Abstract

I argue that there is a “paradox of ambition” because black electoral success is detrimental to black agenda setting. The last three election cycles suggest that we may be experiencing a surge in black political ambition. Barack Obama’s historic election is sandwiched between the failed efforts of people like Denise Majette, Harold Ford Jr., Artur Davis, and Kendrick Meek. Combined with the specter of Cory Booker’s inevitable run for higher office, scholars have argued that there is a need for a reevaluation of black political ambition (Smith 2009) and a new classification for black politics itself (Gillespie 2009). If we are experiencing a genuine emergence of a new ambitious breed of black politicians, then the paradox of ambition would suggest that we may also be experiencing a major abandonment of black politics. This paper begins to investigate this possibility in terms of individual bill sponsorship and collective power through the committee system.
In the first 132 years (1870-2002) of black Americans serving in Congress only three sitting black members of Congress (MCs) voluntarily left their seats to pursue higher office: Yvonne Burke, Harold Washington, and Alan Wheat. Five black MCs have left Congress to pursue higher office over the past nine years: Denise Majette, Harold Ford Jr., Barack Obama, Kendrick Meek, and Artur Davis. Although only one of these five candidates was successful, Obama’s election as president is safely described as “kind of a big deal.” Smith (2009) argues that this apparent surge of black candidates for statewide office suggests a new structure of ambition, and political scientists and pundits alike have asked what these newly ambitious black politicians might portend for black politics (Bai 2008; Ifill 2009; Gillespie 2010). In this chapter I add some off-key notes to that chorus by investigating the potential consequences of having more ambitious black representatives in Congress.

Beginning with the first big-city black mayors in Gary and Cleveland, each major advance in black electoral success has been accompanied by both declarations of rebirth and eulogies for the death of black politics (Nelson and Meranto 1977; Preston 1987; Smith 1990; Gillespie 2009). These constant reincarnations of black politics focus primarily on questions of electoral strategy, and they try to infer policy consequences from those electoral strategies. The basic idea is that achieving higher levels of electoral success necessarily requires a greater ability to attract white voters. McCormick and Jones (1993) argue that campaigns that are most effective at attracting white electoral support will tend to involve some level of “deracialization” – black candidates will deemphasize policy issues that directly appeal to either race or the (potentially controversial) concerns of black voters. Given the prominence of this concept in the black politics literature, there has been surprisingly little work that seeks to make connections between deracialized campaigns and deracialized governance. I begin to fill in that gap by asking about two separate consequences of black political ambition. First, are ambitious black MCs less active in black agenda setting? Second, does ambition weaken black MCs’ collective institutional power in terms of committee leadership?

I argue that there is a paradox of ambition: black electoral success is detrimental to black agenda setting. Using data on the biographical features of black MCs throughout the history of Congress I
show that there are relatively few changes observed over time. However, there is evidence to suggest
that black MCs with Ivy League pedigrees are a relatively recent development; black Ivy Leaguers
are more likely to be ambitious; and ambitious black MCs sponsor fewer pieces of black interest
legislation. I address the second question by examining data on committee assignments and bill
sponsorship from the 80th to the 110th Congress. I show that black MCs sit on committees that
have greater jurisdictions over black issues; committees with more black subcommittee chairmen
have greater jurisdictions over black issues; there are not significant differences in how black and
white seniority translate into committee power; and the stacking of black MCs on black issue
committees has diluted black institutional power overall. Based on these findings, I conclude that
there are tradeoffs between black electoral success and black policy success. That tradeoff is the
paradox of ambition.

The rest of the chapter proceeds in five sections. Section 1 elaborates on what the paradox
of ambition is conceptually and offers hypotheses to guide the empirical investigation. Section 2
describes the data and presents results on the relationship between biographical features, ambition,
and black bill sponsorship. Section 3 describes the data and presents results on black political
ambition’s potential consequences for black committee power. Section 4 concludes with a discussion
of how this preliminary research fits into a broader understanding of the role of black MCs in black
agenda setting.

1  A Paradox of Ambition

As stated above, black MCs must attract white votes to secure any higher level of office. Ambitious
black MCs want to establish cross-over appeal by showing that their policy interests and expertise
extend beyond the parochial issues of their black constituents. We should observe ambitious black
MCs developing legislative portfolios with both offense and defense in mind. Offensively, these
MCs should sponsor bills that create a reputation for addressing some set of problems that are
important for the intended non-black voting audience. Defensively, black politicians want to avoid
a legislative record that potential challengers could racialize and/or portray as narrowly geared
toward “black special interests.” The consequence of these offensive and defensive considerations is
that ambitious black MCs should be less active in furthering a black issue agenda.

