

# *Politics in the New South— Representation of African Americans in Southern State Legislatures*

Edited by Charles E. Menifield and Stephen D. Shaffer.  
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The promise of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was that electoral barriers to political participation for African Americans would end and that increased political participation would yield not only descriptive but also substantive representation for historically excluded groups like African Americans. Forty years and considerable increases in the number of African American state legislators later, the promise of the Voting Rights Act is measured against the political realities of the “illusion of inclusion” in *Politics in the New South—Representation of African Americans in State Legislatures*, edited by Charles E. Menifield and Stephen D. Shaffer.

The concept of the “illusion of inclusion” is one heuristic to measure the impacts of civil rights legislation like the Voting Rights Act. It focuses on how increased descriptive and substantive representation play within contexts of traditional political economies and institutional and organizational norms and practices in legislative bodies like city councils and state assemblies. Simply electing a person a color or even increasing the number of racial and ethnic minority representatives to an existing organizational structure, like a legislature, can provide the illusion of progress. The reality is that inclusion by itself cannot provide the sufficient conditions necessary to bring about dramatic changes in policies or condition. *Politics in the New South—Representation of African Americans in State Legislatures* unfolds against the backdrop of a region of the country that is the perhaps the most conservative in the nation and in most need of redistributive economics policies. Eight of the top ten states with the highest three year average poverty rates are southern states. Three of the top four were states examined in this work (Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi), for example.

Against this backdrop the authors assess the impact of increased African American legislators in providing adequate representation and in doing so not only benchmark the progress in descriptive and substantive representation for African Americans in southern state legislatures in the last two decades of the twentieth century but also raise important new consideration for assessing political representation.

While the literature on minority and racial and ethnic representation continues to grow, the findings are generally mixed as a result of different periods and units of analysis typically examined. Menifield and Shaffer, mindful of this gap, coordinated

several analysts to assess whether African Americans are adequately represented. Focusing principally on five southern states (Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Georgia and Texas), each chapter addresses several questions: Has the number of African American legislators increased over time? Do African American legislators vote as a group and how does this compare to other groups (Democrats and Republicans)? Do they successfully form coalitions with other Democrats or Republicans in the passage of legislation? What voting influence do African American legislators as a group exact on different types of legislation? And, are African Americans securing leadership positions in state legislatures? Using roll-call data on key votes from legislative sessions from 1980 to 2000 and examining the extent that African American lawmakers have ascended institutional leadership posts, *Politics in the New South* begins to answer these and many other questions.

Each of the chapters, for example, provides an historical and political context for examining and measuring the levels of success over time. On the one hand, the political successes of African Americans at the state legislative levels are indeed impressive given the historical context of neglect and institutional barriers to political participation. Steven Tauber's chapter on Florida, for example, notes in the middle decades of the twentieth century, southern states, like Florida, often failed to reapportion. As a result, urban areas, where African Americans typically resided, were underrepresented relative to their numbers. Equally, Tauber and other chapters note that it was the heavy hand of the federal government via the Supreme Court in cases like *Swann v. Adams* (1967) that mandated that Florida redraw its lines and *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) that overturned the white primary in Georgia and other states that the barriers to political participation for African Americans were slowly dismantled. Readers will find these chapters useful reminders that it was not the intransigent southern states that one day awoke and remorsefully set asides its illegal ways, but the persistence of plaintiffs and federal courts that brought relief to these illegal practices.

Other chapters speak to many of the varied and typical "successes" of African American legislators. Weilhouwer and Middlemass, in their chapter on Georgia, for example, cite the success of the 1995 selection of David Scott to head up the powerful Rules Committee. Shaffer and Meneifield's Mississippi chapter relay the successes of Robert Clark from vice chair to chair of the House Education Committee and eventually to speaker pro tempore and chairman of the Management Committee. On the other hand, chapters like the one on Arkansas note the relative lack of influence of the black caucus ("the Arkansas Black Caucus was simply never big enough to 'really kill anything'"(37)), while the Texas chapter mentions the limited number of chairmanships.

