# The Effect of Descriptive Representativeness on Political Engagement

Jennifer Kukucka

California State University, Northridge

# Abstract

This review examines the effect of descriptive representativeness in government roles on political engagement in the electorate using existing data on the topic. Descriptive representation has become an increasingly more necessary component of democratic government as society sees extensive diversity. I hypothesize that as descriptive and minority representation is more present in electorate government positions, there will be a positive effect on political engagement. The dependent variable can be measured in varying ways, but for the purpose of this study was mainly focused on voter turnout, fluctuations in protest participation, and candidate support. I find a uniform consensus that supports my hypothesis from historical datasets and former case studies. As there is an increase in descriptive representatives in different levels of government, the minority groups they serve to represent exercise increased political engagement in varying forms.

***Keywords:*** representation, political engagement, minority, electorate, diversity

Correspondence should be addressed to: jennifer.kukucka.264@my.csun.edu

# Introduction

The question around descriptive representation in government and its effect on political engagement has been a topic widely discussed as our populations become more diverse.

Representation is critical in having a mass of voices heard and legislative action expressing the reality of needs from various demographics. The purpose that representative government intends to serve is important to analyze. A critical aspect of measuring the quality of representation is through the outlets of political engagement. These comparisons help to inform our decisions on the descriptive makeup of assemblies and reinforce the importance of diversity. Researchers have found unique outlets to study descriptive representation and targeted issues that may be resolved by it.

The hypothesis for descriptive representation encouraging political engagement has been proven in multiple studies, through various scenarios. Research that compares diverse and descriptive representation present almost always results in a more politically active and participatory electorate than otherwise. This unique representation has also shown to improve legislative action and encompass a holistic approach in political consideration. Data sets such as results from the census bureau, congress profiles, and federal election reports can help to determine the causality of these figures. As research seems fairly consistent, we would expect to find a similar positive relationship between these two elements using dataset figures.

The following studies have been compiled based on their relevance to this study and organized by three main topics, influence, causality, and significance. Influence highlights research that has studied how descriptive representation has had influence over another element such as an electorate, public support, or legislative action. Causality focuses on studies that bring up the question of cause and effect within descriptive representation and political engagement.

Lastly, significance highlights studies that emphasize the importance of descriptive representation in societies and use the effects to backup their reasoning. They all have in common a centered focus around descriptive representation in different levels of government and its effect on electorates has proven necessary for our ever evolving society.

# Influence

Badas and Stauffer (2018) explore the question of whether the public supports judicial court nominees based on ideological congruence or descriptive identity, and how they affect each other. These scholars are trying to explain the most important influences on voting decisions for judicial court nominees. Badas and Stauffer (2018) used individual demographics for their units of measurement. For example, a liberal African American sub group was linked to a specific nominee. Data shows that ideological congruence with a nominee is the most important factor in support, though when underrepresented groups don't align ideologically, the candidates’ shared racial identity can garner support. “Descriptive Representation and Support for Supreme Court Nominees” (2018) answers how descriptive representation affects votership but under the specific circumstances of judicial court judges.

Hardy-Fanta, Navarro, and Hernandez (2016) discuss how stereotypes and the image of latinas in politics affect voter outcomes. The researchers are attempting to explain how the intersection of race and gender create unique outcomes for representation and electability of candidates. These scholars used Latina women’s political influxes based on behavior as the main

individual measurement. They also focused on the nation's votership and separate demographics. “Latinas in American Politics” (2016) concluded that intersections of race and gender do significantly affect electability of candidates and create opportunity for representation. Analysis by Hardy-Fanta, Navarro, and Hernandez (2016) show that descriptive representation does have an impact on voters, as well as the logistics of what makes a representative candidate electable.

