

# Descriptive Representation and the Composition of African American Turnout

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*Though many studies have focused on African Americans' turnout levels in descriptively represented electoral districts, few have examined the composition of African-American turnout in these districts, compared to districts that are not descriptively represented. This study contends that descriptive representation should conditionally affect African Americans' political participation, given preference heterogeneity among this group. It then examines the extent to which the ideological orientations of African Americans condition the effect of their Representative's race in the 104<sup>th</sup> House on their probability of participating in the 1996 national election. The study finds that when liberal African Americans are descriptively represented, they are more likely to vote, while moderate and conservative African Americans are less likely to vote. These findings not only help to resolve prior studies' disparate conclusions concerning descriptive representation's participatory effects, but they also show that descriptive representation affects which African Americans' interests are communicated to elected officials through voting.*

Observers of American politics have long been interested in not only the volume of electoral participation that takes place (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1988; Teixeira 1992; Wattenberg 2002), but also the composition of the voting population (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). One reason for the latter focus on *who* participates in politics is the belief that, as Lijphart observed, “who votes, and who doesn’t has important consequences for who gets elected and for the content of public policies” (1997, 4; see also Bartels 1998; Griffin and Newman 2005; Hill and Leighley 1992; Key 1949; Verba 2003).

Despite these important motivations for examining the composition of the voting population, studies of African-American political participation have focused almost entirely on the level of African-American voting (e.g., Gay 2001; Kousser 1999; Tate 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For instance, a series of studies in recent years has uncovered mixed evidence that African Americans who are descriptively represented, i.e., those

who are represented by African Americans, are generally more likely to participate in elections (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001; Tate 2003). This focus on stimulating African-American turnout is understandable and important, given the legal and economic barriers to voting that African Americans historically have encountered (Kousser 1999), and still face (Guinier 1994). However, as a consequence scholars know much less about the unique factors affecting the composition of the African-American voting population, including its relationship to descriptive representation.

This is a significant omission, for several reasons. First, studying the effect of descriptive representation on turnout among African-American subgroups will illuminate whether theories connecting descriptive representation and political participation should be stated in conditional terms. In addition, better knowledge of the effects of descriptive representation on the composition of the African-American voting population may shed light on the literature’s conflicting results concerning descriptive representation and turnout. Finally, the link between

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voting and political influence suggests that more should be known about the factors affecting which African Americans vote (Bartels 1998; Griffin and Newman 2005; Key 1949; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). That is, if scholars are concerned about the transmission of African Americans' preferences to elected officials, they should investigate how descriptive representation affects "who votes" among African Americans.

For reasons to be elaborated, this study contends that representation by an African American Member of Congress (MC) will boost the probability that ideologically liberal African Americans will participate in elections, while more conservative African Americans will be less likely to vote when they are descriptively represented. Specifically, using data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES), this study asks whether African Americans' ideological orientations condition the effect of their Representative's race in the 104<sup>th</sup> House on their probability of participating in the 1996 national election. Like prior studies (Gay 2001; Tate 2003), it does not uncover evidence that descriptive representation in Congress generally improves turnout among African Americans, even when they know their MC's race. More to the point of this analysis, however, the study finds that liberal African Americans are much more likely to vote when they are descriptively represented, while more conservative African Americans are less likely to vote. Moreover, these results are robust in a number of ways. Descriptive representation does affect the ideological composition of the African-American voting population, and thus which African Americans' interests are communicated to elected officials on election day.

## Background

Motivated by a desire to better understand the mechanisms affecting the political participation of racial minorities and women, and by the hope of boosting the involvement of these groups in public affairs, a number of studies have theorized that descriptive representation should broadly increase turnout among descriptively represented groups. For instance, because these groups historically have been excluded from many aspects of the political process, descriptive representation may "empower" them by conveying the message that politics is not an exclusionary domain (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Tate 2003). Descriptive representation might also affect political participation by increasing the political knowledge and interest of descriptively represented groups (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and

Verba 2001; Tate 1993). Finally, groups who are descriptively represented may sense that they have a better chance of achieving their goals through government, spurring increased participation (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In sum, descriptive representation and in particular "[b]lack congressional representation. . . could prime the pump of minority voter participation and pull the black community into the political process" (Gay 2001, 589).

However, the empirical studies of descriptive representation's effect on aggregate voter turnout have produced somewhat conflicting results. For instance, studies find that African Americans who reside in cities with African-American mayors (Bobo and Gilliam 1990), or who have an opportunity to vote for an African-American presidential candidate (Tate 1993) are more likely to participate in elections. Residence in one or more majority-minority districts—which is closely associated with descriptive representation—also has been shown to stimulate Latino turnout (Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004). Finally, there is some evidence that ballot "roll off" rates in contests for state and local offices (Vanderleeuw and Liu 2002) and uncounted vote rates (Herron and Sekhon 2005) are lower when African Americans have the opportunity to vote for descriptively representative candidates. However, other studies have uncovered little evidence that the race of MCs significantly affects African-American turnout overall (Brace et al. 1995; Gay 2001; Tate 2003). This mixed evidentiary record tends to undermine the theoretical links between descriptive representation and political participation recounted above.

One reason the evidence of descriptive representation's participatory impacts is not more definitive is that much theoretical and empirical work incorrectly assumes descriptive representation uniformly affects all members of descriptively represented groups. This assumption is understandable in the case of African Americans, given this group's greater attitudinal cohesiveness compared to other segments of the population. However, as many have shown, African Americans' attitudes are by no means monolithic (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Canon 1999; Gay 2004; Gilliam 1996; Tate 2003). If African Americans' attitudes are not identical, and (as shown below) the intersection of these attitudes with their MC's liberalism affects turnout decisions, why should it be expected that all African Americans will be similarly affected by the race of their elected officials?

