

The Diminishing Returns of Descriptive Representation:  
Considering the relationship between minority representatives and agenda setting in city  
councils

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**Abstract**

The link between racial minority descriptive representation and representation in policy has been extensively considered. Thus far, this relationship has been conceptualized as relatively monotonic; as descriptive representation increases, representation in policy increases. I contend, however, that this relationship is dynamic. By focusing on national and state politics, previous studies have overlooked how the relationship changes given very high levels of descriptive representation. Councilors in these situations have incentive to cultivate secondary identifications and electoral support outside the minority group, leading to fewer minority representative policies. Nine cities, and nearly 195,000 policies, are considered.

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In representative urban politics, it is impossible to have it all. Minority groups cannot pursue both descriptive representation and representation in policy to equal ends – they must choose a focus to be most effective. A considerable body of scholarship has shown that at the national and state level, minority groups can move towards increased presence and policy influence simultaneously, regardless of the level of descriptive representation. Thus far, those in the urban politics field have assumed that this relationship is transferrable to the city level and that state and national legislatures are analogous to city councils. I argue that previous scholarship has focused on a restricted range of data, and thus has missed the full scope and nature of the relationship. When descriptive representation is very high, minority councilmembers cultivate secondary identifications and electoral support outside the minority group, leading to less representation in policy for minorities. Minority groups seeking representation must choose between goals that are at-odds – is it more important to reach very high descriptive representation or wield the most policy influence? They cannot effectively target both.

In this paper, I begin testing the nature of the relationship between descriptive representation of minority groups and representation in policy. The first section is devoted to explaining the concepts and conceptual operationalization. I then evaluate the current state of the literature, particularly emphasizing topics that are consistently under researched – local legislative bodies, and agenda setting. In the third section, I discuss my theory and enumerate my hypotheses. The fourth section is focused on the methods used. In the fifth section I discuss my results. Finally, I consider the implications of these results and propose further research.

## Conceptualization and Operationalization

There are two major concepts that are essential to my argument: descriptive representation and representation in policy. *Descriptive representation* is a fairly concrete idea in the field; it occurs when a political representative shares the same primary identification as a defined group (Pitkin 1967). A councilor is considered descriptively representative of a racial minority when he, too, identifies as that minority.

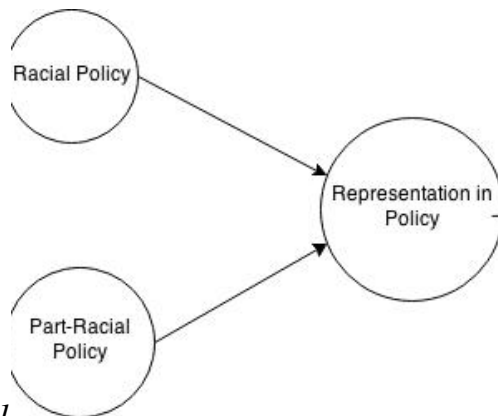
Operationalization of descriptive representation in this paper is a ratio of the number of councilors that share a racial identity (e.g. the number of Asian councilors), to the total number of councilors. This value is calculated for each year and each city.

$$\text{Descriptive Representation} = \frac{\text{Number of councilors in a racial group}}{\text{Total number of councilors}}$$

The second concept that requires definition is a bit more controversial. *Representation in policy* has been conceptualized in different ways in the field. Perhaps most often, it is thought of to be substantive representation. Pitkin's definition has dominated the field, and thus substantive representation occurs when a policymaker acts in the best interest of a defined group. This definition, however, is inherently difficult to operationalize. Practically, studies of substantive representation must make one of two theoretical leaps. First, the study must consider the actual, long term, impact of policies on the intended population. These studies must conduct rigorous policy analysis to consider the benefits, unintended consequences, and implementation of each policy considered. This conflates a myriad of things – bureaucratic efficacy, ability to secure funding, etc. – that may be out of a lawmaker's control. The second option for substantive policy studies is to assess what the policymaker's intentions were when

developing the policy. There are obvious problems with this, which have been extensively considered in fields like decision making theory.

