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The Role of Personal Attributes in African American Roll-Call Voting Behavior in Congress

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In this research note, the authors explore the extent to which personal attributes influence voting behavior for African American members of Congress. The authors test the relationship between legislators' personal attributes and Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores for black members of the 101st to 108th Congresses. The results suggest that personal attributes matter. They increase the explained variance in the models, and factors such as generational cohort, religion, and military experience are statistically significant. These results suggest that while descriptive members of Congress share much in common, they should not be interpreted as monolithic with respect to congressional voting.

Keywords: *descriptive representation; substantive representation; attributes; Latino; African American*

The purpose of this research note is to examine the extent to which the personal attributes of black members of Congress (MCs) influence their voting behavior. The motivation for the study stems from two primary sources. First, the 2006 congressional elections led to an unprecedented number of black MCs chairing full committees: Charles B. Rangel (D-NY) of Ways and Means, the late Juanita Millender-McDonald (D-CA) of House Administration, John Conyers Jr. (D-MI) of Judiciary, and Bennie Thompson (D-MS) of Homeland Security. Since black MCs tend to behave differently than white MCs (e.g., Swain 1993; Lublin 1997; Canon 1999; Tate 2003), notwithstanding Swain's (1992) analysis, it is reasonable to expect their newly acquired positions of influence to facilitate substantive changes in policy agendas.

Second, much of the work on black representation in Congress has tended to treat black MCs as a monolithic group (e.g., an MC is coded as either black or not black). But Canon (1999) and Tate (2003) are among those who have found interesting variation within the Congressional Black Caucus. Similarly, Dovi's (2002) analysis contends that minority and female representatives are not monolithic and that some descriptive representatives are preferable to others. We applaud these efforts to move beyond a monolithic view of descriptive representation and

advance this argument by exploring the diversity among black MCs and how it may affect their roll-call vote decisions.

We approach this study from the perspective that personal attributes matter to how MCs vote. We believe representatives' descriptive characteristics are important determinants of their ideology, a factor that students of Congress have long shown to be a key predictor of congressional voting (see Kingdon 1989; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Our theory is grounded in the work of Easton and Dennis (1969) and Jennings and Niemi (1974), who argued that attitudes are a result of a lifelong process of political socialization and learning. To test our theory, we focus on five general agents of socialization for black MCs: education, religion, generational cohort, military experience, and nativity relative to their district. We also address gender, a factor that has consistently been shown to matter for congressional behavior.

Our results show that even after controlling for institutional and electoral factors, personal attributes

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indeed matter to how black MCs vote. This suggests that scholars interested in descriptive representation should move beyond simple dichotomous measures for race, ethnicity, or gender when studying minorities' congressional behavior.

Data and Method

We used Amer's (2005) CRS report as well as *The Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Ujifusa 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) to identify sixty-seven black members of the House during our period of study. The unit of analysis is the legislator-Congress, and the data take a cross-sectional time series form. Because most individuals served more than one term during this period of study, most appear multiple times in the data. To account for the nonindependence across observations, we cluster individual MCs in our ordinary least squares regression model.

The dependent variable in our study is the voting behavior of African Americans in Congress. We utilize Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) well-known DW-NOMINATE scores to measure a member's voting behavior. We have multiplied the scores by 100 to simplify interpretation (the scores thus range from -100, indicating most liberal, to 100, indicating most conservative). One advantage DW-NOMINATE scores have over interest group ratings is that they allow for temporal comparability (see Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999).¹ This is an important characteristic since our data consist of all black legislators who served between the 101st and 108th Congresses.

Independent Variables

There are three sets of independent variables in the model, one of which is institutional in nature (for detailed coding schemes of these variables, see the appendix). Specifically, we include measures for an MC's party affiliation, whether he or she is a party or committee leader, and his or her length of tenure. Previous research has found Democrats (Bartels 1991; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Erikson and Wright 2000, 2001) and more senior members (Payne 1991; Moore and Hibbing 1996) of Congress to be more liberal in their voting records. We expect similar trends among black MCs. In contrast, we expect black leaders to vote more conservatively than black nonleaders because as Swain (1992) noted, promotions to leadership positions introduce minority MCs to an inevitable host of cross-pressures that dampen their incentives to represent minority issues. Therefore,

gaining influential positions may pressure minorities into being less responsive to their minority constituents and may lead to more conservative voting records.