Prior studies have not investigated the effect of descriptive representation on the *composition* of African-American turnout. Several studies have investigated the composition of the African-American voting population and the individual-level considerations that affect

it. These studies generally find that the prominent factors explaining African-American turnout mirror those affecting white turnout—education, income, age, political interest, and partisanship (Tate 1993; Walton 1985). Perhaps the most unique consideration linked to African-American voting is the extent to which African Americans are “race conscious” (Tate 1993; Verba and Nie 1972).<sup>1</sup> Much less is known about the contextual factors affecting the turnout decisions of African-American subpopulations, including the effect of descriptive representation. As one scholar of African-American political participation put it, “[f]uture research should explore more fully the individual attitudes that animate the political dynamics in [African-American represented] districts” (Gay 2001, 598).

Studying the composition of African-American turnout builds upon prior efforts to document the composition of the voting population (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). These studies are motivated in part by the long-held belief that voters wield greater political influence than nonvoters. As Dahl argued, “If a group is inactive. . . the normal American system does not necessarily provide it with a checkpoint anywhere in the process” (1956, 138).<sup>2</sup> Voters’ preferences are thought to exert greater influence on officials’ actions because voters tend to select like-minded representatives (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963, 50); because voters are more likely to communicate their opinions to policy makers by other avenues (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963, 54–55);<sup>3</sup> and because only voters can reelect politicians (Bartels 1998; Key 1949).<sup>4</sup> As these theoretical arguments would predict, several studies have uncovered empirical connections between participation and representation. Verba and Nie (1972) showed that local elected officials’ and political leaders’ policy priorities were more often consistent with the priorities of the politically active. Other studies have linked turnout rates of various groups and government policy outputs, generally finding that policies favor groups that tend to vote (Campbell 2003; Hill and Leighley 1992;

Keech 1968). Finally, a recent study of Senators’ voting behavior showed that voters are much better represented than nonvoters, apparently for the theoretical reasons laid out above (Griffin and Newman 2005).

This study asks whether descriptive representation affects “who votes” among the African-American population, and thus which African-American subpopulations speak for the African-American community at the ballot box. This question is well worth asking, given other evidence that African-American voters and nonvoters have rather different preferences (Elcessor and Leighley 2001). Another motivation for this study is to examine whether descriptive representation in Congress really does affect the turnout decisions of African Americans, but only *some* African Americans. If descriptive representation affects subgroups of African Americans differently, extant theories linking descriptive representation and participation need to be modified to account for this. Finally, examining the effect of descriptive representation on the composition of African-American turnout may shed light on the disparate conclusions prior studies have reached about the effect of descriptive representation on African-American turnout in general.

## Theoretical Expectations

For descriptive representation to affect the turnout decisions of African-American subgroups, there must first be a reason to expect that individuals’ context can affect their decision to go to the polls. Among the studies that have asked whether contextual factors affect political participation by individual citizens, early efforts maintained that more solitary pursuits such as voting may not be influenced by such factors (e.g., Huckfeldt 1979), while more recent work has contended that the turnout decision is made in part based on individual citizens’ assessment of their political environment (e.g., Alex-Assensoh 1998; Leighley 1995). As discussed above, Bobo and Gilliam (1990), Tate (1993), and others have specifically claimed that one contextual consideration, descriptive representation, can affect individual African Americans’ turnout decisions. How might descriptive representation affect the voting decisions of African Americans differently?

To generate theoretical expectations concerning which African-American subgroups are likely to be affected by descriptive representation, this study begins with the common claim that some citizens hope to achieve utilitarian goals through voting (e.g., Enelow and Hinich 1984). Citizens are more likely to participate in elections when they have a sense that something is at stake—that

<sup>1</sup>Elcessor and Leighley (2001) also found that African-American voters are less supportive of cuts in social programs than are African-American nonvoters.

<sup>2</sup>Fenno (1978) similarly showed that Members of Congress perceive their voting constituents as a special subconstituency.

<sup>3</sup>According to Verba, “political activity is the means by which citizens make their needs and preferences known to governing elites and induce them to be responsive” (2003, 663).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, “vote-maximizing politicians must care more, other things being equal, about the views of regular voters than about the views of people who seldom or never get to the polls” (Bartels 1998, 45).

one of the candidates will represent their interests considerably better than the other and sufficiently well enough to be worth supporting (Converse 1966). Stated another way, if neither candidate reflects a citizen's attitudes particularly well, that citizen is more likely to feel "alienated," as the nearest of the candidates is not very near at all, and may be sufficiently alienated that they decide to abstain from participating in the election (Adams and Merrill 2003; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Most empirical studies that have asked whether alienation leads to abstention have concluded that it does (e.g., Adams and Merrill 2003; Brody and Page 1973; Plane and Gershtenson 2004).

This study contends that liberal African Americans who are not descriptively represented are more likely to be alienated and less likely to vote come election time. Even though the proportion of the nation's African-American population that is represented by an African-American MC increased markedly in the early 1990s, as recently as 1995 more than half of all African Americans were not descriptively represented (Lublin 1997, 35).<sup>5</sup> The data show that African Americans who are represented by white MCs almost always face the prospect of participating in congressional elections pitting two white candidates against each other.<sup>6</sup> One important way that citizens obtain information about whether a candidate is likely to be a good representative of their interests is the candidate's race (e.g., Bianco 1994).<sup>7</sup> Knowing that a candidate is white is a signal that the candidate is much less likely to be ideologically liberal. So, *liberal* African Americans who are not descriptively represented usually must vote for one of two white candidates who are not sufficiently liberal for their taste or abstain from voting altogether (Guinier 1994).<sup>8</sup>

It is anticipated that descriptive representation reduces the political alienation of liberal African Americans and motivates this subgroup to vote. Although African-American Members of Congress are not ideologically uniform, they vote more liberally than any other identifiable group of legislators (Canon 1999; Lublin 1997; Tate 2003). African-American citizens appear to recognize this through their assessments of their Representatives'

ideological orientations.<sup>9</sup> When liberal African Americans have an opportunity to vote for an African-American incumbent, this group is less likely to feel alienated, because the incumbent will typically have a more similar ideological orientation to their own. Indeed, this line of reasoning brings to mind one justification for the creation of majority-minority districts in the first place, to "provid[e] blacks a realistic opportunity to elect candidates of their choice" (Guinier 1994, 7). So, it is expected that descriptive representation decreases alienation among liberal African Americans and increases this group's propensity to vote.

