

**Race, Class, and Representation:
Exploring the Relationship between Shared Traits and Shared Interests**

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Abstract: This paper considers whether descriptive representation enhances substantive representation. Past studies of congressional representation have focused predominately on the descriptive value of race, while others have considered gender. This paper continues the previous exploration of descriptive representation based on racial identity, but includes the additional dependent variable of that based on economic status in order to distinguish the differences *among* racial groups. I find that a positive relationship does exist between the presence of a black member of Congress and support of black interest, though economic indicators do not significantly affect economic-related voting behavior in this study.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 12.9 percent of the United States population (36.4 million Americans) identified itself as black or African American in the year 2000.¹ In the 106th Congress, however, only 8.5 percent of the legislators serving in the House of Representatives were African American; as Carol Moseley-Braun left the Senate in 1999, there was not a single African American senator serving in the 106th Congress. According to Katherine Tate, the underrepresentation of African Americans is not only a feature of the U.S. Congress, but one of elected offices at all levels: “Blacks hold about two percent of all elected offices in the country.”²

This disparity between the number of African Americans in the U.S. population and the number of African Americans in elected offices inspired the 1982 extension of Sections 2 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act. In order to enforce the VRA amendments, congressional districts were redrawn to increase the number of majority-black districts, thus providing the opportunity for African Americans to elect their “representative of choice.” This racial redistricting resulted in the election of thirteen new African Americans to Congress in 1992. Shortly thereafter, however, several court cases, most notably *Shaw v. Reno* (1993) and *Miller v. Johnson* (1995), challenged the redistricting.³ With these cases, the major normative question underlying the racial gerrymander was spotlighted: should blacks be represented by blacks?

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¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “American FactFinder: Race Alone or in Combination” [Online] (U.S. Census Bureau: April 1, 2000), Available: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_QTP5&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-_lang=en&-_sse=on (May 3, 2005).

² Katherine Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2003), pp 4.

³ David T. Cannon, *Race, Redistricting, and Representation: The Unintended Consequences of Black Majority Districts* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1999), pp 66-70.

For more than a decade since the redistricting, scholars of congressional representation have considered whether the percentage of African Americans in elected offices should better reflect the percentage of African Americans within the entire U.S. population. Normative claims that blacks should be represented by blacks have been tested in the empirical studies of Swain, Glaser, Canon, Fenno, Tate, and others; behind these studies is the question of whether descriptive representation leads to substantive representation.

Descriptive representation occurs when a representative and constituent share some distinctive trait, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or religion. An African American legislator descriptively represents his African American constituents based on the shared characteristic of race; if the same legislator is a lawyer, he will simultaneously descriptively represent other lawyers based on the shared characteristic of occupation. Descriptive representation can be contrasted with substantive representation, which is the realization of one's preferred policy outcomes by having political interests and preferences in common with one's representative. Theories that descriptive representation can enhance substantive representation are based on the notion that shared experiences result in common interests. Many people believe that others "like them" will have similar interests and thus behave in accordance with their interests.

In *Black Faces in the Mirror*, Katherine Tate illustrates that African Americans appreciate descriptive representation: "descriptive representation turns out to be very important to Blacks, as Blacks were generally more approving of their legislator when that representative was black."⁴ Tate further argues, however, that "Blacks are not alone

⁴ Tate, pp 122.

in their strong appreciation of being descriptively represented; all Americans place a strong value on it as a component of political representation.”⁵ Even though constituents can be descriptively represented based on a number of shared traits (not only race, but class, gender, religion, etc.), and even though all Americans value descriptive representation, studies of congressional representation have remained focused predominantly on race. Many scholars have explored whether the race of a legislator matters in determining the substantive representation of minority interests, but few have considered other elements of social background. Tate asserts that “the U.S. government is socially unrepresentative of the public – with its members being wealthier, older, whiter, and overwhelmingly male.”⁶ As representatives are not only *whiter* than the general population, but also of a different class, age group, and gender, why have scholars not as thoroughly explored descriptive representation based on wealth, age, or gender as they have that based on race?

Tate argues that without the history of the denial of black voting rights, which continued in some regions even after the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment provided for universal male suffrage, “their numerical underrepresentation in government never would have won judicial protection and remedy.”⁷ Women, however, are also overwhelmingly underrepresented in proportion to their numbers in the general population, and like African Americans, women also share a history of disenfranchisement, having not attained nationwide suffrage until 1920. The attention paid to African American descriptive representation, therefore, must be based on some

⁵ Tate, pp 6.