If representation in policy is conceptualized differently, however, those problems are avoided. In this paper, representation in policy means getting specifically representative policy on the agenda. Specifically representative policy consists of two subgroups: racial policy and part-racial policy (Cannon 1999). Part racial policy is policy that disproportionately affects racial minority groups. Racial policy, on the other hand, is the policy that specifically names the group that it intends to affect. For example, a bill that commits funding for African American History Month is a racial policy. Please see Figure 1 below.



*Figure 1*

Part-racial policy is indeed interesting, and it may well be where the bulk of representation in policy occurs. However, it varies wildly across policy context. That is, the prudent scholar must have a deep and nuanced understanding of a policy context before she can decide whether a policy is indeed part-racial or not. This is best illustrated by example. If Portland, Oregon passes a law that puts more funds into homeless aid, it

would not be considered part racial. This is because, in 2011, 81% of the county’s homeless population was white (Kristina Smock Consulting, 2013) – thus the policy disproportionately affects white (homeless) people, not any minority group. If the same policy were implemented in another city, however, the results could be different. That is, if the same policy were enacted in Oakland, California – where only 20.5% of the homeless population in 2004 was white – the policy would certainly be seen as having disproportionate effects on the minority group, and thus it would be classified as part racial (Speiglman and Norris 2004). Future research, and indeed a chapter of my dissertation, will be committed to city case studies, policy context, and part-racial policy.

Because of these practical constraints, racial policy is the indicator of representation in policy in this paper. Racial policy is easy to measure; I simply count the number of policies each year that are on a council’s agenda<sup>2</sup>. Representation in policy is then a compound variable, which includes: number of racial policies considered by a council for a year, total number of policies considered in that year, and the percentage of the city’s population that is part of that minority group.

$$Representation\ in\ policy_{Minority\ A\ in\ year\ x} = \frac{\left( \frac{Racial\ policies\ considered\ for\ A}{Total\ number\ of\ policies} \right)}{Percentage\ of\ city\ population\ that\ is\ A}$$

## **Background on the literature**

There has been a considerable amount of scholarly work done on descriptive representation in its own right. That is, there are many examples of pursuits that focus on the impact of descriptive representation, without considering the agenda setting or

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<sup>2</sup> I consider number of policies on the agenda, instead of policies passed, because it better reflects a councilor’s direct influence. Policy passed conflates representation and ability to garner support from other councilors. As Bratton and Haynie (1999) find, racial minority councilors may have markedly more success at introducing, as opposed to passing, minority issue bills.

substantive representation effects. A consensus in the field is that descriptive representation, regardless of what follows, is important. Authors cite reduction in ethnic tensions (Hajnal 2001), reduced political alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003) and a contingent increase in minority voter turnout (Griffen and Keane 2006). Minority representatives are *perceived* as more responsive to minority concerns (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2004, Conyers and Wallace 1976). Others argue that it is normatively better to have more descriptive diversity in a legislative body – regardless of any measurable difference it may make in policy (Cheney and Fevre 2002).

The field has yet to reach unanimous consensus about the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. Indeed, despite over 30 years of inquiry, Childs and Krook (2009) assert that the link between substantive representation of women and descriptive representation (of women) is “inconclusive” (125). Further, some studies find that the link is unsubstantiated by empirical evidence (Carroll 2001, Dovi 2002, Lublin 1997). The majority of studies, however, contend that increased descriptive representation generally indicates increased substantive representation (e.g. Mansbridge 1999, Preuhs 2007, Swiss, Fallon and Burgos 2012). The lack of consensus may be driven by the measurement issues that I discussed above; determining whether a group is substantively represented by a policy is really quite difficult.

Fewer scholars have addressed the question of descriptive representation’s effect on agenda setting. A handful of studies link descriptive representation and agenda setting for gender (e.g. Thomas and Welch 1991). Bratton and Haynie (1999) find that in state legislatures, African American representatives introduce more African American representative bills than white representatives. Their findings are concurrent with others

in the field, and imply that increased descriptive representation will lead to increased representation in policy on the agenda (Preuhs 2006, 2007, Browning, Marshall and Tab 1997).