Conversely, it is anticipated that conservative African Americans are *more* likely to feel alienated when they are descriptively represented. Notably, others have shown that whites are less likely to vote when they are represented by African Americans (Gay 2001) or Latinos (Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004). These studies argue that whites are demobilized by their perceptions of "greater ideological and policy conflict" with these generally very liberal Representatives (Gay 2001, 599), aggravated by the generally low levels of electoral competition in these districts (Canon 1999). If true, this logic should extend to conservative African Americans who reside in districts represented by African Americans as well. Faced with the prospect of participating in an election with an invulnerable, very liberal African-American incumbent, conservative African Americans are more likely to be alienated and less likely to vote. Next, the data used to test these expectations are described.

## Data

Political participation and attitudes among African Americans are measured using self-reports of postelection NBES Respondents.<sup>10</sup> One advantage of the NBES is its size; this study is able to examine the turnout behavior of a significant number of African Americans without pooling

<sup>5</sup>In the NBES data, 60.3% of the sample was not descriptively represented.

<sup>6</sup>Specifically, 96.3% of the African Americans represented by a white MC in the 104<sup>th</sup> House did not have an opportunity to vote for an African-American congressional candidate in 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Bianco concluded that race is a "signal that speaks louder than words, or at least with more meaning" (1994, 153).

<sup>8</sup>Consistent with this expectation, other studies have documented higher levels of political alienation and a lower sense of external efficacy among racial minorities who are not descriptively represented (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 2004; Gay 2002; Pantoja and Segura 2003).

<sup>9</sup>To examine this in more detail, using pooled National Elections Studies data African Americans' identifications of their Representatives' ideological orientations were regressed on their Representatives' race (African American = 1, non-African American = 0). This revealed that African Americans place their Representatives in a more liberal position when they are descriptively represented.

<sup>10</sup>The NBES was a telephone survey of African Americans residing in 252 Congressional districts, including 34 of the 39 districts represented by African Americans (for a full discussion of the NBES sampling design, see Tate 2003). The NBES turnout item was worded, "In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote. . . How about you—did you vote in the elections this November?"

surveys across elections. Pooling surveys introduces special difficulties for the study of turnout because mobilization patterns can vary considerably across elections as the context changes. The NBES also contains unique items useful to this analysis, such as whether Respondents were able to correctly identify the race of their Representative—a critical assumption in studies of descriptive representation that is not often discussed.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, NBES turnout self-reports are not validated, and a lofty 76% of the Respondents in the NBES reported voting.<sup>12</sup> In many contexts, misreporting does not appear to affect the inferences that can be drawn from the data (Sigelman 1982). However, it would be damaging for this analysis if more liberal African Americans are more likely to misreport voting when they are represented by African Americans, biasing the results in the direction of (incorrectly) rejecting the null hypothesis. Since the NBES did not validate turnout, to examine this possibility in other data, validated National Election Studies (NES) data were pooled over multiple years.<sup>13</sup> This data showed that African-American liberals are no more likely to misreport voting when they are descriptively represented.<sup>14</sup> Thus, any evidence suggesting that descriptive representation mobilizes liberal African Americans is not simply a by-product of misreporting patterns.

Relying on data acquired in a presidential election year to analyze the effect of congressional incumbent characteristics on turnout is not ideal. Some studies of congressional election turnout focus on midterm years, precisely for this reason (e.g., Gay 2001; but see Tate 2003). However, the benefits of the NBES already highlighted appear to outweigh the single disadvantage that it was conducted in a presidential election year. The competitiveness of the presidential election in each congressional district's state also is accounted for to try to isolate congressional election turnout from those effects.

<sup>11</sup>65.4% of NBES Respondents correctly identified whether their Representative was African American.

<sup>12</sup>While election surveys may oversample voters, "misreported" turnout has been documented elsewhere, and African Americans are somewhat more likely to misreport voting (e.g., Abramson and Claggett 1984).

<sup>13</sup>The NES validated turnout in 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986, 1988, and 1990.

<sup>14</sup>Specifically, a probit model was estimated among African-American self-reported voters in which misreporters were coded 1 and correct reporters 0, as a function of ideological orientation (1–7 scale, liberal coded higher), Representative race, and the product of ideological orientation and Representative race. The parameter estimate for the interaction term was slightly negative and not statistically significant ( $p = .63$ ).

African Americans' ideological orientations are measured using the NBES ideological self-placement item.<sup>15</sup> Some scholars have questioned whether the ideological orientations of African Americans are comparable to those of whites (McClain and Stewart 2002). However, the NBES data consist entirely of African-American Respondents, so as long as African Americans substantially agree on the meaning of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" this study's results point to the mobilization of an identifiable African-American subgroup based on descriptive representation. According to Tate (1993, 31–32), while a substantial proportion of African Americans do not offer an ideological orientation when queried, and for this group ideology may not be a useful construct, African Americans who *do* identify themselves as liberal or conservative tend to converge on a common set of reference points for this self-assessment. Namely, African Americans who self-identified as liberals defined liberals as those in favor of equality and social reform, including a commitment to social programs, while those who self-identified as conservatives indicated that conservatives were traditional, less risky, fiscally frugal, and patriotic. According to Tate, strong race identifiers, urban, and younger African Americans are more likely to identify themselves as liberals. This study analyzes whether this group is mobilized by descriptive representation.