⁶ Tate, pp 3.

⁷ Tate, pp 10.

understanding beyond historical circumstances.

Studies of African American representation rely on the designation of “black interests.” In such studies, one finds claims that blacks are more liberal than whites, and often the representation of “black interests” is measured by liberal voting behavior. Yet in *Black Faces, Black Interests*, Carol M. Swain asserts,

No one can argue that African Americans are monolithic. Some are capitalists; others are socialists. Most live in the South, but some reside in the Northeast, Midwest, and other sections of the country. Some are doctors, lawyers, and engineers; others are sanitation workers, street cleaners, and domestics. Owing to these differences the interests of blacks must vary in important ways.⁸

Claims that African American descriptive representation can enhance African American substantive representation rely on the assumption that there exists a uniform set of “black interests;” this assumption, however, ignores the many differences *among* blacks. A comparison of public opinion data and the positions taken by black interest-group leaders indicates that there are even differences between the aggregation of the black public’s preferences and the preferences of their leaders. There exists, according to Swain,

an increasingly visible group of black conservatives and moderates who do not automatically accept the positions of the leading black and liberal interest groups... It is important to be aware that perceptions of black leaders and the black public may vary on critical social issues.⁹

On such issues as criminal justice and affirmative action, for instance, the black public is generally more conservative than their leaders.

As with social issues, the “black position” on economic issues is generally considered to be liberal. Issues of unemployment, substandard healthcare, and limited

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⁸ Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1993), pp 7.

⁹ Swain, pp 12-13.

educational opportunities are regularly cited as “black interests,” due to blacks’ disproportionate experience with such difficulties, as compared to whites.¹⁰ But are these *really* black interests – or are they actually poor interests? The fact that historical events have correlated race with poverty doesn’t imply that race is inherently linked to poverty or explains one’s position on economic issues. David Canon exposes the myth of “racially linked fates”: “an intraracial divide is evident on some issues, such as economic redistribution. As income increases, blacks are increasingly less interested in redistribution.”¹¹ As there can be no uniquely African American occupation and no distinctive African American income, there is no uniform African American economic interest. According to Swain,

There exists a growing black middle and professional class whose members often live apart from poorer blacks. Ironically, the percentage of black families earning \$50,000 a year or more has increased alongside the percentage of blacks whose earnings place them below the poverty line. These income disparities highlight differences both between and within ethnic groups.¹²

Swain’s conclusion is not unique; Canon agrees with her findings: “there are two black Americas – a middle class that has become better off and a lower class that has been left behind.”¹³ There is a divide within the black community, and this divide occurs along class lines. The existence of such a split indicates that although African Americans may be united on racial issues due to common racial experiences, they are divided on other nonracial issues due to divergent socioeconomic experiences.

Although blacks may better represent blacks on explicitly race-related issues,

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¹⁰ Swain, pp 9.

¹¹ Canon, pp 25.

¹² Swain, pp 9-10.

¹³ Canon, pp 25.

blacks *cannot* uniformly represent blacks on economic issues. The only interests that can be uniformly defined as black interests are interests directly related to race, such as anti-segregation or anti-discrimination legislation. To claim that African Americans are best represented by other African Americans ignores the incoherent positions of African Americans on non-race-related issues. This leads into my first hypothesis that while African American descriptive representation will increase African American substantive representation on *racial* issues, it may not enhance their overall representation. I further hypothesize that class-based descriptive representation will result in substantive representation on economic issues.

As there does not exist an overarching set of “black interests,” one must consider whether African American legislators more closely resemble their African American constituents than they do white legislators on the basis of education, income, and interests. Previous scholarly studies of African American representation do not fully explore the differences *among* African Americans, particularly class differences. I seek to explain what relative roles the descriptive characteristics of race and class play in the determination of substantive representation.

To determine whether descriptive representation truly enhances substantive representation, I am examining two types of descriptive representation, one based on race, the other based on economic background. I am using two descriptive measures (legislator’s race and legislator’s economic status) to determine whether they can predict voting behavior on related issues, controlling for other variables. I thus have two dependent variables that I will be analyzing separately, voting behavior on race-related

issues and voting behavior on economic-related issues, in order to determine whether they are each explained by different variables. If both are best explained by the same variable, for instance party, then that variable may be a better indicator of voting behavior than either descriptive trait, thus indicating that descriptive representation does *not* enhance overall substantive representation on roll-call votes. If race-related voting is significantly affected by the race of the legislator, or if economic-related voting is significantly affected by the economic status of the legislator, then descriptive representation may in fact lead to substantive representation, but only regarding voting behavior on specific issues.