I make three key claims about the paradox of ambition. First, there is a connection between presentation of self and legislative behavior. Second, ambitious MCs should behave differently than their non-ambitious colleagues. Third, white voters are more likely to support a black candidate that is racially neutral. There is support for all three claims in the literature. Fenno (1978) argues that we cannot understand what happens in Congress unless we consider how members present themselves to constituents back in the district. Mayhew (1974) simplifies the argument even further by placing reelection at the center of congressional motivations. Both of these works touch on the same central idea: the necessity of reelection forces MCs to consider how their legislative behavior will be interpreted by voters. As a result, MCs strategically shape that interpretation. Sulkin (2005) makes this connection between elections and behavior explicit through her research on issue uptake – incumbent MCs introduce bills on the policy topics of their electoral challengers. Recent studies have shown that MCs use visual images in their advertisements to signal their legislative commitments (Sulkin and Swigger 2008); MCs campaign on the issue priorities they establish through bill sponsorship (Sulkin 2009); and MCs alter the policy priorities of their bill sponsorship when new constituent concerns are introduced by redistricting (Hayes, Hibbing and Sulkin 2010). Sulkin’s research provides strong, consistent evidence that members’ choices of how to construct legislative portfolios is heavily influenced by how they want to present themselves to voters. The argument about a paradox of ambition applies that insight to a multiracial audience.

Herrick and Moore (1993) are interested in how political ambition shapes legislative behavior. They argue that MCs who are progressively ambitious – those who are seeking some higher office – seek to create broader reputations to appeal to the larger electorates they will have to face. Using data on bill introductions and floor activity, Herrick and Moore (1993) find that ambitious MCs are indeed more active. They sponsor more legislation and give more speeches than their unambitious counterparts. Black MCs not only have to appeal to a larger audience, but they also have to account for the broader range of concerns that a racially diverse electorate might have. The last claim is whether these broader appeals have any effect. Griffin and Flavin (2007) show that white constituents are more likely to hold black representatives accountable for being ideologically out
of step, so there is certainly a problem to overcome. However, Hajnal (2007) uses data on black mayors to demonstrate that white attitudes towards black leadership do change in response to the reality of governance. Basically, establishing a strong reputation as a race neutral candidate can help black MCs to overcome white voters’ negative stereotypes about black leadership. Combining my argument about the paradox of ambition with the findings from the literature suggests a clear hypothesis:

\[ H1: \text{Ambitious black MCs will sponsor fewer black interest bills than non-ambitious black MCs.} \]

The first component of the paradox is that ambition might alter the behavior of individual black MCs. The second component is that, regardless of individual behavior, black political ambition lowers the institutional power that black MCs can wield through the committee system. Gerber (1996) speculated that black MCs’ exceptionally high rates of reelection would lead to incredible influence within the Democratic Caucus via seniority. If more black MCs forfeit their congressional seats in order to pursue higher office, then this apparent advantage in seniority accumulation will never manifest. More specifically, ambitious black MCs will not accrue the necessary seniority to become committee chairmen, so black MCs would have less influence over the legislative process compared to the counterfactual of not running for higher office. The advantages that committee chairmen have as partisan gatekeepers (Cox and McCubbins 2005) and as more effective legislators (Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier and Sinclair-Chapman 2003) has been established in the literature. Gamble (2007) and Minta (2009) demonstrate that black MCs use their committee work to further black interests. The argument is that if black MCs were committee chairmen, then they could use that institutional power in a variety of ways to further the black agenda. Rather than exploring all of these possibilities, my interest in this paper is confined to how black committee leadership is related to the number of black issues that a committee addresses. With that in mind, I offer the following hypothesis:

\[ H2: \text{Committees that have more black MCs in positions of leadership will address more black issues.} \]
It is important to note the distinctions between the two arguments and approaches for the paradox of ambition. The aim for the first component of the paradox is to show that ambition alters black MCs’ legislative behavior. The second component is a counterfactual argument: if ambitious black MCs did not leave their congressional seats for higher office, then they would be able to gain more institutional resources to further black agenda setting. I explore both of these arguments in the next two sections.

2 In Search of New Pathways to Black Political Leadership

In her examination of recent events in black politics Ifill (2009) makes the point that has seemed to become the conventional wisdom: black politicians today are just different from their predecessors. Despite the warning in Gillespie (2009) that there is diversity among the group that she calls the “third wave” of black politics, the popular imagination has envisioned a cadre of Barack Obamas and Cory Bookers who are presenting a radically distinct approach to black political leadership. This perceived difference is at the core of this study of the paradox of ambition. If we are experiencing the genuine emergence of a new ambitious breed of black politicians, then the paradox of ambition would suggest that we may also be experiencing a major abandonment of black agenda setting. This section addresses those concerns by focusing on two related questions: 1) Are there changes in black MCs’ educational, political, and professional backgrounds that are associated with a rise in ambition; and 2) how do these backgrounds and ambitions shape black agenda setting through bill sponsorship? Finding answers to this second question should provide a clear test for our first hypothesis.