The second set of variables is electoral in nature. First, we include presidential vote share, a popular measure for constituency preferences (e.g., Erikson and Wright 2000, 2001; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). We also control for whether a black MC represents a majority-minority district, a factor that still attracts considerable debate.² We also control for electoral security and for whether the legislator represents a Southern district. We expect a black MC's voting record to become more liberal as his or her district votes more Democratic, as his or her district becomes less competitive, and if he or she represents a majority-minority district or one that is outside of the South.³

The final set of explanatory variables is personal attributes. These variables were collected from *The Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Ujifusa 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004), from representatives' Web sites, and through personal phone calls to legislators' offices. These variables are gender, type of high school education, level of education, type of undergraduate institution, involvement in historically black fraternities or sororities, religion, military experience, and generational cohort.

The first attribute that we examine is gender, which has long been shown to influence congressional voting (e.g., Welch 1985; Burrell 1994; Swers 1998). Among other effects, research finds that women are more liberal than their male counterparts in Congress, even within the same party (Burrell 1994; Welch 1985). We also include several measures of an MC's education, a factor that has been shown to have a variety of important effects on political socialization and learning. First, students of socialization find that the more education citizens receive, the more liberal they become (Feldman and Newcomb 1969). We believe the same will hold for black MCs. Second, we expect a member's type of schooling to affect his or her voting behavior. For example, it is reasonable to expect private education to be a proxy for a representative's socioeconomic background. Given the well-documented relationship between class and political opinions, it is likely that those who could afford a private education are more conservative than those who attended public school.

We also employ measures for several aspects of the educational process that may be unique to African Americans. For example, historically black colleges and universities have been critical to the educational attainment of African Americans. We believe that

attending a historically black college or university increases notions of group identity and will therefore lead to more liberal voting records for African American MCs. Similarly, black fraternities and sororities have been and continue to be a major agent of socialization for black college students by reinforcing solidarity and pride in black history among members (McClure 2006). We expect black MCs who were members of these organizations to have more liberal voting records than their colleagues who were not.

Generational effects have also been shown to affect the political preferences of individuals.⁴ Following Delli Carpini (1986), we expect younger MCs to be more conservative than older cohorts in Congress. We also employ a measure for military experience among black MCs. African Americans have been and continue to be overrepresented in the military (U.S. Department of Defense 2006; Segal et al. 1999). Given the trend of enlisted military personnel to be more conservative than the civilian population (Betros 2001), we expect black MCs with military backgrounds to be more conservative than those without experience in the military. Furthermore, we control for whether an MC represents a district from the state in which he or she was born. Actually being from the locale that one is representing would presumably promote stronger ties to that community, potentially strengthening the relationship between the representative and his or her constituency. Since virtually all black MCs in our data are from Democratic districts, we anticipate that those MCs who represent their home states will provide greater substantive representation to their constituency base, leading to more liberal voting records.

Finally, religion has been shown to affect the political socialization of individuals. The National Baptist Convention is the largest religious organization among African Americans, with more than 30,000 churches and 6 million members. This is consistent with our data: of the sixty-six African American legislators in our data set, thirty-five (or 53 percent) are Baptists. We therefore limit our analysis to Baptists or non-Baptists. Despite the challenge of translating Baptists' multidimensional ideology into a one-dimensional continuum, we expect Baptists to vote more conservatively than non-Baptists due to the overall conservativeness of Protestant denominations.

Results

Table 1 depicts the results for two models: a model with only institutional and electoral variables and a

second that includes personal attributes. Our intent is to determine whether personal attributes add explanatory value to what previous research has determined to be significant predictors of congressional behavior, most notably, party affiliation and constituency preferences. The second column (model 1) shows that electoral and institutional factors do an adequate job of explaining black MCs' voting behavior ($R^2 = .68$). Furthermore, the variables perform as expected, with Democrats voting approximately 78 points more liberally than Republicans and party leaders voting approximately 14 points more conservatively than nonleaders. Among institutional factors, for every 1 percent increase in a district's Democratic partisanship, its black MC becomes .45 more liberal. And for every 1 percent increase in a black MC's previous vote margin, his or her voting record becomes about .13 more conservative. Tenure, committee leadership, majority-minority districts, and region are insignificant in model 1.

Model 2 is the "unrestricted" model—it controls for personal attributes as well as institutional and electoral factors. Four of the personal characteristics are statistically significant, and the overall R^2 value increases 12 points to .80, indicating that personal attributes do in fact matter to black congressional behavior. First, while African Americans' type and level of education do not matter to their voting record in Congress, fraternity/sorority membership does. However, contrary to our expectation, members of black fraternities and sororities vote approximately 5 points more conservatively than nonmembers. While purely speculative at this point, this may be due to fraternity or sorority membership's serving as another proxy for socioeconomic status. Membership would require new inductees to have the financial ability to pay annual dues and a variety of other hidden costs to remain active members. Similarly, there may be a tendency for new inductees to be the children of earlier members who have themselves reaped the economic and social benefits of a college education and the professional networking opportunities that Greek-letter organizations are believed to provide (McClure 2006).