My paper will proceed as follows. I will report the findings of the existing body of literature on the value of descriptive representation, and I will describe the contributions and shortcomings of this literature. After then detailing the data and methods that I use, I will present and analyze the findings of my research, which will be followed by a series of implications and conclusions.

II. EXISTING LITERATURE

In both normative and empirical studies, congressional scholars have addressed theories of whether descriptive representation enhances substantive representation. Many empirical studies have used roll-call voting as a measure of substantive representation, while others have considered campaign strategies, constituency service, and project allocation in their evaluations. These studies have delivered mixed results. Some scholars claim that it's not the legislator's race, but rather party, that matters; others argue that

race is a significant factor in determining representation. Some have even emphasized that descriptive representation yields important substantive benefits, such as an increased sense of empowerment, due to its relationship with symbolic representation.

Following the redistricting that put thirteen new African Americans in congressional seats, Carol M. Swain empirically explored Hanna F. Pitkin's theory on the relationship between descriptive representation and substantive representation, questioning whether black descriptive representation is necessary to secure the substantive representation of black interests. In *Black Faces, Black Interests*, Swain analyzes quantitative data from the 100th Congress and examines thirteen case studies before she ultimately concludes that descriptive representation does not enhance substantive representation. Swain determines that the substantive interests of African Americans are best represented by Democrats, and packing African Americans into majority-black districts to ensure descriptive representation dilutes their general substantive representation by limiting the opportunity for Democrats to hold additional offices.¹⁴

David T. Canon reports his findings on African American descriptive representation in *Race, Redistricting, and Representation*. His theory focuses on campaign dynamics, and he explores what he identifies as the "politics of commonality" (the idea that African Americans can represent whites and vice versa) and the "politics of difference" (the notion that only members of a racial group can understand and represent their interests).¹⁵ These two perspectives on racial representation shape candidate

¹⁴ Swain, pp 205-211.

¹⁵ Canon, pp 4.

behavior in the campaign and legislator behavior in office. Canon conducts a regression analysis utilizing LCCR scores as a measure of support for African American interests; his findings, in contrast with Swain's, indicate that descriptive representation does in fact enhance substantive representation, although he also acknowledges that party plays an even more significant role in determining support of black interests.

In *Black Faces in the Mirror*, Katherine Tate examines black public opinion data, and she reports two important findings:

First and most immediately, Blacks are very divided in opinion on most social and economic policy matters, more so than Black legislators. Secondly, Black opinion has become somewhat more conservative over time. This makes the distinctively liberal policy representation of Blacks less representative of their real policy interests.¹⁶

Tate clearly exposes the varied interests among blacks, and her study of voting behavior indicates that descriptive representation does ensure substantive representation. Tate does, however, contribute to the notion of symbolic representation, which she defines as “descriptive representation devoid of any substance impact.”¹⁷ Tate stresses the symbolic benefits of descriptive representation, as African American legislators are the only sponsors of African American symbolic legislation; she asserts that “symbolic representation is one important reason why blacks need to be descriptively represented in the U.S. Congress.”¹⁸ As all majority-black districts are represented by black representatives, though, Tate fails to consider whether this trend is a response to constituency demand or truly a product of descriptive representation.

The existing body of literature on descriptive representation does not respond to

¹⁶ Tate, pp 93.

¹⁷ Tate, pp 13.

¹⁸ Tate, pp 15.

the differences that exist *among* blacks. By considering only general ideological measures on one range of issues (“black interests”), these scholars don’t take into account the variation among blacks *across* issues. Tate does, however, acknowledge that African American legislators are more liberal than their African American constituents, and this finding signifies that previous assumptions that “black interests” can be best represented by overall liberal voting behavior are inaccurate. In my study of African American representation, I distinguish between race-related issues and economic-related issues. There is currently no existing literature that discusses economic status as a descriptive trait in relation to representation.

III. DATA & METHODS

In order to analyze the relative roles of the descriptive characteristics of race and class in determining substantive representation, I examine the House of Representatives for the 106th Congress. The House of Representatives has greater variation than the Senate in terms of both the race and the economic status of its members; as it also consists of more legislators, it provides a larger sample size to examine.