## **Theory**

Voters read information shortcuts, like birthplace and last name, as signals of politicians' policy preferences (Shugart, Valdini and Suominen 2005). Descriptive representativeness functions in the same way (McDermott 1997, Popkin 1995, Sanbonmatsu 2002). Voters make candidates legible by reading primary identifications and making assumptions. Politicians know this and emphasize an identity to win votes. This strategy is effective – to a point – and candidates who win by running on their descriptive characteristics are incentivized to promote policy that benefits the group that elected them. The mandate that these politicians perceive is strategic. Elected officials who ran on the assumed link between substantive and descriptive representation have little hope of retaining office over multiple elections if they alienate their voting bloc.

The theory that I present in this paper is not divergent, exactly, from the literature's consensus. Instead, I argue that the current literature focuses on a subset of data, and therefore has skewed its results. That is, by looking at representation primarily at the state and national levels, scholars have considered a restricted range of data. In neither US Congress nor state legislatures has there ever been instances of high and very high descriptive representation. Researchers and theorists have built their assumptions about descriptive representation and representation in policy based on a restricted range,

and thus there is inherent bias. Below, I specify the relationship that has been found in the current literature (Figure 2).

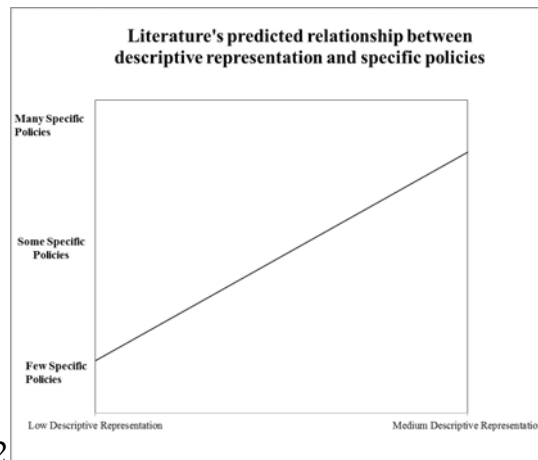


Figure 2

As stipulated, I am not disagreeing with this relationship; I am building upon it. I assert that if we, essentially, zoom out in our view of the data, the true relationship looks closer to Figure 3. Figure 3 highlights the major points of divergences between the current literature and my theory.

