Notes on Black Representation and Bill Sponsorship

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1 Some Questions about Black Representation

The 103rd Congress saw an influx of twelve new black members of Congress as a result of the creation of new majority-minority districts following the 1990 census (Carol Mosely-Braun is excluded here). This surge in the numbers of black members of Congress (MC hereafter) has inspired a wealth of scholarship seeking to understand the consequences of black descriptive representation in terms of the impact on citizens’ political behavior (Gay 2001, 2002; Tate 2001, 2003; Griffin and Keane 2006), the potential tradeoffs between descriptive and substantive representation (Swain 1993; Cameron, Epstein and O’Halloran 1996; Overby and Cosgrove 1996; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997; Canon 1999; Sharpe and Garand 2001; Whitby and Krause 2001; Shotts 2003; Grose 2005), and the congressional behavior of black representatives themselves (Gile and Jones 1995; Pinney and Serra 1999; Gamble 2007). However, that latter category of research still leaves a large number of questions unexplored. In particular, we know relatively little about the role that black MCs have played in advancing a black policy agenda within Congress. My previous work on the importance of non-black MCs to black agenda setting suggests that black descriptive representation has declined in its value as an agenda setting tool since 1965 (Platt 2008b). This extended research note builds on those findings by exploring the nature of black representation over time. More specifically, I seek to explore the following questions:

1. What are the racial differences in the volume and content of members’ legislative portfolios?
2. What are the racial differences in terms of the types of black issues that are recognized?
3. How has black representatives’ responsiveness to black political activity changed over time?

2 Data, Definitions, and Concept

Before any of the above questions can be addressed, we first need a basic understanding of what sort of bill sponsorship data I am using, how black issues are defined, and a conceptual framework to guide the
empirical exploration. First, I draw on data from the Congressional Bills Project, which has compiled every bill introduced in Congress from 1947 to 1998 and classified them according to nineteen policy topics (Adler and Wilkerson 2007). Second, I coded all of the non-private bills as addressing black issues or not. Based on the “pragmatic black solidarity” developed by Shelby (2005), I define black issues as policies that attempt to fight racism and/or promote racial justice in the United States. In a less abstract sense, black issues must satisfy at least one of the following conditions:

1. **Anti-Racist**: Policies that erect legal protections against racial discrimination and remedies for the negative effects of past discrimination. Hate crime legislation, civil rights bills, the voting rights acts, minority set asides, and affirmative action are all examples of this criterion.

2. **Cultural**: Cultural policies are those landmarks, commemorations, holidays, and monuments that celebrate black achievements and history while simultaneously undermining negative racial stereotypes of inferiority.

3. **Social Welfare**: Social welfare is limited to policies which explicitly address some racial disparity; explicitly attempt to remedy urban poverty; and those which disproportionately impact black Americans. These policies must foster non-stigmatizing, non-discriminatory social programs such as full employment, a guaranteed income, federal control over programs, or an opposition to work requirements. This encompasses a wide range of policies from expanding benefits under AFDC to funding research on sickle cell anemia to increasing federal funding of elementary and secondary education.

Throughout the paper, whenever I speak of black issues I am referring to a policy idea that meets at least one of the criteria outlined above. The aim of this paper is to provide a more comprehensive examination of how black representation contributes to the congressional recognition of these black issues.