The study focuses on descriptive representation in the U.S. House of Representatives because this is the "highest" elected office for which a significant proportion of African Americans regularly have the opportunity to vote for an African-American candidate. African-American incumbents in the 104<sup>th</sup> House were identified using data from the Congressional Research Service (Amer 2004). Each NBES Respondent was mapped to his or her MC's race by the state and congressional district.<sup>16</sup> To be consistent with the theoretical mechanisms developed above, the use of incumbent race to identify descriptively represented districts requires the assumption that these MCs stood for

<sup>15</sup>The exact wording of the item was, "In general, when it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or what?" Responses were rescaled such that self-identified liberals were higher (conservative = 1; moderate = 2; liberal = 3).

<sup>16</sup>The one exception was Cynthia McKinney, who represented Georgia's 11<sup>th</sup> district in the 104<sup>th</sup> House but due to redistricting stood for reelection in 1996 in the 4<sup>th</sup> district. Neither of the candidates who ran for the newly drawn 11<sup>th</sup> district's seat was African American. The 4<sup>th</sup> district was coded as descriptively represented and the 11<sup>th</sup> district was coded as not descriptively represented. Coding the 4<sup>th</sup> district as descriptively represented does not substantially change the results.

reelection.<sup>17</sup> Of the 40 African-American incumbents in the 104<sup>th</sup> House, four retired or lost in a primary election in 1996.<sup>18</sup> In three of these four cases, an African-American candidate ran to replace the African-American incumbent and won.<sup>19</sup>

The models account for a number of factors that others have shown are related to African-American turnout and turnout generally. These factors include Respondent educational attainment, income, age, and “folded” partisanship (Tate 2003), as well as gender (Verba and Nie 1972).<sup>20</sup> Also included are general contextual factors that have been linked to aggregate turnout, including the competitiveness of the Clinton/Dole presidential contest in the Respondent’s state, and whether there was a U.S. Senate and/or gubernatorial contest in the state in 1996.<sup>21</sup> The estimations also incorporate each district’s congressional campaign expenditures using FEC data (Cox and Munger 1989), and whether each congressional race included an incumbent candidate.

Also accounted for is each NBES Respondent’s racial context. Specifically, the models control for the racial composition of each district’s state legislature and use a dummy variable to identify congressional districts where two African-American House candidates ran against each other in 1996.<sup>22</sup> In that year, no major party gubernatorial candidate in any state was African American and only a handful of NBES Respondents in North Carolina had the opportunity to vote for an African-American U.S. Senate candidate.<sup>23</sup> The estimations do not control for mayoral incumbent race because mayoral elections in large metropolitan areas are more often than not held in odd-numbered years (Bositis 1998).

<sup>17</sup>In two cases (MD-7 and CA-37), African-American incumbents resigned during the 104<sup>th</sup> House and were replaced by African Americans who stood for reelection in 1996.

<sup>18</sup>The 1996 retirees were Collins (IL-7), Fields (LA-4), and Ford (TN-9); Collins (MI-15) was not renominated.

<sup>19</sup>Davis was elected to the Illinois 7<sup>th</sup>, Kilpatrick to the Michigan 15<sup>th</sup>, and Ford, Jr. replaced his father in the Tennessee 9<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>Partisan is coded 1 = partisan, 0 = nonpartisan; gender is coded 1 = female, 0 = male. Educational attainment, income, and age are all coded with greater values higher.

<sup>21</sup>Presidential candidate vote shares for 1996 were obtained from the *Atlas of Presidential Elections*. The National Governor’s Association identified 1996 major party gubernatorial candidates. Senate candidates were identified using CNN.com’s ALLPOLITICS.

<sup>22</sup>House candidate data provided by Ben Highton were validated using CNN.com’s ALLPOLITICS. The National Conference of State Legislatures provided data on the racial composition of state legislatures.

<sup>23</sup>Harvey Gantt (D) lost to Jesse Helms (R) in the 1996 North Carolina U.S. Senate race.

Finally, some studies show that racial minorities who reside in majority-minority districts are more likely to participate in elections.<sup>24</sup> However, it is very difficult to disentangle the effect of district racial composition on turnout from the effect of descriptive representation on turnout because the two are usually so highly correlated. For example, in this data, the Pearson’s  $r$  of district percent African American and MC race is .85.<sup>25</sup> Some studies of descriptive representation’s effect on political participation control for “African American population density” (Gay 2001), while others do not (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). All of the models herein are estimated with and without a control for the proportion of the district population that is African American to demonstrate that the results do not turn on model specification.

## Results

In order for descriptive representation to affect the attitudinal composition of African-American turnout, African Americans’ attitudes must not be uniform. At the outset, several studies should be noted that emphasize African-American opinion is not monolithic (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Canon 1999; Gay 2004; Gilliam 1996; Tate 2003). As Gilliam observed, “Too much research on racial and ethnic minorities proceeds on the assumption of [attitudinal] homogeneity” (1996, 76–77). According to the NBES data, 32% of all African Americans identify themselves as liberals, 40.8% identify themselves as moderates, and 27.2% identify themselves as conservatives. It is also notable that the average ideological orientations of African Americans appear to be quite similar in districts represented by African Americans (2.07) and districts not so represented (2.03). Moreover, in the NBES data there exists considerable heterogeneity in the preferences of African Americans (as reflected in standard deviations of self-placements), both among those who reside in districts represented by African Americans and those who do not.<sup>26</sup> These data reveal attitudinal differences among African Americans, which create the possibility

<sup>24</sup>Baretto, Segura, and Woods (2004) found that residence in “nested” majority-minority districts was related to turnout among Latinos; however, their analysis did not account for incumbent race.