Meier and Severs (2018) examines how the role model function of descriptive representatives affects excluded groups of voters or supporters in a negative way. These scholars are trying to explain that there can be negative effects on supporting descriptive representatives, as personal ideologies and experiences impact political decisions. The researchers use individual descriptive representatives and role models to measure how their demographic group compares in political support. Research found in “The Dark Side of Descriptive Representation” (2018) states that individual experience and opinion can often influence representatives’ decisions which could differ from their demographic group and in result exclude them. Meier and Severs (2018) highlights the potential negative aspect of descriptive representation and how it could fail the demographics it seeks to empower.

Preuhs and Hero (2011) address the question of whether descriptive representatives in government are more influenced by minority concerns in legislative action than their white counterparts, and if they are more willing to use their legislative avenues. The researchers are trying to explain how descriptive representation plays a role in legislative action and decision making. The scholars analyze individual descriptive representatives and compare them to individual counterpart representatives through their legislative action. This study in “A Different Kind of Representation” (2011) found that representatives who advocated for minority issues did take cues further from their counterparts, regardless of political party affiliation. Preuhs and Hero (2011) focus on how legislative action for underserved communities benefits when there is descriptive representation in government.

Sances and You (2017) address the question of how minorities are represented in local governments’ use of fines and court fees for revenue. The researchers are trying to explain how black voters and cities are disproportionately affected by fines and court fees for local revenue and how descriptive representation may be a remedy for it. The scholars analyze the institution of local governments to assess how individual black votership and representatives are affected by city policy. This study in “Who pays for government?” (2017) found that when there is more descriptive representation, in this case more black members on city council, that there was less use of fines for revenue on the black community. Sances and You (2017) focus on how communities can benefit in a very tangible way through policy when descriptive representation exists for minority voters.

# Causality

Barnes and Burchard (2013) attempts to answer if having women’s descriptive representation in government increases women’s political engagement and decreases the gender gap in individual countries. These scholars explain how women are impacted politically and the nation’s gender gap is affected when they have descriptive representation in their own governments. The researchers use broader measurements of individuals like focusing on the female population, the gender gap or comparison between male and female population, and how they are affected by individuals in the government. Barnes and Burchard (2013) conclude that

incorporation of women into political institutions encourages women’s engagement at the citizen level and the gender gap decreases. “Engendering’ Politics” (2013) answers how descriptive representation and identity are a critical factor in making political decisions, not just ideological alignment.

Bowen and Clark (2014) address how an unprecedented number of minority representatives in the 113th Congress has translated into legislative responsiveness and constituent-legislator communication. The researcher explains how descriptive representation should improve the relationship between representatives and whom they represent, and some minority groups may be more affected than others. Bowen and Clark (2014) measure their research by analyzing individual representatives in the 113th Congress and the legislative action within it. The scholars found that their results matched their expectations in that the presence of descriptive representation is essential for the success or downfall of the citizen experience, and that latinos and african americans put more care into representation than other minorities. “Revisiting Descriptive Representation in Congress” (2014) expresses the importance of descriptive representation still in our growingly progressive society.

Cohen and Stout (2011) explore the question of how descriptive representation plays a critical role in the support and public opinion of the police force. These scholars are trying to explain what factors contribute to support or disdain for a local police chief, a topic that has not been touched very often. Cohen and Stout (2011) used individuals and individual demographics for their units of measurement. For example, they looked at 2 police chiefs specifically, then looked at their representative demographic groups in the city. Data shows that police chiefs receive more support regardless of race when residents believe that the police force is performing well. For the african american demographic, those who descriptively represent them in the force tend to have more support as they believe it could be an effective way to improve minority relations. “Rating Los Angeles’ Top Cop” (2011) answers how descriptive representation affects a major political issue like law enforcement support and what factors influence public opinion.