Congressional recognition is how bill introductions are conceptualized. Studies of legislative effectiveness have made it clear that most of the bills introduced in Congress never receive anything that might remotely be labeled as attention (Moore and Thomas 1991; Wawro 2000; Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier and Sinclair-Chapman 2003; Krutz 2005). Over the 52 years of bill sponsorship included in this study, only five percent of public bills are enacted into law. Given these small rates of success, the agenda setting literature has generally overlooked the introduction of legislation as a meaningful measure of placing issues onto the formal agenda (Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976). Instead, the formal congressional agenda has been measured through the holding of congressional hearings, what Jones and Baumgartner (2005) refer to as congressional attention. Unfortunately, the existing literature on bill sponsorship does little to redeem its position as an important aspect of agenda setting. Introducing legislation is conceived as either symbolic position-taking (Mayhew 1974; Schiller 1995, 2006) or as a strategy for institutional advancement (Herrick and Moore 1993; Wawro 2000), but neither of these approaches provides a policy-relevant purpose for bill sponsorship. I try to provide such a purpose with a conceptual framework called legislative problem-solving (Platt 2008b,a).
The basic argument is that MCs introduce legislation in order to cultivate reputations as problem-solvers. Problem-solvers are members who identify existing problems, define new problems, and then craft solutions to those problems. Members then use these problem-solving reputations to pursue their multifaceted goals of election, institutional advancement, and good public policy. Legislative problem-solving provides a policy-relevant purpose because it shifts our focus to one of the central ideas in agenda setting – problem definition. Research on agenda setting argues that policy entrepreneurs strategically define/re-define issues to appeal to cross-cutting audiences, and these broadened coalitions of interests allow new participants into the process who break apart established policy monopolies (Cobb and Elder 1972; Schattschneider 1975; Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner, Jones and MacLeod 2000; Sheingate 2006). Introducing legislation is how MCs identify and define problems, so even bills that never get out of committee serve the policy relevant purpose of placing issues onto the public agenda. In that sense, bill sponsorship gauges congressional recognition of issues. Given this conceptualization of legislators as problem-solvers, variation in bill sponsorship should be driven by differences in how MCs recognize/identify problems and the institutional resources available for crafting solutions to these problems.

Rather than going into more detail about how MCs identify problems, the focus will be limited to the conceptualized role that race plays in how MCs craft their legislative portfolios. Race is an important factor in understanding how MCs recognize problems because it helps to define their integrity costs. Integrity costs refer to conflict between a member’s personal preferences and public legislative activity. Basically, MCs have some core set of values that shape how they view the world, and these values will make them more likely to identify certain types of problems as opposed to others. Previous research has shown that race and gender impact how MCs construct their legislative portfolios (Canon 1999; Baker and Cook 2005; Swers 2005, 2007), so I simply extend those findings by arguing that racial identity shapes the types of issues that MCs recognize to establish their reputations as problem-solvers. The first questions raised above call for the exploration of these racial differences in how MCs identify problems. In particular, I am interested in three aspects of bill sponsorship: activity, richness, and diversity. Activity is the number of bills introduced by a member of Congress in a given year. Richness is the number of policy topics (out of a possible nineteen) in which an MC has introduced at least one bill. Diversity is how evenly distributed an MC’s activity is over the nineteen policy categories, and it is measured by the following formula:

\[
D = \frac{1}{\sum \left(\frac{n_i}{N}\right)^2}
\]
In Equation 1, \( n_i \) is the number of bills/hearings that fall within a given topic and \( N \) is the total number of bills/hearings. Higher values mean that there is greater diversity, and the highest possible score is the total number of categories. In this case, there are nineteen policy topics, so a diversity score of 19 means that issues have been evenly distributed across each topic. In the next section, the task is to examine racial differences in activity, richness, and diversity over time.

3 Racial Differences in Bill Sponsorship

Among the most fundamental questions about black representation is whether there are meaningful racial differences in congressional behavior. The literature on race and representation has investigated that question almost exclusively in terms of voting behavior. Earlier work on the tradeoffs endemic to racial redistricting concluded that party and the racial composition of districts – not the race of the member – were most important for maximizing substantive representation (Swain 1993; Cameron, Epstein and O’Halloran 1996; Overby and Cosgrove 1996; Lublin 1997; Sharpe and Garand 2001). In contrast to these findings, research on the Congressional Black Caucus shows that black MCs vote as an extremely cohesive bloc, even when compared to state, regional, or party affiliations (Gile and Jones 1995; Pinney and Serra 1999). Whitby and Krause (2001) find that black MCs have a higher probability of voting favorably on issues of primary importance to black Americans – those that provide concentrated and/or preferential benefits, and Cobb and Jenkins (2001) demonstrate that black MCs in the Reconstruction congresses were the most ardent supporters of racial issues. Lastly, Grose (2005) argues that – even after controlling for party and racial composition – race matters for creating liberal voting records generally and on civil rights issues specifically.