One issue relative to this approach is the lack of consideration of what seniority and chairmanships mean for representation. Typically, appointments and committee memberships are determined by the majority party leader, usually the speaker in the House and the Lieutenant governor or presiding officer of the Senate. Chairmanship appointments are usually partisan, taking into consideration legislative acumen, seniority and political loyalty. Unlike the U.S. Congress where seniority plays a stronger influence, party loyalty and more specifically, loyalty to the leadership, plays a greater role in many state legislatures. This point speaks to the influence of legislative and partisan norms on political representation. Chairmanships or leaders are not simply representatives but also carry institutional and partisan responsibilities as well. Equally, legislators do not ascend to chairmanships by necessarily being "good" representatives. As a result, "getting along

to going along” prevails in the machinations of many state legislatures. In these cases, how does the maverick racial or ethnic minority legislator “represent”? What is the measure of substantive representation or legislative influence of a racial or ethnic legislator from a super majority minority legislative, inner city and impoverished district that “fails to go along”? Achieving a chairmanship is a prestigious and important element to the dynamic of representation but how it cuts relative to the responsibilities of representation is not necessarily positively correlated or even clear.

In the end, overall the successes of the increased number of African American legislators are impressive. Menifield, Shaffer and Patrick in the final chapter “Politics in the New South: Looking Ahead,” successfully bring together the book’s chapters. Here, Menifield et al. demonstrate, for example, that while African Americans continue to lag behind in terms of descriptive representation state-by-state, the level of underrepresentation relative to their proportions in each of the state’s populations have decreased substantially. Menifield et al. also show that the number of chairmanships, with the exception of Florida, have also increased, with dramatic changes in states like Mississippi and Georgia. When comparing “winning coalitions,” Menifield et al. note that of 239 votes (in areas like abortion, crime, economics, education, government reform, welfare and race-relevant bills; p. 184) over the twenty year period under examination, the Black Democrats as a Caucus were successful (on the prevailing side (passing or failing) of a bill) 71% of the time with a success rate slightly higher on race-related issues and lowest on issues such as abortion and crime. Overall, African American Democrats were most successful on health, welfare, economic, and government reform issues. Finally, Menifield et al. demonstrate that African American legislators formed biracial coalitions with white Democrats on 39% of the roll-call votes and 31% on consensus votes or were in the dominant voting coalition two thirds of the time. In the aggregate, African American legislators are succeeding in increasing the political representation of African Americans.

But how shall we assess the performance of African American legislators over time or is it even equitable to do so given the relative little time that has transpired since the advent of the modern African American legislator. Despite limited committee assignments, modest advances in enacting bill, limited leadership positions, African American representation, influence, and behavior are impacting public policy and increasing the quality of life for their constituents. Collectively and individually, African American legislators are changing the nature of legislative politics and representation.

Where do we go from here? More emphasis is needed on the dynamic of racial and ethnic minority legislators from super majority minority districts compared to legislators from nominally majority minority districts and legislators from minority minority districts. Representation is contextual. Equally, more conversation and analyses are warranted on the role and influence of African American women legislators. A revisit to the Miller-Stokes constituency (1963) links between legislative behavior and political attitudes of constituents is also appropriate in bringing a fuller picture to the dynamic of representation. Finally, a Fenno *Home Style* or Swain *Black Faces, Black Interests* approach to examining representation offers another method to evaluate and consider representation. How do African American legislators see their core constituencies relative to their financial and political supporters or even relative to their responsibilities in the legislatures, for example? I wish this work would have followed a similar method and conducted interviews with African American legislators (comparing

the perspectives of the likes of the late Shirley Chisholm) who were the firsts to be elected and comparing them to those with most recently elected African American legislators (like U.S. Senator Barack Obamas) at the state level. Some triangulation of data sources with interview or survey data would have been beneficial.

In all, *Politics in the New South—Representation of African Americans in Southern State Legislatures* will make an important contribution to the literature. It will serve nicely in undergraduate state and local politics courses as well as graduate seminars on legislative behavior and politics, political representation, and African American and racial and ethnic politics. Moreover, it raises important issues of inquiry for others to pursue.