Gleason and Stout (2014) explore the question of whether black representation in government causes political engagement amongst black voters, or is there more black representation in government because of increasing political engagement in black voters. The researchers attempt to assess the causality of descriptive representation and political engagement. These scholars use individual black voter and office holder groups to measure causality and changes in political engagement. The study held within “Who is Empowering Who” (2014) concluded that higher levels of engagement are a result of descriptive representation, rather than the cause of it. Gleason and Stout (2014) answers how voters are more politically involved with descriptive representation already in government officials, not that engaged voters create representation.

Madrid and Rhodes-Purdy (2016) addresses how descriptive representation has an impact on regime support, specifically in Latin America. These scholars are trying to explain how descriptive representation has a different effect on different demographics within regimes. The researchers use individual intersections of Latin America to measure changes in regime support with or without specific descriptive representation. Cases found in “Descriptive Representation and Regime Support in Latin America” (2016) shows that in Latin America, ethnicity has more impact in elections and governing than gender in countries that have elected indigenous or female presidents. Madrid and Rhodes-Purdy (2016) breaks down how specific intersects of

voters are impacted by descriptive representation compared to others, and that not all representation equates to consistent engagement.

# Significance

John, Smith, and Zack (2018) examine in which form of government descriptive representation is best utilized, single-member districts or multi-member districts. These scholars are trying to explain how different operations of government can be more or less beneficial to different demographics that they serve to represent. The researchers use different electoral systems to study alongside the specific demographics within those districts. Research found in “The Alternative Vote” (2018) states that both single-member and multi-member districts do not function efficiently for minority representatives, but reform to single-member systems could have a positive impact. John, Smith, and Zack (2018) highlight how government systems affect the success of descriptive representation.

Katz (2011) defines descriptive representation and why it is significant to society. The researcher explains the concept’s cultural significance and societal definition in modern society, while giving relevant historical context. Katz (2011) uses a mix of measurement types, institutions through political definitions and political bureaucracy’s role in representation, as well as individual votership and societal roles. The reference entry gives clearly defined and well rounded political context. “The Encyclopedia for Political Science” (2011) defines descriptive representativeness for the use of creating a clear understanding of other research and its significance.

Menifield (2001) explores the question of how descriptive representation of different races and genders changed in the US since 1965 in Congress, state, and local governments and what effects on political action there have been. The researcher is trying to explain minority descriptive representation in different levels of government and the effect of political action on representation. This scholar analyzes the institutions of congress and different levels of government over history to compare the effect on individual minority groups and their representativeness. “Representation of Minority Groups in the US” (2001) examines the institution of congress and levels of government while addressing how descriptive representation has changed in modern history and impacted legislation for minorities.

Schildkraut (2013) explores the question of how the minority groups of latinos and asian americans view the importance of descriptive representation in government. The researchers attempt to assess if these minority groups prefer direct descriptive representation or coethnic representation in institutions. These scholars use individual minority demographics, with a focus on latino and asian american populations to study their voting preferences. The study held within “Which Birds of a Feather Flock Together?” (2013) concluded that latino and asian american groups did prefer coethnic representation in their representative government and elections, as to show a more holistic minority view. Schildkraut (2013) answers how specific minority groups perceive descriptive representation and weigh the importance of it for their own specific demographic.

West (2017) studies whether the existing theory of descriptive representation holds up in the results of the 2008 democratic primary between Obama and Clinton. The researcher is trying to explain how existing expectations of representation would suggest that voters who share identities with candidates would be more politically engaged, though the 2008 showed different

results for different minority groups. West (2017) analyzed specific individual minority groups and compared them with the success of individual candidates in the 2008 primary. The study found that African American voters increased in efficacy as Obama had a higher probability of success, while white democrats were unaffected by his success - suggesting African Americans are more driven by race. Clinton’s success did not correlate with women’s engagement, which suggests that descriptive representation is less pronounced for women. “Descriptive Representation and Political Efficacy” (2017) gives a real example of descriptive representation voting in our society, which means it gives real results of how minorities view representation and consider it in choosing a candidate or being engaged.