There has been much less work on racial differences outside of voting behavior. Canon (1999) presents evidence that black MCs are more active in giving speeches on racial issues and introducing black issue legislation, and Gamble (2007) highlights the importance of black MCs’ participation in committee markups of such black issue bills. However, in terms of bill introductions more generally, demographic factors such as race and gender are usually not included in the analysis. Rocca and Sanchez (2008) are an exception to this trend by arguing that black and Latino representatives are institutionally disadvantaged in terms of passing bills, so they strategically sponsor at lower rates when Republicans are in control of the House. This section builds on Rocca and Sanchez’s discovery of racial disparities in MCs’ legislative portfolios.
### 3.1 Overview of Racial Differences

Table 1 presents the racial differences between the mean levels of activity, richness, and diversity. Going across the rows, cell entries show the mean for black MCs, the mean for non-black MCs, the difference \((\text{black} - \text{nonblack})\), and the white/black ratio. All of these differences are statistically significant at standard levels. Dealing first with activity, we see that – regardless of whether it is public bills, private bills, or both – black MCs only sponsor two for every three bills that white MCs sponsor. A similar pattern is found in terms of the content of members’ legislative portfolios. On average, black MCs recognize problems in almost two fewer policy areas than their white counterparts, and that lessened breadth is combined with decreased depth to yield a full point gap in the diversity scores of black and non-black MCs. Table 1 sends a fairly straightforward message: black MCs identify fewer problems in a more narrow range of policy areas than non-black MCs. The key question is what accounts for these disparities. Legislative problem-solving offers an alternative explanation for these results rather than relying on the claim of institutional disadvantage posited by Rocca and Sanchez (2008). Racial disparities in richness and diversity suggest that perhaps black Americans are interested in a smaller range of policy issues, so black MCs’ efforts to establish reputations as problem solvers are concentrated in these areas. Platt (2008a) finds that – controlling for race of the member – increasing the proportion of black constituents is associated with declining levels of richness. That finding lends support to the idea that racial disparities in bill sponsorship may be a response to constituents rather than the constraints of the institution. Similarly, Griffin and Flavin (2007) show that black constituents hold black MCs less accountable, so it could be that less is required for black representatives to establish themselves as problem-solvers.

In order to have a better appreciation of which policy areas exhibit racial differences in congressional

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**Table 1: Average Activity, Richness, and Diversity by Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Black MCs</th>
<th>Non-Black MCs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Activity</td>
<td>8.74</td>
<td>13.51</td>
<td>-4.77</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Activity</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Activity</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>10.70</td>
<td>-3.74</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richness</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>-1.58</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recognition, Table 2 presents the ratios of bills introduced by white MCs to those introduced by black MCs in specific policy areas. For example, the cell entry in the first row and first column shows that white MCs introduce 2.53 times the amount of bills on macroeconomic issues compared to black MCs. The difference of means for all these issues were statistically significant. The first point to take away from Table 2 are the issues for which there are no significant differences: health, education, labor, law/crime/family, government operations, and international affairs.\(^1\) Health, education, and labor contain a number of policy proposals that were part of the core black agenda from 1947 to 1998 (Walton and Smith 2003; Platt 2008b). Issues of law/crime/family were not at the center of the black agenda, but certainly it is understandable that questions of criminal justice or teenage pregnancy would be pressing issues that black MCs could build problem-solving reputations upon. Government operations cover a wide range of topics, many of them dealing with bringing pork back to the district, so its exclusion from the table of differences is also intuitive. However, it was not immediately obvious why there would be a lack of racial disparities for international affairs. One possibility is that there are simply very few members overall who can benefit from reputations that revolve around the recognition of non-domestic problems. Alternatively, it may be that the identification of problems relating to South Africa and/or Haiti served to bolster the reputations of black representatives.

The second key point is to note the two areas in which black MCs are more active than their non-black colleagues: civil rights and housing/community development. Black MCs recognize more than double the number of civil rights issues than their white counterparts, and black MCs sponsor over 1.5 times

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*Table 2: Racial Differences in Problem Recognition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>White/Black Ratio</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>White/Black Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>7.34</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>Public Lands</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^1\)These issues are excluded from the table because the difference in means were not statistically significant.
the number of bills on housing/community development introduced by non-black MCs. As with health, labor, and education, these two policy areas were integral to the black agenda over this time period, so it is not entirely surprising that black representatives would disproportionately establish problem-solving reputations by concentrating on civil rights and housing issues. Lastly, Table 2 shows that black MCs are dramatically outpaced in almost every other policy area. These descriptives suggest that racial differences in bill sponsorship are not driven by institutional disadvantages, but by truly distinct views of the types of problems that should be addressed by the national government. In that sense, black representatives are interested in being viewed as qualitatively different kinds of problem-solvers than non-black members of Congress.