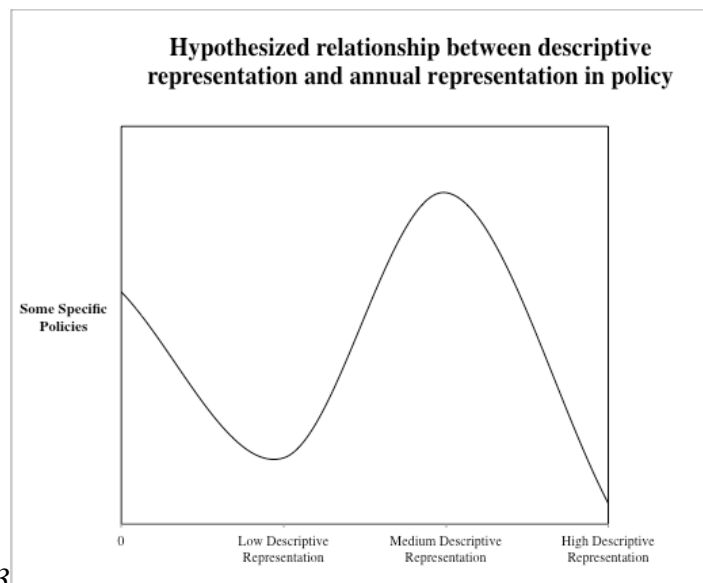


Figure 3



There are three phases of divergence. The first is when there is no descriptive representation (i.e. when the number of descriptively representative councilors equals zero). I posit that representation in policy will be relatively high, even though there are no descriptively representative councilors. I think this is true based on the same theoretical building blocks that are present in the field: strategic politicians and descriptive representation functioning as an information shortcut. Only, in this situation, there are no descriptively representative members and thus this information shortcut is rendered moot. This means that, according to the literature, those votes are up for grabs. Voters from the underrepresented group need to be wooed by politicians. In order to woo the underrepresented group, politicians will try to appear representative of the group's interest. They will support representation in policy to court voters' support. Therefore, though the group is underrepresented descriptively, a fair number of specifically representative policies will be passed.

The second phase of divergence is the dramatic fall in representation in policy that occurs when descriptive representation reaches a marginal level. This drop off should occur because non-descriptively representative councilors will see a voting bloc as dominated. That is, when there are no councilors of a racial group, councilors from all other groups may try to woo the voters through representation in policy. When there are just a few descriptively representative councilors, the information shortcuts will be activated and the descriptively represented voters will, or will be assumed to, support the representing councilors. Thus, councilors of other racial groups will divert energies away from trying to woo that racial group's votes and there will be a downturn in representation in policy.

In the third phase of representation, I overlap with the current body of literature. Here I expect a positive, relatively linear relationship between the representations. This overlaps not only with theorists like Bratton and Haynie, but also critical mass theorists like Mansbridge (1999). At a very low level of descriptive representation, I do not expect much representation in policy. However, once the minority group starts making significant gains in descriptive representation, representation in policy will also gain significantly. The voting bloc has yet to be exhausted (see below); minority councilors are experiencing electoral success and security supporting representative policies.

The fourth phase, and third point of divergence, is more controversial; it is the sharp decrease in representation in policy when there is high descriptive representation. In essence, this is a point of over-representation in relation to the voting bloc. When a candidate is elected, it is by voters who think that he is the best (i.e. most representative) candidate in the field. As substantiated in the literature review, descriptively representative candidates are assumed to be more representative of that group's interests. However, what happens when there are so many descriptively representative candidates that the voting bloc becomes, in essence, exhausted? That is, what happens when many politicians, sharing the same primary identity, seek office and the descriptive representation card is rendered moot?

What happens is a decrease in representation in policy. Unless there is a – very - significant change in the population demographics, there is a finite pool of voters who are using this information shortcut to support a descriptively representative candidate. That is, there are a finite number of minority (Asian, Latino, or African American) voters. Having more descriptively representative candidates implies that the represented group's

votes will be split between all of these candidates. At some point of descriptive representation, relying on the represented group's votes is no longer sufficient for election. Politicians must cultivate outside support to win office.

Candidates must send different signals to the voters; descriptive shortcuts no longer lead to enough votes to win. They must cultivate another, secondary, identity to be elected. That is, it is not enough to be the black (or Asian or Latino) candidate; politicians must become the business candidate who happens to be black (or Asian or Latino). The candidate then makes promises to this new set of voters. When he wins, he is again strategically mandated to maintain the *new* voter bloc and thus support policies for the secondary identity (in this example, business). The politician's incentives are always to appear representative of those who elected him. When so many descriptively representative candidates are in the field, the candidates will have to align themselves with interests other than the descriptively representative group because there simply are not enough votes to get everyone elected. As the candidates woo other voters, they make promises to groups that are not their minority group, and thus when they are in office, they have incentive to support interests other than those of the minority group.

**Hypothesis 1:** The relationship between annual representation in policy and descriptive representation will not be monotonic.

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship will take on the shape above, in Figure 3.