# Source Analysis

The main threads throughout the literature on descriptive representation emphasizes its effects on political behavior and engagement, specifically on minority groups. Many scholars compare the weight of representation on differing demographics and conclude that race representation in government officials triggers increased involvement at a higher rate than gendered representation. Many articles discuss themes throughout prominent elections in history, the economic outcomes that can come from improved representation, and changes in institutions over decades within specified demographics. Much of the data agrees on descriptive representations effectiveness and proves its benefit to different socioeconomic aspects of our society. Few researchers have shed light on the negative influence of representation and the role model effect that determines political decisions. Overall, it's clear that scholars agree on the importance and prominence of descriptive representation in our incredibly diverse political culture. It seems fair to say that if there is more descriptive representation already present in representative government, then political engagement increases amongst the citizens they serve to represent.

# Theory

Data amongst researchers and defined studies agree that descriptive representation has proven effective and serves a benefit to the diverse demographics and socioeconomic groups in our society. There's aspects that few studies have touched which help develop the theory of positive influence, such as the negative effects of representation and certain phenomena as the role model effect that can have critical determinate power on political decisions. Throughout the studies conducted on the influence of descriptive representativeness, it's fairly conclusive that if there is more descriptive representation already present in representative government, then political engagement increases amongst the citizens they serve to represent.

# Hypothesis

- **Hypothesis:** If there is more descriptive representation already present in representative government, then political engagement increases amongst the citizens they serve to represent.

**- Hypothesis Model:** Descriptive representation > political engagement

The empirical phenomenon I am attempting to observe is the changes and totals of representatives that fall under a specific descriptor for representation. We can also observe and measure the fluctuations in political engagement and voting turnouts. We would expect that different forms of representation in government officials and positions, for different descriptors, and in different parts of the world would all see the same result of increased political engagement. This hypothesis is supported through the extensive research and evidence collected in the Annotated Bibliography and further explored in the Literature Review. The direction of this hypothesis in particular is positive in relation as it focuses on the relationship between both elements increasing. The more descriptive representation that is present, the more political engagement comes as a result. This can be demonstrated as X increases, so does Y, and as X decreases, so does Y. The testing for this hypothesis will mainly come from varied research methods and data acquisition. Results can be measured and compared between political engagement results in areas with increasing descriptive representation in government. This should also be true for the contrapositive, research showing areas with declining representation should see the opposite results. The testability of this hypothesis is strong as the data already exists in strong favor of the hypothesis. Measurements of political engagement through voting turnout in areas with varying descriptive representatives in their various levels of government serve as strong population sets. Public records and databases for use of historical data is also a confident way to check validity.

# Data

Sources compiled for this study define the referenced concepts fairly uniformly. Scholars agree on their meaning, and use them for measurement in similar ways. The most important concepts of descriptive representation and political engagement are defined the most similarly across the sources. Descriptive representation taken in its literal definition of using a specific demographic and then studying the productivity or outcomes of representatives that match that demographic. Political engagement takes on its own different concepts in order to define it, but uniformly means engaged voting and participation in legislative action, whether on the government level or grassroots level.

For the purpose of this study and to ensure uniformity, the following concepts have been clearly defined using both the literary definitions and the common usages. Descriptive Representation demonstrates when a specific demographic group elects an individual to represent them, who in their own characteristics, mirror the qualities and experience of that group. Representative Government, similarly, is a type of democratic government that operates on the principle of elected officials representing a group of people, as opposed to the people representing themselves directly. Political Engagement often includes a broad range of activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world, how it is governed, and try to take part in and shape the decisions that affect their lives. This often includes political protests, voting, and sitting on councils or committees. Representation is usually defined as the action or fact of one person standing for another so as to have the rights and obligations of the person represented. Though, the weight of representation cannot simply be defined in its dictionary definition. Participation is used similarly to engagement, as to have a part or share in something. An Elected Official is any person holding an office in a governmental entity which is filled by the vote of the appropriate electorate. Descriptors are often shown through

characteristics of a population expressed statistically, such as age, sex, education level, income level, marital status, occupation, religion, birth rate, death rate, average size of a family, average age at marriage. Demographics refer to the number and characteristics of people who live in a particular area or form a particular group. Fluctuations define an irregular rising and falling in number or amount such as a variation.