Second, generational effects have a meaningful influence on African American congressional behavior. Although MCs who belong to the Silent Generation or to Generation X do not have voting records that differ statistically from those in the Builder Generation (the baseline category), the coefficients indicate that younger MCs have more conservative voting records than do older MCs. For example, Silent Generation MCs, Baby Boomers, and Generation Xers vote about 6, 13, and 16 points more conservatively than MCs in the Builder Generation, respectively. Baby

Table 1
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results: Roll Call Behavior of Black Members of Congress

Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)	
	Model 1	Model 2
Democrat	-78.200*** (8.328)	-83.840*** (7.498)
Tenure (years served)	-0.236 (0.186)	-0.122 (0.136)
Party leader	13.483*** (2.770)	13.800*** (3.461)
Committee leader	-0.863 (2.365)	0.579 (1.872)
Democratic presidential vote	-0.447** (0.174)	-0.404** (0.143)
Legislator's previous vote margin	0.131* (0.077)	0.100 (0.062)
Represents majority-minority district	-0.555 (3.618)	-1.432 (2.666)
Represents Southern district	1.980 (3.595)	0.730 (3.400)
Attended public high school		-2.161 (2.940)
Advanced Degree (MA, PhD, or JD)		2.491 (3.130)
Fraternity/sorority membership		5.515** (2.375)
Attended a historically black college or university		4.431 (2.760)
Female		3.041 (3.161)
Served in military		7.173** (2.383)
Baptist		5.150** (2.460)
Baby Boomer (1943-1960)		12.731*** (3.740)
Generation X (1961-1979)		15.756 (10.045)
Silent Generation (1930-1942)		5.863 (3.815)
Represents district in home state		-2.182 (2.242)
Observations	272	272
R ²	.684	.801

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Boomers' voting records differ from Builders' records at the .05 level of statistical significance, while the other two cohorts just miss the more relaxed .10 level of significance.

These results suggest that black MCs have become more conservative in their voting behavior over time. This may be due to the evolving agenda of Congress. Older cohorts were voting on major civil rights legislation (Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act, etc.) wherein African American interests were clearly advanced through more liberal voting records. However, that may no longer be the case as the agenda has moved to social issues (gay marriage, abortion) about which African Americans tend to be more conservative (Tate 2003). This trend is also consistent with African Americans generally, as public opinion data indicate that older African Americans were far more likely to identify themselves as liberal than younger blacks (McClain and Stewart 2002).

Finally, military background and religion both perform as expected. Military background is statistically significant at the .05 level and positive. Specifically, African American MCs who have military backgrounds vote approximately 7 points more conservatively than MCs with no military service record. Also, Baptists vote 5 points more conservatively than non-Baptist black MCs. This suggests that the black

church continues to play an important role in the politics of the African American community.

Interestingly, neither gender nor attendance at a historically black college or university has an impact on African American roll-call votes. Although female MCs have been found to vote more liberally than their male colleagues overall, there does not appear to be any gender differences within the African American congressional membership. We believe this is due to the relatively liberal ideology already prevalent among African Americans. In comparison to female and Latino MCs, African Americans have the most liberal roll-call voting records. Thus, any potential impact of gender is diminished by the overall liberalism of African Americans generally. Contrary to our theory regarding the role of historically black college and university attendance in the formation of group identity, this factor does not appear to matter to the voting records of African Americans.

Finally, there are a couple of notable changes in the electoral and institutional effects after controlling for personal attributes. First, the strength of party increases to a nearly 84-point difference in liberalism between Democrats and Republicans in the full model, up from 78 points in the previous restricted model. Second, electoral security is no longer significant with the inclusion of personal attributes. This is an interesting result.

We believe one explanation for the change is electoral security's covariance with black MCs' personal attributes. Although the collinearity is not high enough to disrupt the validity of the model, it is certainly reasonable to argue that descriptive characteristics affect vote margins. Thus, controlling for exogenous factors such as gender, religion, and education dampens the significance of electoral security. The relationship between electoral security and personal attributes certainly deserves further research.