I agree with the majority of the literature that asserts that as minority presence increases, their influence over policy increases. However, I contend that there are diminishing returns to this assertion that have not been experienced at the national level. At high descriptive representation, the number of representative policies lists. The minority group must choose to pursue additional presence representation or policy influence.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study considers nine medium and large US cities. I account for the major regions of the country, as well as a variety of demographic distributions in terms of minority groups. All cities in this study have strong city councils. That is, the council, not the mayor, drives the legislative process in each of these cities. These characteristics guided my search for cities, but there was another essential factor: availability of information. City agendas needed to be online, and available to the public. This significantly limited the sample. Further studies will reach farther into archives, expanding the data set both temporally and to more cities. With that in mind, the following cities are considered:

Albuquerque, Baltimore, Columbus, Milwaukee, New Haven, Oakland, CA, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco

Next, I gathered basic information on the elected officials. I used newspaper archives (e.g., LexisNexis) and government websites to look for officials' racial identification. To determine racial identification, I considered councilmembers' self-identifications, the groups to which they held membership and awards received, and

photos using “panethnic” categories (Lopez and Espiritu 1990)<sup>3</sup>. This process of racial identification mirrors the cues that voters read. Voters will not know the exact self-identification of a politician; voters impute characteristics and published information as the basis for their information shortcuts. My information gathering is intended to simulate that process.

After the cities had been selected and the councilor data collected, I began policy analysis. The first task was to collect a group of terms most frequently associated with representation in policy. I based my list on Cannon’s group of racial terms, but added to it as I read through sample legislation. From there, I was able to compile a list of words that were most frequently associated with specific representation. The following list below was created.

African American, black, colored, NAACP  
Asian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pacific Island, Vietnamese  
Hispanic, Latino, Mexico, Mexican, Spanish  
Race, racial, immigrant, immigration, minority, ethnic

A JavaScript program was written to sort through the legislation. The program searched all bills for the words above, compiled the text of the bills for further review, and did preliminary coding. I manually checked through the results of the program, verifying that the legislation was racially driven<sup>4</sup>. I corrected coding errors when necessary, and used policy context analysis to determine how to code policies that

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<sup>3</sup> That is, a candidate would be considered Asian if he identifies as Chinese.

<sup>4</sup> For example, there may be a policy that was highlighted because it contained the word “black” in reference to Blackhawk Terrace and a road-paving project that was being funded. This policy would have been automatically coded as African American.

included words like “immigrant”<sup>5</sup>. Through this process, I was able to assess 194,906 policies.

At this stage, analysis was fairly low-level. I placed my *descriptive representation* variable on the x-axis, and the annual *representation in policy* on the y-axis. Each data point (below) represents the mean annual representation in policy value, given the level of descriptive representation. Future work on this project will certainly include more rigorous quantitative methods. For now, however, considering the patterns that appear across cases (i.e. racial minority groups) highlights a promising trend.

## Results and Discussion

The results of my study are undeniably promising. Across all three groups, I find that the relationship is not linear, not wholly positive, and not monotonic. The trends are not perfectly in line with the hypothesized curves, but they certainly warrant further exploration. See Figures 4, 5, and 6 for my findings.