3.2 Racial Differences Over Time

For our purposes, it is not enough to know that there are racial differences in how MCs recognize problems. The intent is also to address questions about the changing nature of black representation. With that in mind, Figure 1 plots the white/black ratio for sponsorship of all bills and for public bills respectively. The dotted horizontal line indicates when there are no racial differences. Looking at Figure 1(a) we see that black MCs outpaced their non-black counterparts for extended stretches in the 1950s and 1960s. However, when those periods are compared to the plot of public bills in Figure 1(a), we see that private bills accounted for these sponsorship gaps. After 1970, both plots seem to tell identical stories. There was a peak in the white/black ratio around the time that Ronald Reagan was elected, that peak had trailed off by the mid-1980s, and the gap between black and white bill sponsorship has steadily grown over the last ten years of the sample. Overall, these trends seem to be fairly stable over time, generally fluctuating between a ratio of one and two. In that sense, the nature of black representation has not changed sufficiently to impact the standard disparities in legislative activity.

That basic message of stability is echoed by Figure 2. These two plots show the expected first differences in activity and richness. Greater discussion is presented in Platt (2008a). However, each plot is the product of multi-level regression in which the coefficient on the race of the member is allowed to vary by year. Figure 2(b) suggests that black MCs have begun to recognize a broader array of problems (relative to white MCs) since the mid-1970s. Despite that slight upswing, the richness gap in legislative portfolios has hovered between one and two policy areas for most of the second half of the 20th Century. Figure 2(a) provides even less room for an argument about the changing nature of black representation. Black MCs have consistently recognized fewer problems in terms of both number and type. This finding of stability is not entirely
Figure 1: White/Black Ratio of Bill Introductions Over Time

(a) Total Activity  
(b) Public Activity

Figure 2: The Impact of Race Over Time: These plots show the first differences in Activity and Richness for black and non-black representatives when the coefficient for “Black Reps” is allowed to vary over time.

(a) Activity  
(b) Richness
surprising. Examinations of the CBC’s voting cohesion also suggest that there have not been substantial changes in black representation since 1972 (Gile and Jones 1995; Pinney and Serra 1999). Canon (1999) is interested in changes in black representation that deal specifically with how issues of particularly interest to black Americans are dealt with. I take up some of those questions in the next section by investigating racial distinctions in the recognition of black issues.

4 Recognizing Black Issues

Previous studies have shown that race matters for the recognition of black issues. Canon (1999, 195) finds that older black MCs devote a larger proportion of their legislative portfolios to black issues compared to other MCs – black and white. Baker and Cook (2005) separate cultural and material black issues in their analysis, but find that race matters for the recognition of both types of issues. Neither of these studies looks at more than three congresses, so they simply do not have the flexibility to analyze changes in how black MCs sponsor black issue bills over time. Table 3 presents the overall racial differences in the recognition of black issues. The rows break down these differences according to the black issue criteria discussed in Section 2. Given the small numbers of black issue bills introduced, it is more instructive to compare the ratio of black issues recognized by black MCs to those recognized by non-black MCs. Looking at the third row, we see that black cultural issues are almost entirely the province of black representatives. Although the disparity is not as large, it seems that black descriptive representation is also required for the adequate recognition of black anti-racist issues. On average, black MCs recognize roughly 5.5 times the number of anti-racist issues as their white colleagues. Not surprisingly, the smallest gap – though it is still substantial – occurs for the social welfare criterion. These descriptive statistics fit in nicely with previous findings that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Black MCs</th>
<th>Non-Black MCs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Black/White Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Black Bills</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Racist</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>5.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>16.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
black MCs are far more active on issues that deal more explicitly with racial concerns (Canon 1999; Whitby and Krause 2001; Baker and Cook 2005). The higher disparities for anti-racist and cultural issues suggests that non-black MCs are still hesitant to create problem-solving reputations that are openly geared towards racial issues.

Figure 3 illustrates that idea by seeing how black and non-black MCs construct the portions of their legislative portfolios dedicated to black issues. In Figure 3(a) we see the proportion of black bills sponsored by black MCs that fall under the anti-racist and social welfare criteria respectively. Prior to 1965, black MCs recognized anti-racist issues to the exclusion of social welfare problems. After a transition period from 1965 to 1973, social welfare issues became the focus of the black agenda put forth by black MCs; however, anti-racist concerns were still not forgotten. Figure 3(b) presents some contrast. Prior to 1965, there was parity between social welfare and anti-racist issues on non-black MCs’ congressional agenda. After the major civil rights victories in 1964 and 1965, parity gave way to overwhelming domination of black social welfare issues, typically accounting for more than 80% of all black issue bills introduced by non-black MCs. Conversely, black MCs have only rarely allotted social welfare issues more than 80% of their black congressional agenda. Figure 3(c) shows that part of these racial differences are the result of black MCs’ introduction of black cultural bills. Just as Table 2 conveyed that black and non-black MCs established problem-solving reputations on distinct foundations, Figure 3 displays the substantial racial disparities in the types of black issues that are recognized by Congress.