I seek to explain both race-related voting preferences and economic-related voting preferences, measured respectively by NAACP support and National Journal ratings of economic conservatism. Ratings of high NAACP support are consistent with the liberal position on racial issues; I assume that this is the preferred position of African Americans on race-related issues. I also assume that a high rating of economic conservatism is the adverse position of the impoverished but the favored position of the wealthy. The variables that I consider as explanatory factors of NAACP support include region,

percent urban, district percent black, legislator's race, and legislator's party; the variables that I consider as explanatory factors of economic conservatism include region, percent urban, district median income, legislator's economic status, legislator's race, and legislator's party. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

As all representatives earn the same salary, I determined their economic status based upon their financial disclosures rather than income. The financial disclosures include information regarding assets (stock, trust funds), unearned income (rent, interest), and liabilities (loans, legal fees). These values are reported as a range (for example, \$1,000 – \$5,000), so I assigned legislators to one of three categories: those with assets totaling less than \$100,000, those with assets ranging from \$100,000 to \$750,000, and those with assets totaling over \$750,000. To compute which category a legislator belongs in, I subtracted liabilities from assets and unearned income, using a figure at the lower-middle end of the range.

Using these data, I seek to determine what factors most strongly influence representatives' voting behavior and whether or not descriptive representation does in fact lead to substantive representation for racial and economic issues. The race and the economic status of the legislator are used as measures of descriptive characteristics; if descriptive representation leads to substantive representation in roll-call voting, one should expect to see that the race and economic status of the legislator are significant predictors of policy positions (Does a black legislator represent black interests? Does a poor legislator represent poor interests?). District percent black and district median

income are used as indicators of constituency preference; if these variables are strong predictors of legislators' behavior, then voting can be explained as a response to constituency demands. I include region and percent urban in my analysis to control for differences that may arise due to the strong history of racial conservatism in the South and urban liberalism. Party was found to be a significant indicator of legislative behavior in the works of both Swain and Tate, and so it is included in my analysis. By conducting a regression analysis, I evaluate the significance of these variables.

IV. RESULTS

In analyzing race-related voting preferences, measured by NAACP support, I examined the explanatory effect of the following variables: region, percent urban, district percent black, race of legislator, and party of legislator. The results of the regression analysis are provided in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

As the overall fit of the model is high (R square .840), we have assurance that most of the variation in voting behavior on race-related issues can be explained by the independent variables. With the exception of district percent black, all estimated coefficients are statistically significant.

Holding all else equal, there is a negative relationship between southern districts and NAACP support; on average, legislators from the South scored 5.455 points lower than those from other regions. Percent urban has a slight effect on racial voting preferences; a ten percent increase in the percent urban corresponds with a 1.43 point

increase in NAACP support. Consistent with theories that descriptive representation enhances substantive representation, there is a positive relationship between the presence of a black member of Congress and support of black interests; holding all else constant, African American legislators score 7.309 points higher on NAACP support than their white counterparts. This fact seems to indicate that African American descriptive representation *does* enhance substantive representation on issues related to race. Of even greater significance, however, is party. Holding all else constant, Democrats score an average of 50.704 points higher than Republicans in their NAACP support.

Because all but one African American representative in the 106th Congress was a Democrat, the relative effect of race and party on NAACP support is not entirely certain. To speculate as to the influence of each of these variables, I consider only African American legislators. During this Congress, the only African American Republican member of the House was Oklahoma's J.C. Watts. While every other African American representative received a score of either 87, 93, or 100 for NAACP support, Watts received a score of 20 (the minimum NAACP rating was 13); no Democrat, regardless of race or region, received a score below 40. The example of J.C. Watts is only one case, thus broad conclusions cannot be made based on his behavior; nonetheless, his case is consistent with the finding that party matters more than race in determining voting behavior on race-related policy. What initially seemed to be descriptive representation enhancing substantive representation on race-related issues may actually be largely the product of party. This could only be more certainly determined, however, if there were more African American Republicans in Congress.