<sup>25</sup>Data to measure the African-American percentage of the district population are obtained from the 1990 U.S. Census, updated to reflect post-1990 redistricting.

<sup>26</sup>The standard deviation of African-American ideology in descriptively represented districts is .741; in nondescriptively represented districts it is .784.

that African-American constituents will respond differently to descriptive representation.

### Descriptive Representation and Turnout

Next, following Gay (2001), Tate (2003), and others, this analysis asks whether African Americans *in general* are more likely to vote in national elections when they are represented by an African American. However, prior studies are extended by asking whether citizens' ability to correctly identify the race of the Representative is an important consideration in this analysis. Specifically, probit models of turnout are estimated as a function of MC Race (1 = African American, 0 = other race) and a series of controls. The results of these estimations, reported in Table 1, reveal that African Americans are in general not more likely to report voting when they are represented by an African-American legislator, as others have shown (Gay 2001; Tate 2003). Even among NBES Respondents who correctly identified their Representative's race (columns 3 and 4), the parameter estimates for the MC race indicator are not greater than zero. The estimates of a number of the control variables in both models lend credibility to the models and measures, with more educated, older, and more partisan citizens more likely to turn out as other scholars have found (Tate 1993). Finally, in a pattern that will continue below, African Americans who reside in districts with a larger proportion of African Americans are more likely to vote, but this is not observed among African Americans who knew their MC's race (i.e., more informed Respondents). The important point for this analysis, though, is that descriptive representation in Congress does little to mobilize African Americans as a whole, even when they know their Representative's race.

### Ideology, Descriptive Representation, and Turnout

Next, the analysis digs deeper to examine whether descriptive representation affects turnout among important subpopulations of African Americans. To test the expectation that *liberal* African Americans are more likely to vote when they are descriptively represented, turnout is modeled as a function of ideological orientation, representation by an African-American MC in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, the product of these measures, and a series of controls. If the parameter estimate for the interaction term is positive and statistically significant, it can be concluded that when they are descriptively represented, liberal African Americans have a greater probability of voting. The results of

these models, reported in the first four columns of Table 2, indicate that liberal African Americans are more likely to vote when they are represented by an African-American legislator.<sup>27</sup> It is also notable that the parameter estimates for the interaction term in the models of Respondents who correctly identified the race of their Representative are more than twice the magnitude of the estimates in the models that include all NBES Respondents (see columns 3 and 4).<sup>28</sup> Finally, it is noted once again that the voting behavior of African Americans who knew their MC's race was not affected by the racial composition of their district, but among the entire sample district racial composition has mobilizing effects. This suggests that more informed African Americans are mobilized by descriptive representation so long as they are liberal, while less informed African Americans of all ideological types instead are mobilized by the racial context in which they reside.

To interpret the substantive effect of descriptive representation on the voting propensity of African-American ideological subgroups, predicted turnout probabilities were simulated using the results from the third model in Table 2.<sup>29</sup> These predicted probabilities indicate that liberal African Americans are about 9 percentage points more likely to vote when they are represented by African-Americans than when they are not (see Figure 1). In sharp contrast, moderate and conservative African Americans who are descriptively represented are 5 and 17 percentage points *less* likely to vote compared to those who are not represented by African Americans, respectively. The consequence of these patterns is that moderate and conservative African Americans are more likely to vote than liberals when all the groups are not descriptively represented, but liberals are more likely to vote than the other ideological groups when all these groups are descriptively represented. Descriptive representation affects the ideological composition of African-American turnout.

If liberal African Americans are less alienated and are more likely to vote when they are descriptively represented

<sup>27</sup>Consistent with evidence in earlier studies at the municipal level (e.g., Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997), additional analyses showed that liberal Respondents who had been represented by an African MC for less than 10 years were especially influenced by descriptive representation.

<sup>28</sup>In unreported analyses, to account for the possibility of selection bias in the models reported in columns 3 and 4, citizens' inability to identify their Representative's race was explicitly modeled as a function of education, income, age, attention to the campaigns, and reported contact with public officials. These models, too, showed that the effect of descriptive representation is amplified for liberal African Americans.

<sup>29</sup>These and all subsequent marginal effects reported were simulated using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003).

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Representation and Turnout

<i>NBES Sample</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>
African-American MC	-0.027 [0.141]	-0.454 [0.248]	-0.069 [0.176]	-0.159 [0.310]
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>				
Education	0.212** [0.044]	0.220** [0.044]	0.194** [0.055]	0.196** [0.055]
Income	-0.001 [0.025]	-0.001 [0.025]	0.013 [0.031]	0.013 [0.031]
Age	0.020** [0.004]	0.020** [0.004]	0.023** [0.006]	0.023** [0.006]
Gender	0.178 [0.120]	0.180 [0.121]	0.187 [0.156]	0.183 [0.157]
Partisan Strength	0.535** [0.135]	0.527** [0.135]	0.587** [0.176]	0.581** [0.177]
<i>Electoral Context</i>				
District Presidential Vote Margin	0.774 [0.852]	0.796 [0.854]	0.529 [1.044]	0.537 [1.045]
1996 Senate Race in State	0.268* [0.133]	0.246 [0.134]	0.269 [0.165]	0.265 [0.165]
1996 Gubernatorial Race in State	-0.191 [0.201]	-0.160 [0.201]	0.195 [0.266]	0.199 [0.266]
Total Spending in Congressional Race	-0.122 [0.075]	-0.097 [0.076]	-0.184* [0.090]	-0.178 [0.092]
Open Congressional Seat	0.167 [0.211]	0.132 [0.212]	0.546 [0.301]	0.533 [0.303]
<i>Racial Context</i>				
Congressional District % African American		1.117* [0.531]		0.242 [0.685]
State Legislature % African American	-0.632 [1.125]	-1.297 [1.173]	0.520 [1.463]	0.367 [1.526]
Two African-American House Candidates	0.120 [0.213]	0.067 [0.214]	0.456 [0.295]	0.441 [0.297]
Constant	-1.619** [0.384]	-1.774** [0.395]	-1.893** [0.504]	-1.906** [0.506]
N	668	668	462	462
Log Likelihood	-316.08	-313.83	-188.91	-188.85
Proportional Reduction in Error	6.62%	7.28%	7.06%	9.41%