In order to explore changes in black leadership over time I began with biographical data on MCs collected by McKibbin (1997). This data set provides variables for a range of individual characteristics for all members of Congress from the 1st to the 104th Congress. Using the Congressional Biographical Directory and the biographical sketches from the Office of the Clerk’s “Black Americans in Congress” website, I was able to expand the biographical data up to the 111th Congress. These data provide measures of educational, professional, and political backgrounds for the analysis that follows. I also used these data to construct my measure of ambition. Following the logic of
Herrick and Moore (1993), MCs were coded as ambitious if they ever seriously considered a run for higher office. In the case of black MCs, higher office includes running for mayor of a big city, such as Chicago. “Seriously considered” is based on press reports that a black MC has formed some sort of exploratory committee for a given position. Lastly, the coding is retroactive, so if a member considers higher office once, then they are coded as ambitious for every year prior to and every year after the actual expression of ambition.

Finally, I needed a measure of black agenda setting. Since I am interested in measuring individual contributions to a black agenda, I use bill sponsorship as the measure of agenda setting. The Congressional Bills Project provides sponsorship data for all MCs from 1947 to 1998. I coded all of these bills for whether or not they addressed black issues. Based on the concept of “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.\(^1\) In what follows I show many descriptive statistics, and the specific methods used to generate a table/figure are discussed within the context of the particular point.

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\(^1\)A longer discussion of these criteria and the coding can be found in Platt (2008).
2.1 Biography and Ambition

Educational backgrounds are the first area to explore for changes in black politicians’ paths to Congress. Figure 1 plots the total number of black MCs for each Congress and the number of those MCs who have received at least an undergraduate degree. There is almost a complete overlap between the two lines because a college education has been a basic attribute for black MCs since Oscar De Priest. The more plausible claim is not that black MCs have changed over time in terms of obtaining college degrees but that those degrees now come from more elite institutions than in the past. Figure 2 addresses this claim by plotting the proportion of black MCs who received their degrees from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) versus those whose degrees
Figure 2: HBCUs vs. the Ivy League: This plot shows the proportion of black MCs with college degrees who attended HBCUs compared to the proportion who attended an Ivy League institution.
came from an Ivy League institution.\(^2\) Prior to the 91st Congress there are too few black MCs for proportions to provide much substantive meaning. It is also not surprising that black MCs prior to the 91st Congress would overwhelmingly be alumni of HBCUs\(^3\); the plot simply illustrates the limited options of the Jim Crow south. The rise of southern black MCs in the 103rd Congress has helped to sustain the proportion of HBCU graduates between 0.4 and 0.5. Black Ivy Leaguers are rare and recent phenomena. Only seven black people with undergraduate degrees from an Ivy League school have ever served in Congress.\(^4\) On one hand, observers are correct in pointing out more black MCs with such an elite pedigree. Whether these seven MCs constitute the beginning of a trend or behave differently than other black MCs is a question to address later.

**Figure 3:** The Relative Stability of Black MCs with Advanced Degrees: The plot on the left shows the proportion of black MCs with college degrees who went on to receive an advanced. The plot on the left shows the proportion of black MCs with an advanced degree who have a JD.

Based on the plots in Figure 3, it is not obvious that there has been a change in black MCs’

\(^2\)The denominator for these plots is the number of black MCs with a college degree, not the total number of black MCs.

\(^3\)Harold Ford Sr. was the first black MC (in the 94th Congress) who could have even attended college after the 1954 Brown desegregation decision, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was the first post-reconstruction black MC who was not born in the south.

educational attainment over time. Since William Dawson, college-educated black MCs have usually
gone on to earn an advanced degree. We see in Figure 3(b) that there is greater diversity in the
types of advanced degrees earned since the 91st Congress. There is some evidence to suggest that
the 103rd Congress began a slight resurgence in the proportion of lawyers, but these gains are fairly
modest. Based on the descriptive statistics, there is little to suggest a broad transformation in black
MCs’ paths to political leadership. The handful of Ivy Leaguers presents the only exception.\(^5\)

Now that we have explored changes in the educational backgrounds of black MCs, our attention
turns toward their professional pursuits prior to joining Congress. Figure 4 uses a stacked plot to
demonstrate the relative proportions of black MCs who worked in business, education/professions,
and law respectively. The green shaded region underlines the point from Figure 3(b): a plurality
of black MCs were lawyers prior to entering public life. This is hardly surprising, since most
elected officials have some background in law. Perhaps what is most interesting about Figure 4 is
the relatively large proportion of professional backgrounds that fall outside of business, education,
general professions, and law. A brief perusal of the data suggests that there is a relatively large
segment of black MCs who have always been involved in public life. For some this meant a career
in civil service, but for others (for example Harold Ford Jr. and William Clay Jr.) this means that
they are professional politicians. As we observed for educational backgrounds, there is not much
in Figure 4 to suggest the emergence of new paths for black politicians to take toward Congress.