Incidentally, Watts was the only African American representative to come from a district that was less than thirty percent black; in fact, the black population of his district was only seven percent. Watts' low NAACP support rating might have been influenced by the makeup of his district, although this is unlikely, as evidenced in the regression analysis. Figure 1 demonstrates that there is no perceivable correlation between NAACP support and district percent black.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

When controlling for party, however, it is evident that party is a much stronger determinant of NAACP support than is percent black. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate this relationship, considering Democrats and Republicans, respectively, independent of the other party.

[FIGURES 2 AND 3 HERE]

After analyzing race-related voting preferences, I examined economic-related voting preferences, measured by the National Journal ratings of economic conservatism. I included the following variables in the analysis: region, percent urban, district median income, economic status of legislator, race of legislator, and party of legislator. The results of the regression analysis are provided in Table 3.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Again, the overall fit of the model is high (R square .825), indicating that the independent variables decently explain legislators' levels of economic conservatism. All but the legislator's economic status and district median income are highly significant.

Holding all else constant, members representing southern districts have a 7.986

point higher rating of economic conservatism than those from other regions, while legislators from urban districts receive slightly more liberal ratings than those from rural districts (a ten percent increase in percent urban corresponds with a 1.60 point decrease in economic conservatism). Interestingly, economic indicators do not significantly affect economic-related voting behavior. According to the measure used, a legislator's individual economic status has little to do with voting behavior on fiscal policy. This could, however, be the result of the measure that I used or related to the overwhelming degree of affluence in the U.S. Congress. With the current measure, the results of the regression indicate that descriptive representation based on shared economic status does *not* enhance substantive representation.

Once again, party is a very significant predictor of voting behavior. Holding all else equal, Democrats score 44.098 fewer points than do Republicans on economic conservatism. Also once again, the race of the representative is a significant predictor of voting behavior; on average, African American legislators receive a rating 9.218 points lower than whites on economic conservatism.

To further explore the impact of party and race on voting behavior, I return to J.C. Watts. Watts was one of ten African American representatives that fit in the middle range of economic status, and he represented a district with a median income of \$25,391 (the mean for districts represented by African Americans was \$25,079). While all other African American legislators received scores for economic conservatism ranging from 0 to 43, Watts scored 84.5. The only explanatory factor for the striking difference in economic conservatism is party; neither the descriptive characteristic of race nor that of

economic status (nor even district median income) distinguished him from African American Democrats, but his party did.

V. IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

I have empirically addressed the question of whether descriptive representation enhances substantive representation. Scholars of congressional representation whom have previously addressed this question have focused specifically on race, asking whether blacks can better substantively represent blacks. Arguing that blacks can better represent the interests of other blacks, however, is to claim that race provides more common ground for members of one racial group than does any other sociodemographic trait or even any other combination of traits. To claim that black descriptive representation enhances black substantive representation is to ignore the many levels on which there are differences *among* blacks (such as class, gender, age, region, etc.). Since blacks are not a monolithic group, the argument that blacks can better represent other blacks is inherently flawed, as the focus on race neglects many other important traits; it seems more accurate to claim that blacks can better represent blacks on *race-related issues*, rather than claiming better overall substantive representation.

My findings indicate that African American descriptive representation does enhance substantive representation on race-related issues, although party is a much more significant predictor of voting behavior on race-related issues. This is consistent with both Swain and Canon's findings that party matters more than race in determining the representation of African American interests. Furthermore, I find that party is also highly

significant in determining voting behavior on economic-related issues.

The liberalism of African American legislators, with the exception of Watts, on both racial and economic issues is consistent with Tate's finding that African American legislators are generally more liberal than their black constituents. African American legislators' overwhelming association with the Democratic Party might explain this trend, as is illustrated by the example of Republican Watts' conservative record.

Descriptive representation based on a shared economic status does not translate into substantive representation on economic-related issues. It is interesting that legislators do not represent their own economic interests, but instead regularly represent their party's position. If legislators' behavior could be understood as a representation of their own personal preferences, then this would not be the case. If their behavior is instead interpreted as a response to constituency demands, then we must seek to better understand constituency demands. Do constituents prefer policy that is in their interest and would provide them with direct benefits, such as economic redistribution for the impoverished or tax cuts for the wealthy? Or do constituents prefer policy that is in line with the positions of their party? Legislators' tendency to vote according to party positions on both racial and economic issues indicates that representatives are strongly influenced by party; whether this can be attributed to constituent demands for party-positions or to institutional features that deliver benefits to loyal party members will have to be explored later with additional information.

Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
NAACP	13	100	58.19	30.443
Econ Conservatism	0	89.5	46.785	28.0389
% Urban	12	100	70.54	23.660
Median Income	15,060	57,219	31,327.35	8,616.155
District % Black	0	71	11.82	15.459

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Black MC	0	398	91.5	91.5
	1	37	8.5	100.0
Democrat	0	224	51.5	51.5
	1	211	48.5	100.0
South	0	310	71.3	71.3
	1	125	28.7	100.0
MC Econ	-1	112	25.7	25.7
	0	182	41.8	67.6
	1	141	32.4	100

Sample size: 435

* Sample size for NAACP: 430

** Sample size for Economic Conservatism: 389

Table 2: Regression Analysis of NAACP Rating

Dependent Variable: NAACP Support

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Significance Level
South	-5.455	.000
% Urban	.143	.000
District % Black	.049	.493
Black Member of Congress	7.309	.050
Democrat	50.704	.000

R square: .840
Sample size: 430

Figure 1: NAACP Support by District Percent Black

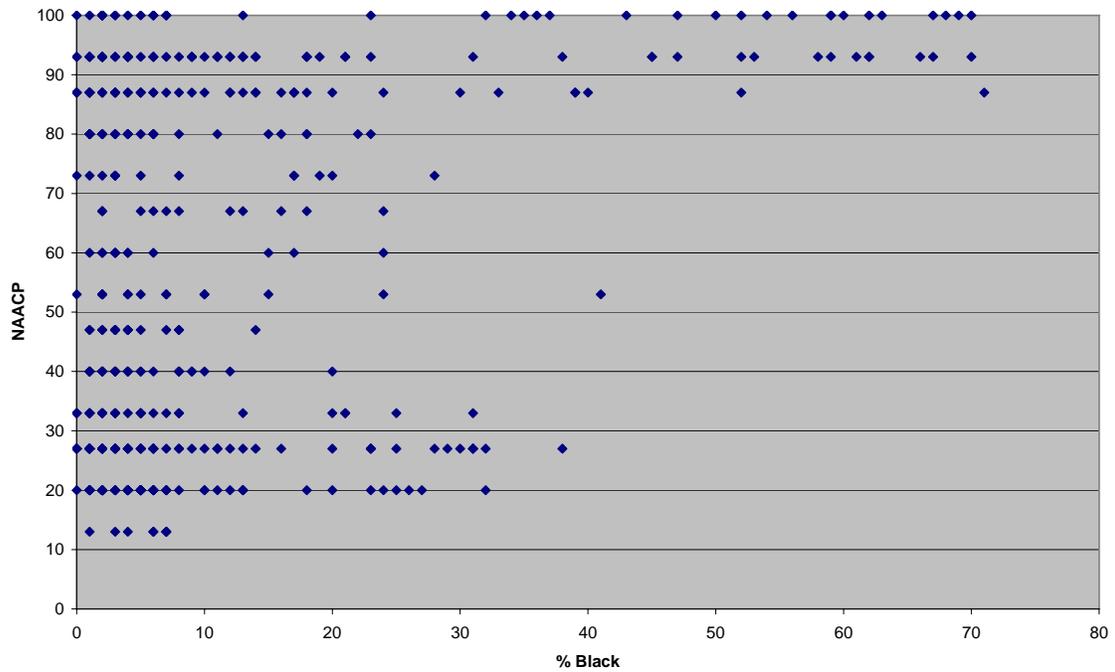


Figure 2: NAACP Support by District Percent Black
(Democrats only)