The operationalization of these concepts can vary depending on the context of the study and the measurement required for analysis. To continue the pursuit of uniformity and clarity, the same concepts above have been defined in their use in this study by means of operationalization. Descriptive Representation can be measured if an elected official has one or more descriptors of a demographic that they serve to represent. Representative Government utilizes the concept definition - if a government holds elections for various representative positions and utilizes the representatives to derive legislation. Political Engagement, due to its broad nature, uses the measurement of voting turnout numbers, measurement of political protest turnout numbers, measurement of changes in political approval or support of specific legislative action or officials, measurement of citizens running for specific offices, and measurement of participants involved in councils or committees. Representation also utilizes the concept definition - a representative person or official that has one or more descriptors the same as the person they serve to represent. Participation is similar to political engagement in that it is measured by the fluctuation in involvement. Elected Official operationalizes the concept definition in any person who was voted into their position by an electorate. Descriptors specifically measure or report the demographic characteristics such as age, sex, education level, income level, marital status, occupation, religion, birth rate, death rate, average size of a family, or average age at marriage.

Demographics measure the number and/or the characteristics of people who live in a particular area. Particular groups are usually formed from these measurements. Fluctuations identify variations in measurements or reports so as to create groups or find changes in studies.

The following table defines each concept in its respective level of measurement:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Nominal:** | **Ordinal:** | **Ratio:** |
| Representative Government | Descriptive Representation | Political Engagement |
| Elected Official | Representation | Participation |
|  | Descriptors | Fluctuations |
|  | Demographics |  |

Table 1

An important consideration for this study was the timeframe for research and data gathering, as well as the appropriate outlets for such a task. The window of time that seems sufficient for this study is 100 years. Within this time, the women's suffrage movement was realized, civil rights were granted to african americans, and immigration policy has fluctuated tremendously. These major events contribute greatly to representation and can showcase how government has changed with and without this descriptive representation. For the concepts of Descriptive Representation, Representation, Demographics, and Descriptors documents such as

the Congress Profiles made available to the public which identify the wide demographics of congress members can be utilized. This would help identify the amount of representation and type of demographics present. For data on citizen demographics, I can use census results in past years.

This data can be found in the following sources:

1. Membership of the 116th Congress: A Profile. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45583>
2. US Census Bureau. (2016, October 20). Decennial Census Datasets. Retrieved from

[https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/data/datasets.2010.ht](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/data/datasets.2010.ht) ml

For political engagement and participation, a document such as the Federal Elections Commission report from past elections for voter turnout and participation numbers in the country can be utilized.

This data can be found in the following source:

* 1. FEDERAL ELECTIONS 2008 - FEC.gov. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2008/federalelections2008.pdf>

# Methods

This study will be quantitative. It primarily focuses on numerical values of representatives compared to political engagement data sets. The involvement of quantitative data and intense reliance of data comparison proves this. As we are not necessarily measuring the quality of representation or political engagement, instead we are more concerned with the basic causality between the two. Probability samples are generally preferred for a study such as this one, as it reduces the possibility of researcher bias by using random sampling.

# Empirical Observations & Conclusion

Assuming the wealth of research stands, a hypothesis predicting a positive relationship between descriptive representation and political engagement seems well proven. Utilizing data, for example, from the 116th congress profile and comparing the 2016 federal election report, we should expect to see an increase in voter turnout through the election report, as the congress profile demonstrates one of the most diverse representative groups in American history.