Legislative experience is the last area to examine for changes in the backgrounds of black
MCs over time. Unlike education or occupation, there does appear to be an upward trend in the
proportion of black MCs with experience in state legislatures. After a trough between the 90th and
93rd Congresses, Figure 5 shows dramatic growth in the pool of legislative experience possessed by
black MCs. There is a particularly strong surge with the creation of southern majority-minority
districts that led to the large cohort of black MCs in the 103rd Congress. This sort of trend fits in
well with the supply-side explanation of black representation in Canon (1999). In terms of holding
prior office, we see a similar surge in the 103rd, but office-holding was already fairly common

\(^5\) An objection could be made that it is more appropriate to view this data by cohort rather than Congress. It
is not clear that plots by cohort tell any alternative stories to those presented above. Given that black MCs tend
to enter Congress as either single individuals or in large clumps during three periods, plots by cohort are not very
informative.
Figure 4: Black MCs’ Professional Backgrounds: This stacked plot compares the proportions of black MCs who were lawyers (in green), educators or in the professions (black), and those involved in business (red). These plots do not stack up to 100% because some MCs were in miscellaneous fields that are not represented here.
Figure 5: Elective and Legislative Experience: This plot shows the proportion of black MCs who held a prior elective office (red circles and solid line) and served in a state legislature (blue cross and dashed line).
among black MCs. We can draw some tentative conclusions from this descriptive exploration of biographical data. First, there have not been large-scale changes in black MCs’ educational profiles in terms of earning either bachelor or advanced degrees. Second, the distribution of occupations among black MCs is also relatively stable over time. They tend to be lawyers, educators, and professionals. Third, black MCs who were undergraduates at Ivy League schools is a category that did not exist prior to the 102nd Congress. Fourth, black MCs now enter the chamber with more legislative experience at the state level. These last two developments will be further explored to see how they could shape legislative behavior.

2.2 The Costs of Ambition

Figure 6: Black Progressive Ambition, 89th-111th Congress: The plot shows the proportion of black MCs who demonstrated progressive ambition at any point during or after their tenure in Congress. Prior to the 89th Congress there were not cases of demonstrated progressive ambition by black MCs.
I am interested in how changes in the biographies of black MCs are reflected in levels of ambition and types of bill sponsorship. Figure 6 shows the proportion of black MCs in each Congress who demonstrated progressive ambition. The twin peaks in the 108th and 109th Congresses suggest that notions of a more ambitious class of black politicians are not wholly fictional. However, the peaks in the 93rd and 103rd Congress reiterate that these recent changes are not entirely unprecedented. Indeed, the pattern from Figure 6 suggests a connection between ambitious politicians and general surges in the number of black MCs. Between the 90th and 93rd Congresses the black delegation grew from seven to sixteen members. This growth reflected the new electoral opportunities available in the wake of the gains of the civil rights movement. Similarly, creating majority-minority districts in the south prior to the 103rd Congress allowed ambitious black state legislators to move into Congress, and some of these politicians attempted to use their congressional seats as stepping stones to still higher offices. The high levels of black ambition in the 108th and 109th Congresses can perhaps be explained by the trend noticed in Figure 2 – the introduction of Ivy League-educated black politicians.

In her typology of black politicians, Gillespie (2009) argues that a group of “Ivy League Upstarts” are characterized by broad crossover appeal and relatively weak ties to a traditional black political establishment. Due in part to their elite educations, these black politicians are viewed as having longer career trajectories than becoming entrenched incumbents within the House of Representatives. Using a logistic regression, I explore the relationship between an Ivy League education and progressive ambition. The dependent variable is dichotomous for whether or not an MC displayed progressive ambition, and key explanatory variables were an Ivy League education and whether an MC had served in a state legislature. There were additional controls for party, attending an HBCU, serving in the Senate, and being a lawyer. Rather than showing the full table of coefficients, the key results are presented in Figure 7. The figure is a bar plot of the predicted probabilities for a baseline\(^6\) black MC, a black MC who graduated from an Ivy League school for undergrad, and a black MC with prior experience in a state legislature. Figure 7 lends support to the argument in Gillespie (2009). Black politicians with an Ivy League education are far more

\(^{6}\text{The baseline is a non ivy educated, non-state legislator, non-lawyer, Democrat in the House who did not attend an HBCU.}\)
Figure 7: Ivy League Education, Legislative Experience, and Ambition: The bar plot compares the predicted probabilities for whether a black MC will be ambitious. Moving from left to right the bars represent the baseline, an MC who went to an Ivy League undergrad, and an MC with state legislative experience. The difference between Ivy League and the baseline is statistically significant.
likely to demonstrate progressive ambition than those without such elite credentials. Looking at the underlying data, only two of the seven black Ivy Leaguers in Congress have not shown any progressive ambition to this point: Sheila Jackson-Lee and Robert Scott. Whether individuals’ latent ambition leads them to pursue elite credentials or elite credentials create more opportunities to explore one’s ambitions is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is simply that black MCs with Ivy League educations is a relatively new development, and that development has real consequences for the behavior of these politicians.