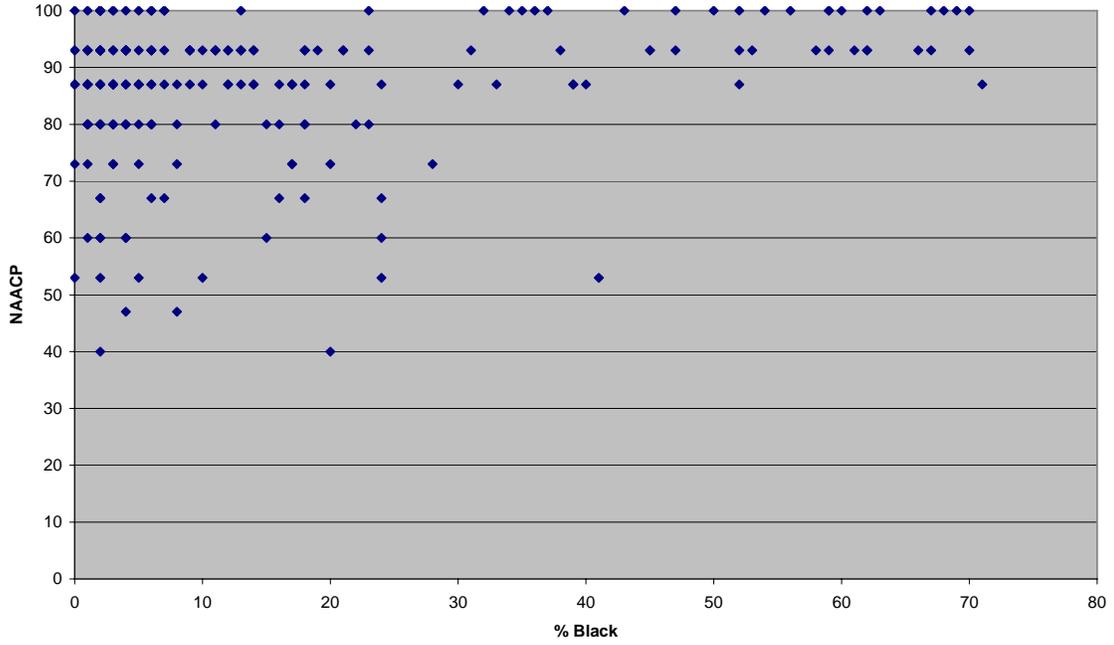


Figure 3: NAACP Support by District Percent Black
(Republicans only)

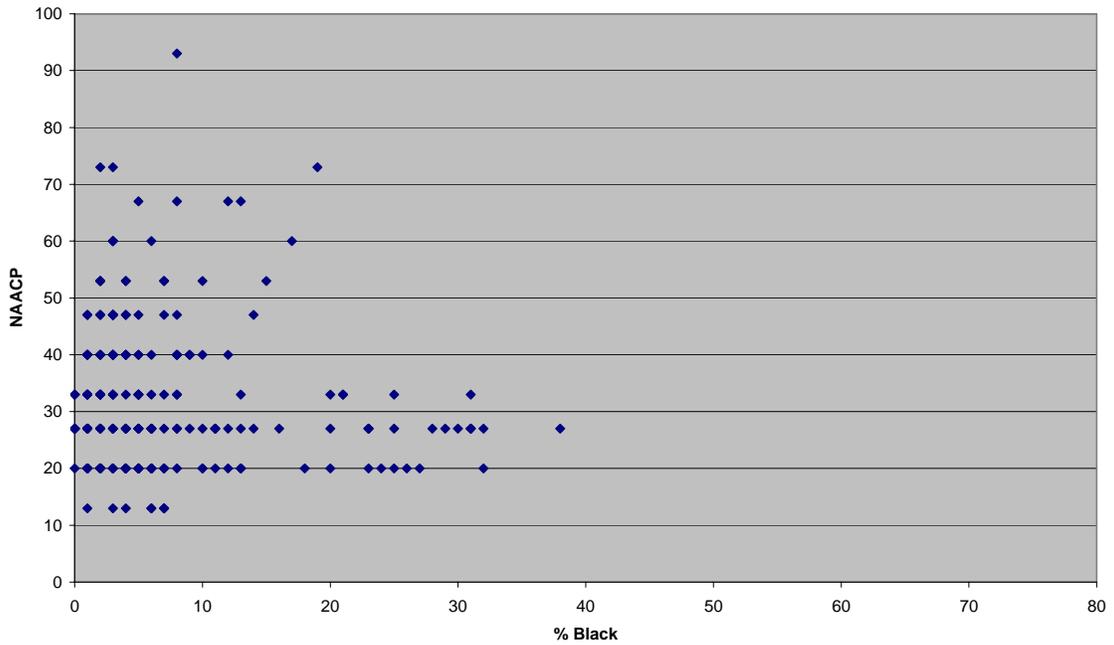


Table 3: Regression Analysis of National Journal Rating of Economic Conservatism

Dependent Variable: Economic Conservatism

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Significance Level
South	7.986	.000
% Urban	-.160	.000
Median Income	8.323E-05	.320
MC Econ	1.005	.221
Black MC	-9.218	.000
Democrat	-44.098	.000

R square: .825

Sample size: 389

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