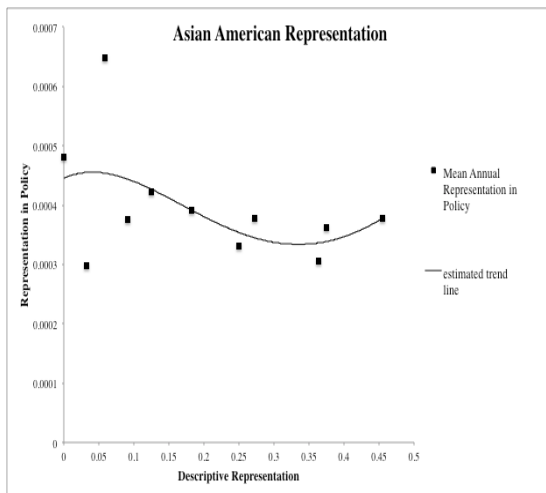


Figure 4

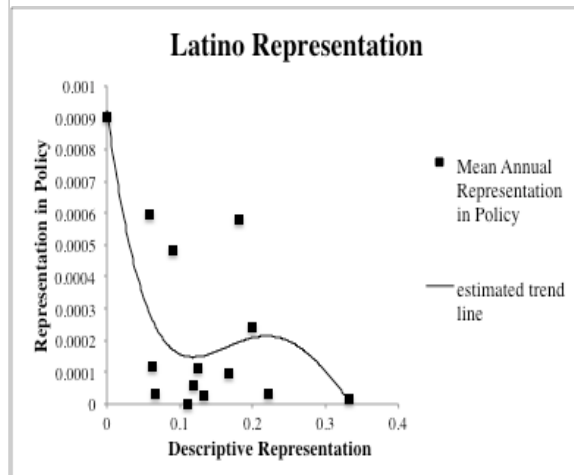


Figure 5

<sup>5</sup> By this I mean, based on city demographics and a basic understanding of the policy context, I was able to distinguish which immigrant policies were created in regards to Latino immigrants (e.g. in Albuquerque), to Asian immigrants, or to both (e.g. in San Francisco).

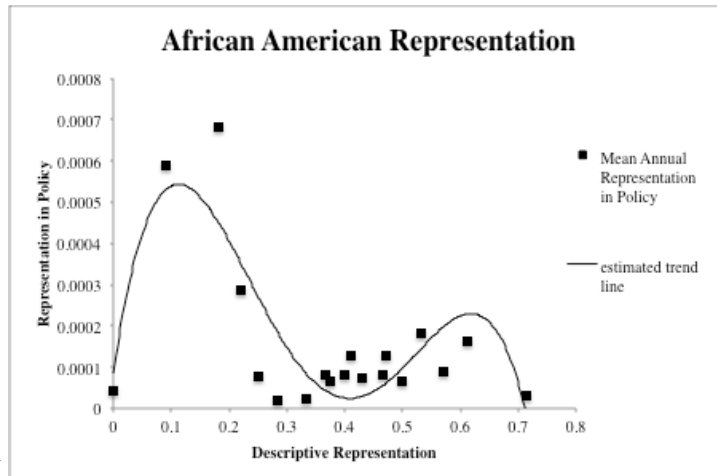


Figure 6

There are some interesting divergences from the hypothesized relationship that are worth considering. First, as compared to the hypothesis, Latino and African American trends, Asian American representation is particularly flat. That is, I do not find the drastic peaks and valleys in representation in policy that are expected. Further, unlike the two other groups, Asian representation in policy takes a noticeable upturn at the high end of descriptive representation. This is unexplained by my theory. It may be that the sampling bias (discussed above) contributes to the unexpected result. Or perhaps, more interestingly, this suggests that the relationship between representation in policy and descriptive representation varies among minority groups. An expanded data set will illuminate whether this is a data-driven anomaly or an opportunity to add nuance to my theory.

Another divergence from the theory appears in Latino representation in policy when descriptive representation equals zero (i.e. when there are no Latino councilors). This value is much higher than theorized. Paradoxically, representation in policy when there are no African American councilors is much *lower* than predicted. Again, further research should illuminate whether this is an anomaly or alluding to something bigger.

Additionally, the analysis is fairly basic. Quantitative analysis may rectify account for the issues that are appearing here.

I find ample evidence to support Hypothesis 1: the relationship between representation in policy and descriptive representation, across racial minority groups, is clearly not monotonic. There is something going on in this relationship that is not yet captured by the literature. The results do not exactly mirror the hypothesized relationship and thus, I cannot accept Hypothesis 2. However, I think it is premature to altogether reject it. There are discernable inflection points in these relationships that cannot be explained by current theories. I leave this unresolved, but ripe for further investigation.

## **Conclusions**

Very high levels of descriptive representation have not yet been observed in the national or state legislatures. Studies that have focused on these political bodies as the unit of analysis have thus operated in a restricted range. Researchers have made claims about representation that do not seem to hold when given higher levels of descriptive representation. Though this does not impugn their findings, it does limit their applicability to other cases. Further, as the US becomes more diverse, and legislatures are made up of increasingly more descriptive representatives, it may be that their findings will have waning relevance.



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