Now that we have seen some evidence of a relationship between education and ambition, the last task is to explore how these biographical features shape agenda setting behavior. In particular, I am interested in whether a black MC’s background is related to the number of black issue bills he/she sponsors. Figure 8 shows that the answer to that question is mixed. The bar plots are

Figure 8: Relationships between Biography and Agenda Setting: The bar plot shows the first differences calculated from a regression of black issue sponsorship on biographical attributes. Bars that are filled in with blue represent statistically significant differences while clear bars are insignificant.
the first differences from a regression of the annual number of black issue bills introduced by a member on the key biographical features.\footnote{There are also controls for ideology, majority status, party, freshman status, total number of bills introduced, and the black issue jurisdiction of a member’s committee assignments.} First, we see that the nature of MCs’ undergraduate educations – whether they attended the Ivy League or an HBCU – was irrelevant to the number of black issue bills they introduced. An important caveat for this result is that many of the Ivy Leaguers were relatively new MCs because the bill sponsorship data ends in 1998, so perhaps those results will attain significance when there are more observations. The lack of an effect for attending an HBCU is less surprising. During the discussion of educational backgrounds I noted that this variable probably has more to do with geography and opportunities than any statement of allegiance or preferences. There is also some intuition behind the significant result for having legislative experience. Perhaps MCs who come from state legislatures already have an issue identity based on responsiveness to (presumably) black constituencies on the state level; they may simply have the legislative skills that allow them to be more active in certain areas; and they can possess a higher level of policy expertise than those without prior legislative service. All of these potential advantages could add up to greater sponsorship of black issue legislation.

Lastly, Figure 8 shows an interesting association between ambition and black agenda setting. Ambitious MCs sponsor fewer black issue bills. Although the substantive significance is questionable (in terms of magnitude), the negative relationship between ambition and black agenda setting speaks to long-standing questions in the black politics literature. In response to the 1989 elections of black candidates in majority white districts, Smith (1990) argued that these newly ambitious black candidates marked the death of black politics. His point was that these candidates lacked any meaningful connection to a strong black issue agenda. The first hypothesis has been confirmed. Ambitious black MCs sponsor fewer black issue bills than their unambitious counterparts. This supports the argument for a paradox of ambition – black MCs must tradeoff between advocating a black agenda and pursuing higher elected office. In the next section we will explore another component of this paradox: the tradeoff between campaigns for higher office and institutional power in the House of Representatives.
3 Black Influence in the Committee System

Recall that the second component of the paradox of ambition is based on a counterfactual. I am interested in the influence that black MCs would have within the committee system if they remained in the House rather than seeking higher office. In this section an analysis of committee jurisdictions and seniority will suggest that there is a connection between black membership on committees, seniority, and the amount of attention a committee devotes to black issues. There are two steps in this process. First, we will examine how the types of issues a committee addresses varies by the quantity and quality of its black membership. Second, we will examine how black MCs transform their seniority into committee power.

Before addressing any of these questions, we need a measure of committees’ jurisdiction over black issues, what I will refer to as “black committee jurisdiction.” Previous studies of committee jurisdiction have sought to measure the breadth of the types of policy areas that a committee addresses and the depth of that activity in terms of either the number of hearings held or bills referred (King 1994; Baumgartner, Jones and MacLeod 2000; Sheingate 2006). I capture that breadth and depth of bills referred to committees by using Simpson’s Index of Diversity – a common statistic used by ecologists to quantify the biodiversity of a habitat. Diversity is measured by the following formula:

\[ D = \frac{1}{\sum \left( \frac{n_i}{N} \right)^2} \]  

(1)

In Equation 1, \( n_i \) is the number of bills that fall within a given issue subtopic and \( N \) is the total number of bills. Higher values mean that there is greater diversity, and the highest possible score is the total number of subtopics. In this case, there are 225 policy subtopics, so a diversity score of 225 means that a committee addresses an equal number of bills from each subtopic. Since our focus is on black issues, \( n_i \) is weighted by the proportion of bills in a given subtopic that are black issues. These black issue jurisdictions were calculated each year for each standing committee and I attached them to individual MCs using committee assignment data provided by Nelson (2005) and Stewart and Woon (2005).

