



How Race Influences Citizen Contact with Officeholders

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Elected officeholders cannot tell what their constituents want unless they hear from them. That is why a typical legislator employs staffers to keep track of messages from constituents. Likewise, because interest groups know that citizen communications matter, they routinely ask adherents to contact their representatives in support or opposition to particular policies. Scholars have accordingly shown that policymakers are influenced by what they hear.

Members of U.S. racial minorities vote a bit less often than whites – but the racial gap is much larger when it comes to contacting and delivering messages to elected representatives. Minority citizens do this much less than whites. According to some surveys, whites are twice as likely as citizens of other races to communicate with elected representatives.

Why does the racial communication gap exist? My research uses field experiments conducted in the state of Maryland to tease out the sources. Maryland has legislative districts where both white and black elected officials represent the same constituents, so I was able to do random phone surveys – to see what difference it makes if blacks are offered the opportunity to communicate with a named black or white representative, while white constituents are offered the chance to communicate with a named white or black representative.

Citizens Communicate Less to Representatives of a Different Race

The racial identities of elected officials matter to citizens, my field experiments suggest. When thousands of residents of multi-member state legislative districts were invited to communicate with their legislators, blacks were much more willing – in fact, twice as willing – to communicate with black representatives, while white constituents were twice as willing to communicate with white legislators. Constituents of both races were more reluctant to send messages to legislators not of their own racial background.

The results add up. Consider the example of a hypothetical district with half black and half white constituents. A black elected representative in that district would receive twice as many communications from her black constituents as from her white constituents, while a white elected representative would receive twice as many messages from the white citizens compared to the blacks. The two elected representatives could gain very different senses of what constituents want. Contrasting portraits of their constituents' opinions might have important consequences for the issues the legislators raise or how they vote, introducing racial bias.

Blacks and Whites Communicate Equally to Representatives of Their Race

Elected officials who represent many people not of their race may draw a mistaken conclusion from the messages coming into their offices. They may perceive citizens from their own racial background as more interested and engaged in politics.

But it would be wrong for anyone to conclude that the engagement of U.S. citizens is sharply different by race. Just as black and white voter turnout in the United States is remarkably similar, so too is black and white interest in communication to representatives – provided that the possibility exists of communicating with a representative from their own racial background. In my field experiments, whites and blacks were equally interested in sending messages when they were offered the chance to contact an elected representative of their own race.

Blacks communicate much less to their elected officials not because they care less, but because they are much less likely to have federal, state, or local representatives from their own race. Consider the U.S. House of Representatives. Only one-third of black citizens have representatives of their race, while more than nine of every ten whites have a white representative. If the overall racial composition of the U.S. population were reversed – with blacks the overwhelming majority – we would be talking about white citizens as the ones who

contact their elected representatives half as often as black citizens.

Racial Barriers are Largest for Residents of Segregated Areas

If elected officials must be cautious as they extrapolate from the actual messages that arrive in letters, emails, and other forms, then this is especially true when many of the residents in their districts are not only of a different race but also live in racially segregated areas.

Although these findings are more tentative, my research suggests that racial barriers to communication between representatives and constituents are most severe for citizens in segregated neighborhoods – where blacks and whites are unlikely to live next door to each other. Citizens living in such segregated areas are the ones most reluctant to communicate with representatives of a different race. Perhaps such residents are less likely to recognize the name of their elected representative. But racial suspicions may also be heightened when people live in a racially homogenous area.

What Fair-Minded Representatives Should Do

My findings have important implications for officials striving to represent all citizens fairly:

- Representatives cannot just add up the messages that arrive in their offices. Realizing that constituents not of their own race may be unusually reticent about actively contacting them, representatives and staffers may need to take active steps to correct for possible racial skews in what they hear. A white representative, for example, may wish to undertake special efforts to hear and understand the views of her non-white constituents. And her office may need to weigh messages differently to take account of more frequent contacts from same-race constituents.
- Politicians need to work extra hard to hear from constituents of a different race who live in segregated enclaves.
- Legislative and judicial policymakers should realize that tools like the Voting Rights Act continue to matter. Encouraging more districts in which minority officials can be elected by majorities of voters from their own race may help to facilitate closer communication between elected officeholders and citizens – until race ceases to be a barrier, as it is now.

Read more in David Broockman, “Black Politicians are More Intrinsically Motivated to Advance Blacks’ Interests.” *American Journal of Political Science* (2013).