much more than window dressing or diversity for diversity's sake. Among other things, they provide sub-

stantive representation of black interests. The data and analyses presented in this book clearly challenge Carol Swain's conclusion that "descriptive representation of blacks only guarantees black faces and is, at best, an intangible good; [while] substantive representation is by definition real and color blind" (Swain 1993:211).

A DISTINCTIVE IMPACT?

The emergence and growth of an African American presence in state legislatures in the aftermath of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s was accompanied by widespread expectations that black legislators would introduce to these institutions issues of particular importance to African American citizens. That is, African American legislators have been expected, first and foremost, to be "race representatives." They have been expected to provide African American citizens with substantive representation by primarily articulating and supporting a black interest agenda.

Has this expectation been met? Based on the analyses and findings in this volume, the answer to this question is not a simple yes or no. It is clear that, in comparison with nonblack legislators, African American legislators did pursue a distinctive set of legislative issues. African Americans were the primary advocates for black interests in each of the five state legislatures examined in this study. Specifically, I found that African American legislators were twice as likely as nonblack legislators to introduce black interest legislation. Also, a majority of African American legislators introduced black interest legislation in all of the legislative sessions. In contrast, in only one of the fifteen sessions did the total number of nonblack representatives who introduced at least one black interest bill exceed 25 percent.

Similarly, in their committee assignments, black representatives tended to accumulate more power and acquire more influence in black interest policy areas than in any other area. Using two separate measures—*saliency*, measured as the percentage of all African American committee assignments devoted to a particular type of committee, and *influence potential*, calculated as the percentage of a committee's membership that is African American—I found that African American legislators were well positioned on standing committees to advance or protect a black interest agenda. For all three legislative sessions in four of the five states, a black interest committee was among the top two committees in terms of potential African American influence.

While it is true that the African American representatives added a distinctive race-based agenda to the policy debates within state legislatures, it is also true that they demonstrated interest in issues with no apparent racial content as well. In chapter 1, in addition to the race representative option, I identified two alternative strategies available to black representatives for maneuvering or managing the challenges resulting from the double-consciousness or duality dilemmas that they experience in performing their professional duties. One of these was deracialization. With deracialization, African American lawmakers purposefully choose to eliminate or de-emphasize issues in their legislative agendas that may be viewed in explicitly racial terms, and they emphasize those issues that are not race-specific and that appeal to a broader constituency (Barker and Jones 1994; McCormick 1989). Such behavior is consistent with what is expected of “responsible legislators.” The second alternative strategy was a type of middle-ground tactic that combines elements of both the race representative and the deracialization approaches. With this strategy, what Canon (1999) has labeled the “balancing perspective,” African American legislators recognize the significance of racial differences and they perhaps make race-related matters their top priority, but they also give attention to issues of broader concern and that have no specific racial content.

The findings presented in the preceding chapters suggest that the behavior of African American state legislators is most characteristic of the middle-ground or balancing perspective. It is clear that in favoring black interests in their agenda-setting activities and their committee assignments, African American legislators behaved in a manner that typifies the race representative. Yet the data and analyses also show that these representatives concerned themselves with other policy matters that were not necessarily or directly related to race. For example, although African American lawmakers were twice as likely as non-African Americans to introduce black interest bills, these were not the only types of bills that they introduced. In fact, in only two of the fourteen legislative sessions did black interest legislation make up a majority of the collective bill introductions of the African American legislators.³ Likewise, black interest committees were the most salient committee assignments for black legislators, and they were the committees on which African Americans tended to have the most influence potential. However, over time, there was increased diversification in the committee assignment patterns of the black legislators to include more assignments on nonrace-related committees. Thus in their bill introductions and their standing committee service, the African American legislators seemed to behave *both* as race representatives *and* “responsible legisla-

tors”—balancing their concern for black interests with their concern for other interests of importance to their districts, their legislative careers, or to both.

AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL INCORPORATION

Political incorporation refers to the extent to which a group is strategically positioned within political institutions to exercise significant influence over the policy-making process (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). For cohesive legislative subgroups like African Americans, political incorporation is seen as an important precondition to having a meaningful effect on government policies and programs. The argument is that political incorporation is a better predictor of policy responsiveness than descriptive representation alone, and that higher levels of incorporation place groups in a more advantageous position to insure that the interests with which they are concerned are heard and seriously considered during the decision-making process (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Sonenshein 1993). Using an incorporation index designed especially for the legislative environment, I found that African American political incorporation in state legislatures has grown dramatically since the mid-1970s.

In terms of the relationship between political incorporation and governmental responsiveness to African American legislators and black interests, the findings reported here indicate that higher levels of African American incorporation do not necessarily translate into what I called internal responsiveness. There was a negative and statistically insignificant relationship between black political incorporation and the passage rates of bills introduced by African American representatives. However, with regard to what I referred to as external responsiveness—state spending in black interest policy categories—political incorporation was found to have a positive effect. In general, the higher the level of African American incorporation, the more states spent on health, education, and social welfare programs.

Surprisingly, and contrary to the findings of previous studies of minority-group political incorporation, the evidence reported in this book indicates that the effects of higher levels of African American incorporation were not decidedly superior to the effects of increased African American descriptive representation. Although black political incorporation had positive and significant effects on spending in each of the black interest policy areas, it was also the case that just the presence of African Americans in state legislatures, regardless of

their political incorporation status, was sufficient to yield significant governmental responsiveness to these interests. In other words, African Americans seem to benefit almost as much from the simple presence of blacks in state legislatures as they do from high levels of African American incorporation in these same institutions.

IN THE EYES OF THEIR PEERS

Whether African American legislators are ultimately successful in their legislative endeavors depends, to a significant degree, on how they are perceived by their colleagues in the legislature. Evidence presented in this book suggests that, everything else being equal, black legislators are perceived and evaluated negatively by other legislators. The case study that examined perceptions of legislative effectiveness in the North Carolina General Assembly yielded the conclusion that their race contributed to African American legislators' being perceived as less effective than their nonblack peers. Even when the African American legislators possessed the characteristics and attributes that, according to previous studies, ordinarily enhance a legislator's reputation for effectiveness, they were nevertheless viewed negatively. In other words, when African American legislators were lawyers, members of the assembly leadership, had seniority, and/or were in the majority party, they were still perceived as less effective than other representatives.

These findings are seemingly at odds with what we have learned about African American political incorporation in state legislatures. The political incorporation index utilizes measures such as seniority, standing committee assignments, majority party membership, and leadership positions to assess the status and clout of the black lawmakers. When their power and influence potential were assessed using this more or less objective scale, the African American legislators in this study fared fairly well. Their level of political incorporation increased significantly from one decade to the next in each of the five states. On the other hand, when judged by the much more subjective standard of perceived legislative effectiveness, the black legislators seemed to be decidedly disadvantaged. Consequently, these findings, notwithstanding what we already know about African American political incorporation, raise interesting and important questions about the openness of state legislative institutions to meaningful participation and influence from African Americans. If, all else be-

ing equal, African American representatives are deemed by their peers to be less effective than nonblack legislators, how successful can they really be in changing or shaping the policies that state legislatures produce?

IMPLICATIONS

At the outset of this book I indicated that the answers to the questions that were to be addressed were potentially relevant to democratic theory and that they had some normative implications for our system of representative government and for African American politics. With regard to African American politics, Lucius Barker and Mack Jones (1994), in one of the more popular texts on the subject, criticized contemporary African American politics for becoming too “routinized.” They argued that as African American elected officials have gradually become more integrated or incorporated into political institutions, they seem to place less emphasis and importance on race and the advocacy of black interests. As a consequence of this routinization, they argue, black representatives’ behavior in these institutions has become conventional, in “more of a *system supporting* than a *system challenging* fashion” (322; emphasis in original). For example, Barker and Jones write:

Seeking to retain a viable political force, the national Democratic Party has followed its erstwhile white supporters to the political right and, in order to remain within the mainstream of the Democratic Party, black political operatives have also moved toward the conservative center, de-emphasizing in the process race-specific interests. (1994:323)

They go on to say that if this trend of routinization continues, it will likely lead to a state of affairs in African American politics where “there will be no agenda that directly addresses the key issues and concerns of blacks, and no effective structures through which one could be forged” (324).