Rather than speaking about these measures abstractly, Table 1 presents each committee’s juris-
diction over black issues. The table entries show the average jurisdiction score for these committees over the period of this study (1947-1998). Given the generally expansive jurisdiction enjoyed by the Ways and Means committee, it is not surprising to find that it also enjoys the greatest jurisdiction over black issues. It is equally unsurprising that Standards has the least jurisdiction over black issues. Interestingly, Small Business has the third lowest jurisdiction over black issues. This low ranking is surprising given that Parren Mitchell served as chair of the committee for the 97th-99th Congresses, and almost a quarter of the CBC sat on the Small Business committee in the 103rd-104th Congresses. Similarly, the Judiciary committee had six CBC members in the 111th Congress – including John Conyers as chairman, but ranks only fourth in terms of average black issue jurisdiction. It is important to note that these jurisdictions are based on bill referral, so the story could potentially change if we thought about jurisdiction in terms of committee hearings and/or oversight. Lastly, the Education and Labor committee ranks second in jurisdiction. This committee was particularly popular among black MCs in the 1980s when Augustus Hawkins served as chair, and of course, it has historical importance through the legislative work of Adam Clayton Powell.

While Table 1 provides some sense of how black issue jurisdiction varies across committees,
Figure 9 shows the mean black issue jurisdiction over time. I have argued elsewhere (Platt 2008) that the black agenda has become more expansive over time. Figure 9 nicely illustrates this general finding, showing relatively a clear upward trend. Prior to the passage of major civil rights legislation, the black agenda consisted primarily of anti-discrimination policies that fell under a few policy subtopics and were handled by either the Judiciary or Education and Labor committees. After passage of major civil rights legislation in 1964, 1965, and 1968, the black agenda expanded to include a variety of social welfare items that spanned a variety of policy areas and were handled by a larger group of committees. Figure 9 depicts that progression.

Table 2 examines the relationship between the prominence of black MCs on a committee and its black issue jurisdiction. Contrary to the intuition that having a black committee chairman

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8These results are from a linear regression with fixed effects for each committee. The dependent variable was the
would increase a committee’s black issue jurisdiction, the relationship between committee chairs and jurisdiction is negative and insignificant. However, our second hypothesis from the paradox of

Table 2: Black Committee Power and Black Issue Jurisdiction: This table presents first differences in the expected value of committees’ black issue jurisdictions given a one unit increase in the independent variables. The associated upper and lower bounds provide the 95% confidence intervals. The key point is that increasing the number of black MCs and black subcommittee chairs increases the black issue jurisdiction of a committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>First Difference</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Committee Chair</td>
<td>-0.259</td>
<td>-0.607</td>
<td>0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Black Subcommittee Chairs</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Black Committee Members</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Committee Members</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Committee Jurisdiction</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>0.170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ambition argument is confirmed. Committees with more black MCs have higher black issue jurisdictions, and committees with more black subcommittee chairs have higher black issue jurisdictions. An important note of caution for these results is that there have not been any meaningful steps to untangle the causal direction. I cannot distinguish between a story that says that black members/subcommittee chairs influence committees in ways that increase their black issue jurisdiction and a story claiming that black MCs are more likely to select committees that already have higher issue jurisdictions. Indeed, in the next portion of the paper I will make this connection between black issue jurisdiction and committee selection. Despite these methodological difficulties, there is at least some suggestive evidence in favor of the first prong of the counterfactual. The presence and prominence of black MCs on committees is associated with the role committees play in black agenda setting. Examining how black MCs convert seniority into committee power will allow us to establish the second prong of the counterfactual.

black committee jurisdiction of standing committees for each year from 1947-1998.
3.1 Black Interests and Committee Selection

There are two reasons that black MCs may not be able to convert seniority into institutional power through the committee system. First, black MCs may select onto a small number of committees that does not allow them to maximize committee influence overall. As we saw from Table 2, this type of stacking onto committees could still prove valuable to agenda setting if black MCs become subcommittee chairmen. Second, black MCs could be passed over for committee posts despite their seniority. Table 3 begins to address the first concern. These results are drawn from a multilevel linear regression of individuals’ black committee jurisdiction on race, ideology, general committee jurisdiction, and relevant district characteristics. The results for the controls are not of particular interest for this study, so I will not discuss them. However, take note of the almost 1 to 1 correspondence between black committee jurisdiction and overall committee jurisdiction. Looking at the first row of Table 3, we can clearly see that black MCs are on committees with greater jurisdictions over black issues, even after controlling for the racial composition of the district.