\*\*denotes  $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . Standard errors in brackets.

due to African-American incumbents' liberalism, rather than some other characteristic associated with African-American MCs, one would expect to observe that African-American liberals are mobilized when they are represented by a liberal incumbent of any race. To test this, turnout was reestimated as a function of Respondent ideology, each Representative's DW-NOMINATE score in the 104<sup>th</sup> House, the product of these fac-

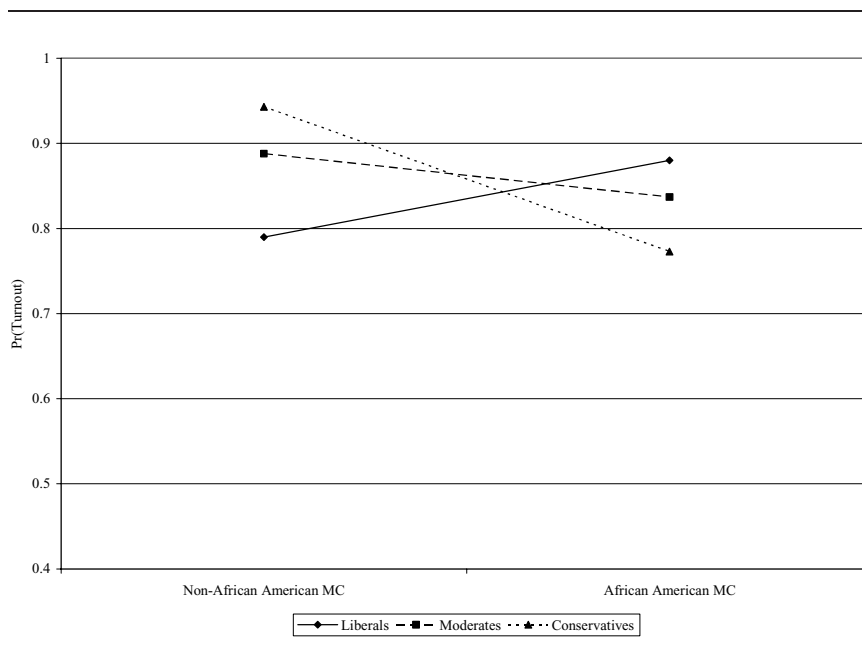
tors, and the same controls (see Table 2, column 5). The results of this analysis showed that African American liberals are mobilized when they are represented by liberal MCs, regardless of the incumbent's race. This supports the theory that African-American liberals appear to be mobilized specifically by an African-American MC's liberalism when they are descriptively represented.

TABLE 2 Descriptive Representation and the Ideological Composition of Turnout

<i>NBES Sample</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>
Ideology * African-American MC	0.286 [0.175]	0.287 [0.176]	0.651** [0.221]	0.653** [0.221]	
Ideology	-0.154 [0.104]	-0.163 [0.105]	-0.396** [0.140]	-0.406** [0.141]	-0.233* [0.115]
African-American MC	-0.719 [0.394]	-1.165* [0.453]	-1.572** [0.508]	-1.795** [0.576]	
Ideology * DW-NOMINATE					0.641** [0.241]
DW-NOMINATE					-1.549** [0.597]
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>					
Education	0.186** [0.048]	0.196** [0.049]	0.163** [0.060]	0.168** [0.061]	0.168** [0.061]
Income	0.010 [0.028]	0.011 [0.028]	0.025 [0.035]	0.024 [0.035]	0.026 [0.035]
Age	0.022** [0.005]	0.022** [0.005]	0.022** [0.007]	0.021** [0.007]	0.021** [0.007]
Gender	0.199 [0.134]	0.205 [0.134]	0.278 [0.176]	0.273 [0.177]	0.262 [0.176]
Partisan Strength	0.371* [0.151]	0.359* [0.151]	0.408* [0.199]	0.386 [0.201]	0.417* [0.199]
<i>Electoral Context</i>					
District Presidential Vote Margin	0.526 [0.949]	0.589 [0.952]	-0.151 [1.173]	-0.129 [1.174]	-0.011 [1.163]
1996 Senate Race in State	0.229 [0.148]	0.219 [0.149]	0.292 [0.182]	0.291 [0.182]	0.296 [0.184]
1996 Gubernatorial Race in State	-0.061 [0.226]	-0.031 [0.226]	0.304 [0.290]	0.315 [0.290]	0.337 [0.293]
Total Spending in Congressional Race	-0.166 [0.085]	-0.139 [0.086]	-0.185* [0.092]	-0.169 [0.094]	-0.176 [0.094]
Open Congressional Seat	0.398 [0.259]	0.351 [0.261]	1.117* [0.477]	1.078* [0.478]	1.139* [0.478]
<i>Racial Context</i>					
Congressional District % African American		1.185* [0.588]		0.600 [0.732]	0.045 [0.561]
State Legislature % African American	0.289 [1.265]	-0.496 [1.330]	0.592 [1.651]	0.196 [1.722]	0.507 [1.773]
Two African-American House Candidates	0.346 [0.249]	0.285 [0.251]	0.753* [0.349]	0.721* [0.351]	0.695* [0.347]
Constant	-1.227** [0.474]	-1.377** [0.482]	-0.808 [0.636]	-0.839 [0.637]	-1.230* [0.596]
N	560	560	401	401	401
Log Likelihood	-251.83	-249.76	-153.47	-153.13	-154.54
Proportional Reduction in Error	-1.75%	0.88%	5.80%	2.90%	2.90%

\*\*denotes  $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . Standard errors in brackets.