Although these simple descriptives provide fairly strong evidence that black descriptive representation is essential for the recognition of black issues, multivariate analysis is required to build on the work in the literature. In previous work I found that the introduction of any black bills is more important than the number of black bills introduced (Platt 2008b), so the dependent variable is simply whether a given MC introduced at least one black issue bill in a given year. Following Platt (2008a) I use a multilevel model in order to allow the coefficients for Democrats, race, and the racial composition of the district to vary over time. Figure 4 presents some of the results from that estimation. The solid black line in Figure 4(a) represents the first difference in the probability that a black MC will sponsor at least one black issue bill relative to a non-black MC, and the dotted lines are the 95% confidence bands. Surprisingly, the race of the member consistently has not had any impact on the probability of recognizing black issues. Although this finding is not in accordance with what has been shown in previous studies (Canon 1999; Baker and Cook 2005), it is not necessarily a contradiction. Unlike these previous examinations of black bill sponsorship, I include variables for members’ ideology in the analysis. Figure 4(b) presents the expected probability of sponsoring
Figure 3: Differing Priorities in Black Issue Recognition

(a) Black MCs: Anti-racist vs. Social Welfare

(b) White MCs: Anti-racist vs. Social Welfare

(c) Cultural Issues
black issue bills as an MC moves across the ideological spectrum. There is a drop of roughly 30 percentage
points when ideology moves from -1 to -0.5 on the first dimension. Of the 754 member-year observations
for black MCs in the sample, 444 (58.9%) of those observations fall within that most liberal range of -1 to
-0.5. The point is that the impact of ideology washes out the effects that are generally attributed to race.
Figure 4 asserts that there is nothing special about the blackness of representatives when it comes to the
recognition of black issues; preferences are what actually matter.

These results speak directly to the ongoing debate in the race and representation literature about the
tradeoff between substantive and descriptive representation. Party and the racial composition of a district
are two key factors discussed by those who argue that descriptive representation negatively impacts black
substantive representation (Cameron, Epstein and O’Halloran 1996; Lublin 1997). Figure 5 contains the
expected first differences in the probability of sponsoring black issue legislation when we vary these two
factors. In Figure 5(a) we see that – after taking members’ preferences into account – Democrats are actually
less likely to recognize black issues. Figure 5(b) shows the effect on the probability of sponsoring black issue
bills when a district moves from having 10% black population to becoming a majority black district (51%).
For most of the years in this sample, becoming a majority district would raise the probability of sponsorship
by roughly 5-10 percentage points. These results fit in with the argument in Sharpe and Garand (2001)
that large changes in racial composition are necessary to impact substantive representation. Taking Figures 4 and 5 together provides a rebuttal to claims that descriptive representation is vital due to its impact on black agenda setting. The key finding here is that liberals are the key to congressional recognition of black issues. Grose (2005) shows us that black Democrats tend to be among the more liberal members of Congress, so it would seem that the policy prescription for enhancing black substantive representation should be to maximize the number of black Democrats. However, Lublin (1997) demonstrates the difficulty of electing black non-incumbents without majority districts, and Shotts (2003) suggests that racial redistricting outside of the south might decrease the number of liberals in a state’s delegation. Thus, we are still left with the “paradox of representation.” Maximizing the liberals who are needed for the recognition of black issues could result in decreasing the number of black people serving in Congress.