Black MCs are driven, at least in part, by black policy concerns when they select their committee

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Table 3: Race, Constituency, and Black Issue Jurisdiction: This table presents first differences in the expected value of committee jurisdictions for black issues given a standard deviation change. The associated upper and lower bounds provide the 95% confidence intervals. The key point is that black MCs’ committee assignments have greater jurisdiction over black issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>First Difference</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black MC</td>
<td>0.677</td>
<td>0.503</td>
<td>0.8601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Urban</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.1146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Black</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
<td>-0.064</td>
<td>-0.0018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Unemployed</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>-0.0077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Jurisdiction</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.937</td>
<td>0.9925</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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9Ideology was measured using the first dimension of DW Nominate common space scores from Poole (1998). General jurisdiction is measured using the 19 major topics similar to Baumgartner, Jones and MacLeod (2000). The multilevel component of the model is that the intercepts are allowed to vary by year. In preliminary analysis, the slopes for the race variables were also allowed to vary by year. There was virtually no change in the coefficients over time, so the simpler model is presented here.
assignments, and that relationship is virtually unchanged over time. To the extent that committee assignments are viewed as an indicator of MCs’ policy interests and institutional goals (I clearly think they should be viewed in this way), then there is no support for the argument that “new style” black politicians emerged in large numbers between 1947 and 1998. More importantly, even in the event of such emergence, it did not seem to result in a lessened commitment to black interests. In that sense, this strengthens the argument for this component of the paradox of ambition – ambition can harm black agenda setting even if the individual members are equally committed.

3.2 Black Seniority and Committee Power

Since there is some evidence that black MCs select onto committees that provide greater opportunities to address black issues, the next question is whether this selection has the unintended consequence of diluting black institutional power overall. Gerber (1996) noted that the lower exit rates for black MCs (in the House) meant that they should gain seniority within the Democratic Caucus over time. Figure 10 shows the average seniority for CBC members from the 80th to the 110th Congresses.\(^{10}\) The sharp dips in average seniority that occur in the 92nd and 103rd Congresses represent the founding cohort of the CBC and the post-redistricting surge in 1993 respectively. This last dip is particularly important because of the severe Democratic losses the following election – losses that were not felt among the CBC. As a result, that large cohort from the 103rd Congress has been able to accrue substantial seniority as Gerber (1996) predicted.

Seniority in and of itself is not particularly interesting. If seniority does not translate into power within the institution, then its value becomes unclear. Given the Democratic Party’s occasional indifference to black voters (Frymer 1999) and the CBC’s various battles with party leadership (Singh 1998), a straightforward translation of black seniority into committee chairmanships should not be taken for granted. As a way of gauging this relationship between seniority and committee chairs, I conducted a multilevel logit where the dependent variable is whether an MC is a committee chair, and the independent variables are majority status, race, seniority, and an interaction between race and seniority. Figure 11 presents the results of that analysis. The figure shows that for most

\(^{10}\)Throughout the paper, seniority is measured as the proportion of MCs whose years in office are less than or equal to the given individual.
Figure 10: Black Seniority Over Time: This plot shows the mean seniority of black Democrats for each Congress.
Figure 11: Translating Black Seniority into Committee Power: This plot shows the relationship between seniority and the probability of serving as a committee chair. The solid black line depicts the effects for non-black MCs and the dashed red line shows the effects for black MCs. Dotted lines represent the 95% confidence bounds.
levels of seniority we cannot distinguish between the probability that black and non-black MCs will be committee chairs. Indeed, for the few levels of seniority where the differences are significant, it is black MCs who are more likely to convert their seniority into a committee chairmanship. There is no evidence to suggest that black MCs are unfairly skipped over in terms of formal authority within the committee system. Given that the Democratic Caucus does not appear to act as an impediment to black institutional power, the last question is whether black MCs’ choices of committees acts as such an impediment.

As suggestive real-world evidence for the above findings, the three most senior members of the CBC – John Conyers, Charles Rangel, and Edolphus Towns – are all serving as committee chairs in the 111th Congress (Judiciary, Ways and Means, and Oversight and Government Reform respectively). In addition to these three, Bennie Thompson, a member of the 103rd cohort, is chair of the Homeland Security committee. As a way of gauging the potential committee power of the CBC in the 110th and 111th Congresses, consider the following hypothetical: if 1) black MCs could go back to their freshman Congress and choose committees to maximize the number of black committee chairs in the present Congress; 2) all non-black MCs’ committee assignments remain constant; and 3) chairs are awarded purely on seniority, then which committees could plausibly have black chairs in the 110th and 111th Congresses.