The implications of this study date back to the founding of our nation and thread through the multitude of human rights movements we have endured. Representation and the uplift of all voices is critical in creating an equitable environment for democracy to thrive. Without it, there are severe holes in legislation and action that, as a result, become a detriment to targeted members of our society. Not only does this highlight the importance of representative diversity but it also demonstrates the balance of political engagement and the power of citizens. Without minorities showing up and using the voice they have, descriptive representation and change cannot maintain its positive results. They work hand in hand, and one can not succeed without the other. With this research, the importance of relieving voting hindrances and obstacles is definitively affirmed. If we want democracy to work, we have to put in the work ourselves.

# References

Badas, Alex, and Katelyn E. Stauffer. “Someone like Me: Descriptive Representation and Support for Supreme Court Nominees.” *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2017): 127–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912917724006.

Barnes, Tiffany D., and Stephanie M. Burchard. “‘Engendering’ Politics.” *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 7 (2012): 767–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012463884.

Bowen, Daniel C., and Christopher J. Clark. “Revisiting Descriptive Representation in Congress.” *Political Research Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2014): 695–707. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912914531658.

Marks, Mara A. Cohen, and Christopher Stout. “Rating Los Angeles' Top Cop.” *Race and Justice* 1, no. 4 (2011): 341–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/2153368711428140.

“FEDERAL ELECTIONS 2008 - FEC.gov.” Accessed May 21, 2020.

[https://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2008/federalelections2008.pdf.](http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2008/federalelections2008.pdf)

Gleason, Shane A., and Christopher T. Stout. “Who Is Empowering Who.” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 7 (2014): 635–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934714545343.

Hardy-Fanta, Navarro S., L. Hernandez, and Carol Hardy-Fanta. “Latinas in American Politics: Changing and Embracing Political Tradition (Latinos and American Politics).” *Lanham: Lexington Books*, 2016.

John, Sarah, Haley Smith, and Elizabeth Zack. “The Alternative Vote: Do Changes in Single-Member Voting Systems Affect Descriptive Representation of Women and Minorities?” *Electoral Studies* 54 (2018): 90–102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.05.009.

“Descriptive Representation.” *The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, n.d. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781608712434.n411.

Madrid, Raúl L, and Matthew Rhodes-Purdy. “Descriptive Representation and Regime Support in Latin America.” *Political Studies* 64, no. 4 (2016): 890–909. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321715617772.

Meier, Petra, and Eline Severs. “The Dark Side of Descriptive Representation: Bodies, Normalisation and Exclusion.” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 3 (2018): 31. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1412.

“Membership of the 116th Congress: A Profile.” Accessed May 21, 2020. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45583.

Menifield, Charles. *Representation of Minority Groups in the U.S.: Implications for the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham, MD: Austin & Winfield, 2001.Preuhs, R., and R. Hero.

“A Different Kind of Representation: Black and Latino Descriptive Representation and the Role of Ideological Cuing.” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2011): 157–71.

Sances, Michael W., and Hye Young You. “Who Pays for Government? Descriptive Representation and Exploitative Revenue Sources.” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 3 (2017): 1090–94. https://doi.org/10.1086/691354.

Schildkraut, Deborah J. “Which Birds of a Feather Flock Together? Assessing Attitudes About Descriptive Representation Among Latinos and Asian Americans.” *American Politics Research* 41, no. 4 (2012): 699–729. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x12466582.

US Census Bureau. “Decennial Census Datasets.” The United States Census Bureau, October 20, 2016.

[https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/data/datasets.2010.html.](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/data/datasets.2010.html)

West, Emily A. “Descriptive Representation and Political Efficacy: Evidence from Obama and Clinton.” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 351–55. https://doi.org/10.1086/688888.

# Appendix

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Nominal:** | **Ordinal:** | **Ratio:** |
| Representative Government | Descriptive Representation | Political Engagement |
| Elected Official | Representation | Participation |
|  | Descriptors | Fluctuations |
|  | Demographics |  |

Table 1