Despite the lack of racial differences in black bill sponsorship, descriptive representation might still be essential for black substantive representation if black representatives are more responsive to black political activity. The social movements literature argues that having allies in institutionalized positions of power increases the likelihood of movement success (Santoro 1999; Cress and Snow 2000; Jenkins, Jacobs and Agnone 2003; Stearns and Almeida 2004; Amenta, Olasky and Caren 2005). In that sense, we should expect black MCs’ recognition of black issues to increase in accordance with rises in black protest activity.
Platt (2008b) finds that aggregate congressional recognition of black issues by non-black MCs has an inverse relationship with black protest – increasing protest activity leads to declining recognition of black issues after 1965. The task for this section is to explore the relationship between black MCs’ recognition of black issues and black protest activity from 1948 to 1997. Rather than looking at individuals, this analysis will focus on the aggregate number of black issue bills introduced in a year by black MCs. Protest activity is measured as the count of events reported in the *New York Times* as collected by Jenkins, Jacobs and Agnone (2003). Due to the importance of 1965 as a turning point both in black politics generally and protests specifically, I include a dummy that takes a value of 1 for years prior to 1966, and that dummy is interacted with the measure of protest. In order to control for broader trends in bill sponsorship, the total number of bills introduced by black MCs is included as a control. Lastly, the number of black people serving in Congress is used as an offset, so the dependent variable is actually the number of black issues recognized per black member of Congress.

Figure 6 presents the expected rates of black bill sponsorship by black MCs as the annual number of protests increase. For each of these four plots the red circles represent the impact of protest before 1965, and the blue crosses show the impact of protest after 1965. Our discussion begins with Figure 6(a). This figure shows that prior to 1966 black protests are actually associated with declining rates of congressional recognition by black MCs, but after 1965 black representatives are fairly responsive to the political demands of black protesters. These results are in stark contrast to the results for aggregate white recognition of black issues. In that analysis, the relationships were reversed – non-black MCs were responsive to protest prior to 1966 and protest was counterproductive after 1965 (Platt 2008b). At least with regard to legislative responsiveness, descriptive representation leads to substantive benefits. Another important point to take away from Figure 6(a) is the difference in the intercepts for black rates of black issue recognition. Black legislators were more active in sponsoring black issue bills before passage of the Voting Rights Act. Examining the remaining plots provide some nuance to the discussion. We see in Figures 6(b) and 6(d) that the overall patterns we observe mirror the transition from anti-racist to social welfare black issues that were demonstrated in Figure 3. Black MCs during the civil rights era were focused on recognizing anti-racist issues that established civil rights and the basic privileges of citizenship. Conversely, black MCs in the post-civil rights era have concentrated their efforts on addressing the material needs of black Americans through social welfare issues. However, their zeal for these types of issues does not match the efforts of their predecessors. Figure 6 provides an interesting illustration of how black representation has changed over time. As black Americans have become more politically empowered their descriptive representatives in
Figure 6: The Relationship Between Black Protest and Black Congressional Recognition

(a) All Black Bills
(b) Anti-Racist Bills
(c) Cultural Bill
(d) Social Welfare Bills
Congress have become less active on black issues, the issues themselves have changed, but responsiveness has increased. These findings fit in nicely with critiques of black leadership in the post-civil rights era. The lowered levels of recognition for black issues provides evidence for claims that black leaders have become too politically incorporated to offer substantive changes in policy (Smith 1990, 1996). However, the increased responsiveness black representatives show toward black protest activity suggests that such changes might be possible if black Americans are able to successfully mobilize (Smith 1992).

5 Summary

This extended research note has both challenged and re-affirmed the literature. I build on the finding in Rocca and Sanchez (2008) about disparities in bill sponsorship activity by exploring differences in the content of bill sponsorship as well. However, the idea of legislative problem-solving challenges the literature by offering an alternative interpretation of why black MCs identify fewer problems in a more narrow range than their white counterparts. Table 3 affirms the conventional wisdom that descriptive representation provides important substantive benefits in terms of agenda setting, and Figure 3 contributes to those findings by showing the racial distinctions in the types of black issues that are recognized. Yet, the statistical analysis conflicts somewhat with previous studies of black bill sponsorship (Canon 1999; Baker and Cook 2005). The central point emerging from that discussion was that ideology – not race – was the key to recognizing black issues, so concerns about the tradeoff between descriptive and substantive representation are not absent in terms of black agenda setting either. Lastly, black MCs are more responsive to black protest in the post-civil rights era, but they recognize black issues at a lower rate. As a result, it seems that protest is necessary for black representation to reach its full potential. Although these results are admittedly preliminary, they offer a number of avenues for further research into variation in black issue recognition among black MCs, racial differences in legislative effectiveness, ideological changes in the CBC over time, and whether black representation moves as a result of replacement or changes in the members themselves. This note offers some first steps down those paths.
References