Table 4: Potential Black Committee Chairs 110th-111th Congresses: This table shows committees that are chaired by MCs with seniority lower than at least one CBC member who was not serving as a committee chair at the time. The columns show the committee, who the chair was, how many CBC members had greater chamber seniority than the chair, and the black issue jurisdiction for the committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee</th>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>CBC Seniors</th>
<th>Mean Jurisdiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>Peterson</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Slaughter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Tech.</td>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Business</td>
<td>Velazquez</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Affairs</td>
<td>Filner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>Reyes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Admin.</td>
<td>Brady</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards</td>
<td>Lofgren</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 presents the results of this hypothetical situation. Since the days of Shirley Chisholm, the Agriculture committee has enjoyed a reputation as being irrelevant to the interests of black MCs, who are primarily from urban districts. Nonetheless, the committee does not have an inconsequential jurisdiction over black issues, so John Lewis, Edolphus Towns, and Donald Payne could have potentially been chairmen. Since John Lewis serves on Ways and Means, we will not count him as a hypothetical switch. Individual MCs do not have the ability to just select onto the Rules committee, so it is not worth discussion here. The Intelligence and Ethics committees are perhaps the clearest examples of how black MCs’ selection into black interest committees may dilute overall power within the institution. Given the low jurisdiction these committees have over black issues, it is understandable that they would not be highly sought after seats by the CBC. However, given the recent ethics investigations against CBC members, the 13 black MCs who hypothetically could have been chair of this committee may be experiencing regrets. Similarly, House Administration does not offer much in terms of policy interests, which perhaps explains why Artur Davis is its sole black member. The more interesting cases are Small Business and Veterans Affairs. We’ve excluded John Lewis from consideration. William Jefferson pursued and was awarded seats on prestige committees (Ways and Means then Budget), but those assignments were stripped away due to his legal troubles. Maxine Waters and Donald Payne appear to be further examples of choosing black interests. Payne serves on Education and Labor, which has the highest mean black issue jurisdiction outside of Ways and Means, and Waters serves on Judiciary and Financial Services, which rank fourth and fifth respectively in black issue jurisdiction. Table 4 offers some speculative evidence on the tension between pursuing black interests and accruing institutional power.

This speculation raises a final empirical question of whether black MCs are packed into a few committees, thus limiting their institutional power. Figure 12 shows the diversity of black committee assignments. Diversity is measured according to the same formula that has been used for jurisdiction. The key difference in Equation 1 is that \( n_i \) is the number of black MCs on committee \( i \) rather than the number of bills in a given subtopic (and thus \( N \) is the total number of black MCs). As Singh (1998) finds, black MCs spread out to hold seats on a variety of committees as their numbers increased. However, the diversity of committee assignments settles in at around
Figure 12: Diversity of Black Committee Assignments: This plot shows the diversity of black Democrats' committee assignments for each Congress.
14 after the 103rd Congress. A diversity score around 20 would mean that the CBC’s members were evenly distributed across all of the committees, at roughly two per committee. Instead, black MCs were over-represented on the Financial Services and Judiciary committees in the 110th Congress. In that sense, the decision of Maxine Waters is hardly an exception. There are a few key points to take away from this exploration of black MCs’ committee assignments. First, we see that seniority has not been converted into the level of committee power that we might have expected, but Figure 11 shows that this failure is driven primarily by black MCs’ committee preferences. Second, we see that black MCs tend to stack themselves onto committees that have higher black issues jurisdictions. This is consistent with the finding in Table 2 that shows an association between black issue jurisdiction and the prominence of black membership. Taken together, these two points reinforce the argument that there is a paradox of ambition. Even these crude associations between black issue jurisdictions and black committee membership help to establish the counterfactual: if black MCs forfeit their House seats to pursue higher office, then they are weakening this suggestive relationship between committee influence and black agenda setting. Lastly, this discussion has raised the specter of an alternative tradeoff. The relationship between black issue jurisdiction and black committee membership could be evidence of a tradeoff between intrainstitutional ambition and black agenda setting.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that there is a paradox of ambition. Black electoral success negatively impacts black agenda setting in Congress through at least two distinct channels. Ambitious black MCs introduce fewer black issue bills because they are trying to position themselves as crossover candidates. As a result, an increase in the number of ambitious black MCs should lead to less support for a black agenda collectively. At the same time, the departure of ambitious black MCs prevents the CBC from maximizing one of its few strengths – the ability of its members to accrue seniority. Although we did not see a direct relationship between black committee chairmen and the number of opportunities a committee provides to deal with black issues, there are plenty of other reasons to believe that black committee chairs could potentially be powerful tools in the realization of a
black policy agenda. Even without a relationship for committee chairs, there is still a tradeoff between the presence and prominence of black MCs on committees and the committees' attention to black issues. Basically, in terms of both individual behavior and collective, institutional power black political ambition is detrimental to black agenda setting.

This discussion of the paradox of ambition is only one part of a larger investigation of the role that black representation plays in black agenda setting. The broader aim is to understand the limits of black representation (in terms of agenda setting), explain why those limits exist, and then explore and explain how those limits have changed over time. Understanding the paradox of ambition is important because it highlights two types of limitations:

- Black voters are a minority, so there is inevitable tension between black electoral achievement and black policy achievement.

- Agenda setting power is not evenly distributed throughout Congress, so the role of black representation in black agenda setting is inevitably tied to black MCs’ abilities to access to these clusters of power.
References