**FIGURE 1 African-American Ideological Groups' Predicted Probability of Voting, by MC Race**



**Rival Explanations**

Several alternative interpretations of the evidence that liberal African Americans are more likely to vote when they are descriptively represented are anticipated. First, it might be argued that this relationship has been observed because liberal African Americans are more likely to be targeted for mobilization by African-American incumbents (Tate 1993). To assess this, NBES data were used to determine whether African-American liberals represented by African Americans were more likely to report being contacted by a party encouraging them to vote than were liberals not represented by African Americans. No evidence of greater party mobilization of liberals in descriptively represented districts was found.

The evidence that African-American liberals are mobilized in descriptively represented districts might instead be interpreted as evidence that African-American Democrats are mobilized in such districts. Indeed, prior work has shown that copartisans in general are more likely to participate in elections (Bullock and Brady 1983), and nearly all African-American MCs in the data are Democrats. Other studies have found that African-American Democrats may be mobilized by descriptive representation (e.g., Leighley 2001). However, when turnout was modeled as a function of each NBES Respondent's party identification (Democrat coded higher), their residence in a descriptively represented

district, and the product of these factors, together with the familiar controls, evidence that African-American Democrats were mobilized by descriptive representation was not uncovered.

Finally, some may interpret this evidence as indicating that African-American legislators are more likely to win office when liberal African Americans are more likely to participate in elections (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). The first way to address this concern is to be careful to compare citizen turnout in an election to the race of their Representative in the *preceding* Congress. So, this analysis compares turnout in 1996 to descriptive representation in the 104<sup>th</sup> House (1994–96). However, it is acknowledged that turnout in 1996 is related to voting in prior elections, including perhaps the prior election in which the incumbent was elected. So, following Bobo and Gilliam (1990, 387) and Leighley (2001, 119), the effect of descriptive representation on African Americans' engagement in *non-campaign* forms of political participation was examined. The logic of prior studies is that if descriptive representation is tied to noncampaign activity, the link between descriptive representation and turnout is not attributable solely to the effect of voting on who gets elected. If descriptively represented, liberal African Americans are more likely to participate in nonelectoral forms of political participation, this would provide some evidence that the causal connection between descriptive representation and turnout among African-American

liberals runs (at least partly) from the former to the latter.<sup>30</sup>

To probe this possibility, Respondents' self-reports of whether they had called or written a public official were modeled using Respondent ideology, an MC race indicator, the product of these measures, and controls.<sup>31</sup> The results showed that both in the entire sample as well as among Respondents who knew their MC's race, liberalism conditioned the effect of descriptive representation on the likelihood of contacting a public official, with descriptively represented liberals more likely to engage in contacting (see Table 3). Substantively, African-American liberals who were descriptively represented were about 12.9 percentage points more likely than nondescriptively represented liberals to contact a public official. Among moderates and conservatives, descriptive representation led to 2.4 and 17.3 percentage point drops in the probability of contacting a public official, respectively. These findings provide some reassurance that the evidence points to an effect of descriptive representation on the turnout of African American liberals, rather than the effect of liberal turnout on descriptive representation.<sup>32</sup> However, it should be emphasized that this analysis is preliminary and that further work is needed to disentangle the effect of representation on turnout from the effect of turnout on representation.

In sum, it has been shown that descriptive representation mobilizes liberal African Americans and demobilizes conservative African Americans and that these results are robust to the consideration of party mobilization strategies, the role of African Americans' party identifications, and the effects of voting on representation.<sup>33</sup> Of course, descriptive representation may (de)mobilize

other African-American subgroups (see Tate 1993, 104), and descriptive representation may affect other forms of political participation. Both of these questions merit investigation. To probe the first of these possibilities in a preliminary way, the ability of African-American incumbents to mobilize income, education, and age groups was explored in the NBES data. Evidence of such effects at the congressional level was not uncovered. However, limited evidence that African Americans with a stronger sense of racial group identity are more likely to vote when they are descriptively represented was found. The effect of descriptive representation on NBES Respondents' campaign contribution decisions was also examined, and revealed that African-American liberals are more likely to make a campaign contribution when they are descriptively represented. These are areas for future research.

## Conclusion

This study shows that in districts represented by African-American legislators, liberal African Americans who know their MC's race are substantially more likely to participate in elections, while ideologically conservative African Americans are demobilized. This analysis advances the understanding of the theoretical link between descriptive representation and political participation, helps to resolve conflicting empirical findings in this area, and shows that descriptive representation affects which African Americans' interests are conveyed to elected officials on election day.

The main finding of this study improves the theoretical link between descriptive representation and political participation by showing that theories need to account for descriptive representation's conditional effects. Prior theoretical arguments concerning the effect of descriptive representation on turnout tend to implicitly assume that descriptive representation will have uniform effects on the targeted populations. Since there is often greater heterogeneity of preferences among descriptively represented groups than these theories generally assume, it comes as little surprise that empirical studies of descriptive representation's effect on turnout have yielded mixed results (Gay 2001; Tate 2003). This study suggests that theories linking descriptive representation to mobilization are not without merit, but that they need to be stated in conditional terms, with a focus on which descriptively represented subgroups stand to gain most (and least) from representation by a member of their racial (or gender) group.

<sup>30</sup>Citizens who contact a public official are not necessarily much more likely to vote (Verba and Nie 1972). Indeed, the correlation between contacting a public official and turnout in the NBES is just .18.

<sup>31</sup>General contextual controls associated with the 1996 election were omitted because the dependent variable is no longer measuring electoral participation.