One of the more interesting findings is the nonfinding for the significance of majority-minority districts in determining black congressional behavior. Results from our analysis of internal variation among African American MCs are consistent with Swain (1993) and suggest that African American MCs from majority-minority districts do not vote any differently than those from more diverse districts. While majority-minority districts may be meaningful in other contexts, when applied to the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation for African Americans, they are not.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research note was to determine the extent to which the personal attributes of African American MCs influence their ideological positions on votes. We included in the analysis personal attributes that research has found to be agents of political socialization and learning and therefore important determinants of ideology in general. Our results show that personal attributes indeed help to explain African American voting records in Congress. After controlling for institutional and electoral factors, the results show that religion, military service, generational cohort, and membership in fraternities and sororities do have significant effects on voting behavior. Type of education, level of educational status, and gender, on the other hand, do not.

The most important implication of this study is that it shows that personal attributes matter to congressional behavior. Dovi (2002) and others argued that the descriptive attributes of representatives have normative value, primarily because descriptive representation is a necessity for real democracy. Attributes such as generational cohort and religion are important agents of socialization that are expressed through the voting behavior of black MCs. These personal attributes therefore may provide important cues to voters, particularly in elections with multiple minority candidates.

It is likely that personal attributes are important for other groups in Congress as well. For example, we find similar results for Latino MCs in a separate

study (Rocca, Sanchez, and Uscinski 2008), and Richard Cohen of the *National Journal* recently examined the role that motherhood has on the careers of women in Congress (Cohen 2007). So while

Appendix Dependent and Independent Variables

Variable	Coding Scheme
Ideology (dependent variable)	DW-NOMINATE score (-100 = <i>most liberal</i> , 100 = <i>most conservative</i>)
Democrat	1 = <i>Democrat</i> , 0 = <i>Republican</i>
Tenure	Number of years served
Party leader	1 = <i>speaker, majority leader, minority leader, majority whip, minority whip</i> ; 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Committee leader	1 = <i>full committee chair, subcommittee chair, full committee ranking minority member, subcommittee ranking minority member</i> ; 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Democratic presidential vote	Democratic candidate's percentage in district—democratic candidate's national percentage
Legislator's previous vote margin	Incumbent vote share—challenger vote share
Represents majority-minority district	1 = <i>district's black population > 50 percent</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Represents Southern district	1 = <i>legislator serves in a Southern district</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Advanced degree	1 = <i>MA, PhD, or JD</i> , 0 = <i>BA or less</i>
Attended public high school	1 = <i>attended public high school</i> , 0 = <i>attended private high school</i>
Fraternity/sorority membership	1 = <i>member</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Attended a HBCU	1 = <i>attended HBCU undergraduate</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Female	1 = <i>female</i> , 0 = <i>male</i>
Served in military	1 = <i>military background</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Baptist	1 = <i>Baptist</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Baby Boomer	1 = <i>born between 1943 and 1960</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Generation X	1 = <i>born between 1961 and 1979</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Silent Generation	1 = <i>born between 1930 and 1942</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Builder Generation (base)	1 = <i>born between 1900 and 1929</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>
Represents district in home state	1 = <i>represents state where born</i> , 0 = <i>otherwise</i>

Note: HBCU = historically black college or university.

descriptive MCs share much in common (e.g., party and representing majority-minority districts), they should not be interpreted as interchangeable members of monolithic groups with respect to their congressional behavior. Our research suggests that their personal attributes indeed matter.

Notes

1. The DW-NOMINATE scores of black members of Congress are highly correlated (.67) with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights vote scores. The relationship is significant at the .01 level, indicating that the more comprehensive DW-NOMINATE measure captures much of the nuances associated with the more specific Leadership Conference on Civil Rights measure.

2. Some contend that race has no discernable impact on congressional behavior (Swain 1993; Sharpe and Garand 2001) or that majority-minority districts actually detract from their substantive representation (Hill 1995; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Lublin 1997). Other researchers suggest a continued need for majority-minority districting (Hutchings, McClerking, and Charles 2004) or alternative approaches that opt for less-than-majority districts to minimize unintended consequences (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Sharpe and Garand 2001).

3. Most of the legislators in our data set are secure in their seats (the average vote margin is 78 percent) and represent districts that are heavily Democratic (the average presidential vote is 73 percent in favor of the Democratic presidential candidate), majority-minority (forty-two of the sixty-seven Black members of Congress represent majority-minority districts), and outside the South (forty-one of the sixty-seven represent non-Southern districts).

4. We borrow Howe and Strauss's (1992) definitions of American generations: Silent Generation, 1930 to 1942; Baby Boomers, 1943 to 1960; and Generation X, 1961 to 1979.

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