With this argument, Barker and Jones are expressing the long and widely held fear in African American politics that “working within the system,” or so-called “cross-over strategies”—attempts by African American officeholders or candidates for public office to cultivate support from or enter into coalitions with nonblacks—necessarily mean the abandonment of a black interest or progressive agenda. Although I did not directly address this specific issue, some of the results in this book do, however, speak to this concern.

I have presented findings which quite clearly indicate that the fears expressed by Barker and Jones, among others (e.g., Walters 1992), may be in large part unfounded, or at least exaggerated. Being a race representative and a “responsible legislator” is not necessarily an either-or proposition. For the African American legislators in the five states studied here, it seemed to have been “both-and” rather than “either-or.” That is, they tended to provide strong advocacy and support for black interests as well as demonstrate concern for other nonrace-related issues that may have been important to their broader constituency, their legislative careers, or to both. My findings in this regard are consistent with the principles expressed in David Canon’s (1999) “balancing commonality” perspective, which allows for the creation of biracial or multiracial coalitions, “but within the context of serving black interests as well” (254).

In terms of implications for democratic theory, one of the core tenets of our representative democracy is that the substantive interests that exist in the politic be represented through deliberation (Bessette 1994; Manin 1997; Mansbridge 1999). Whether such substantive representation depends upon descriptive representation is one of the questions addressed in a recent article by Jane Mansbridge (1999). According to Mansbridge and other normative theorists (e.g., Bessette 1994; Gutman and Thompson 1996), the answer to this question is yes. Mansbridge argues that descriptive representation is all but essential to the deliberative functions of representative democracy (629). The deliberative function serves to determine which policies are good for a representative’s constituency, and which policies benefit the polity as a whole. “It also aims at transforming interests and creating commonality when that commonality can be genuinely good for all. In its deliberative function, a representative body should ideally include at least one representative who can speak for every group that might provide new information, perspectives, or ongoing insights relevant to the understanding that leads to a decision” (634). In other words, a diverse and varied set of ideas contributes to a deliberation that is healthy for a democracy, and the best way to get this diversity and variety is to have a diverse group of representatives in deliberative institutions like legislatures. Ever since the founding of the American republic, race, ethnicity, and gender have been the diversities that have been most salient and the ones that have mattered the most.

With regard to black interests, the empirical findings here indicate that these are indeed more likely to be introduced and deliberated in state legislatures when there are African American representatives present. The data and analyses in the preceding chapters demonstrate that there is a strong connection be-

tween the race of the representative and the type of representation African American constituents receive.⁴ That is, African American legislators are, for the most part, the ones who speak for African Americans and black interests in state legislatures. It is not possible to say definitively what nonblack legislators would or would not do in their absence, but we do know that when African Americans are present, they are the ones most likely to introduce, for debate, deliberation, and possible enactment, issues of particular concern and importance to the larger African American community.

A continued basic level of trust in our political institutions and the continued legitimacy of our current representative system may rest in part on our ability to insure that there are significant numbers of African Americans (as well as women and other minority groups) in deliberative institutions who speak with distinctive African American (or female or other minority-group) voices.⁵ Moreover, once inside these institutions, we must seek to insure that these representatives are perceived and treated as equal participants, and that their ideas and views are seriously considered. This task is becoming increasingly urgent, given the rapid demographic changes that the United States is currently undergoing. Historically disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups, such as African Americans, are quickly becoming a much larger proportion of this country's population. For the health of our democracy, decision-making institutions must be accessible and open to influence from such groups. As Mansbridge puts it, "Seeing proportional numbers of members of their group exercising the responsibility of ruling with full status in the legislature can enhance *de facto* legitimacy by making citizens, and particularly members of historically underrepresented groups, feel as if they themselves were present in the deliberations."⁶