<sup>32</sup>They are also important in their own right by extending prior work showing that African Americans who are descriptively represented are more likely to contact their Member of Congress (Gay 2002). These results suggest that this effect may only hold for liberal African Americans.

<sup>33</sup>In addition, a common critique of contextual explanations of individual behavior is that context and behavior are self-selected (e.g., Hauser 1974). Following Branton and Jones (2005), six indicators were created reflecting the various permutations of NBES Respondents' ideologies *and* whether they were descriptively represented. Probit models of these indicators as a function of Respondent party identification, education, income, age, gender, and southern residence do not support the view that these results are simply a function of residential self-selection (see appendix).

**TABLE 3** Descriptive Representation and the Ideological Composition of Contacting

<i>NBES Sample</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>	<i>R. Knows MC Race</i>
Ideology * African-American MC	0.343*	0.339*	0.392*	0.391*
	[0.145]	[0.146]	[0.165]	[0.165]
Ideology	-0.115	-0.115	-0.141	-0.142
	[0.091]	[0.091]	[0.109]	[0.109]
African-American MC	-0.595	-0.727	-0.781*	-0.835*
	[0.332]	[0.371]	[0.379]	[0.426]
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>				
Education	0.154**	0.156**	0.162**	0.163**
	[0.036]	[0.036]	[0.041]	[0.041]
Income	0.051*	0.051*	0.040	0.039
	[0.023]	[0.023]	[0.027]	[0.027]
Age	0.012**	0.011**	0.008	0.008
	[0.004]	[0.004]	[0.005]	[0.005]
Gender	0.022	0.020	-0.020	-0.022
	[0.117]	[0.117]	[0.139]	[0.139]
Partisan Strength	-0.072	-0.078	0.050	0.045
	[0.137]	[0.137]	[0.170]	[0.170]
<i>Racial Context</i>				
Congressional District % African American		0.371		0.153
		[0.468]		[0.542]
State Legislature % African American	-3.234**	-3.454**	-3.988**	-4.066**
	[0.990]	[1.029]	[1.170]	[1.203]
Two African-American House Candidates	-0.317	-0.342	-0.191	-0.200
	[0.206]	[0.209]	[0.237]	[0.239]
Constant	-1.051**	-1.078**	-0.655	-0.657
	[0.381]	[0.383]	[0.455]	[0.455]
N	596	596	429	429
Log Likelihood	-361.61	-361.29	-269.66	-269.62
Proportional Reduction in Error	10.81%	12.16%	11.73%	12.29%

\*\*denotes  $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . Standard errors in brackets.

In addition, these results help to explain conflicting evidence concerning descriptive representation's effect on African-American turnout in general. As detailed above, some empirical studies have found that descriptive representation has little overall impact on African-American turnout (e.g., Gay 2001; Tate 2003), while others find a stronger effect (e.g., Bobo and Gilliam 1990). This study shows that, compared to African Americans represented by whites, some African Americans are mobilized by the presence of an African-American MC, while others are demobilized. At a minimum, these canceling effects suggest why some studies have uncovered little evidence of a broad impact of descriptive representation on African-American turnout. Moreover, these results may help to

explain the disparate outcomes of prior studies. For instance, others generally have found stronger connections between descriptive representation and turnout in municipalities than in congressional districts (e.g., Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001). If descriptive representation only mobilizes liberal African Americans, and if liberal African Americans tend to reside in urban areas (Whitby 1997), then descriptive representation should boost turnout more in municipal races than in races for higher office, as prior studies find.

These results also are significant because "[t]hose in public life are more likely to be aware of, and to pay attention to, the needs and preferences of those who are politically active (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 163).

African-American Members of Congress are more likely to be familiar with and respond to the preferences of their liberal African-American constituents than to those of more conservative African-American constituents because liberals are more likely to vote (only) in these districts. Though only speculation, this may explain why African-American MCs often vote more liberally than their constituents' preferences as a whole would predict (Tate 2003). Conversely, the results show that white Members of Congress are more likely to be informed

about the preferences of their more conservative African-American constituents. Finally, these results suggest that African-American voters' greater liberalism compared to African-American nonvoters, which others have documented (Elcessor and Leighley 2001), may be linked to the growth in the proportion of African Americans who are descriptively represented. Future work should continue to trace these implications of descriptive representation for the representation of African Americans' interests.

## Appendix

TABLE A1 Models of District Residence Type and Ideological Orientation

	<i>African-American MC</i>			<i>Non-African-American MC</i>		
	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Party ID	0.722** [0.187]	-0.109 [0.113]	-0.187 [0.125]	0.192 [0.115]	-0.075 [0.106]	-0.162 [0.107]
Education	0.063 [0.042]	-0.007 [0.039]	-0.057 [0.047]	0.073 [0.037]	0.083* [0.036]	-0.059 [0.042]
Income	0.027 [0.027]	-0.001 [0.025]	0.056 [0.030]	0.016 [0.024]	-0.003 [0.024]	-0.022 [0.026]
Age	-0.002 [0.005]	0.007 [0.004]	0.003 [0.005]	-0.007 [0.004]	-0.001 [0.004]	-0.008 [0.004]
Gender	0.130 [0.139]	0.099 [0.126]	-0.287* [0.141]	0.005 [0.121]	-0.076 [0.115]	-0.034 [0.125]
South	-0.383** [0.130]	-0.008 [0.121]	-0.128 [0.142]	-0.086 [0.116]	0.072 [0.113]	0.395** [0.127]
Constant	-3.569** [0.619]	-1.175** [0.426]	-0.541 [0.477]	-1.553** [0.429]	-0.889* [0.401]	-0.155 [0.420]
N	711	711	711	711	711	711

\*\*denotes  $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ , one-tailed test. Standard errors in brackets. Proportional reduction in error for all models is 0.00%.

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