

Racial Representation and Partisan Dynamics in the U.S. State Legislatures from 1995 to 2000

Todd Zhou
Harvard College '27

This study reexamines the foundational claim that demographic composition, particularly racial makeup, shapes legislative behavior in the United States. Drawing on a novel dataset that I helped digitize from a government census almanac book, which includes 2,630 state legislators across 18 racially salient states from 1995 to 2000, I test whether the percentage of African American residents in a legislative district predicts the roll-call ideology of its representative. The findings challenge conventional wisdom. While bivariate models suggest a strong negative relationship, with Blacker districts electing more liberal lawmakers, this association collapses under minimal statistical conditioning. Once party affiliation, state context, and district socioeconomic characteristics are held constant, racial composition has no substantively or statistically significant effect on roll-call ideology. This null result holds across model specifications, racial thresholds, partisan subgroups, and robustness checks. The one exception, majority-Black Democratic districts, reflects ideological selection rather than policy responsiveness.

These results force a reconsideration of both descriptive representation and democratic accountability. In contemporary state legislatures, race determines who wins office but not how they vote. Party discipline, rather than constituency demographics, governs roll-call behavior. Representation has shifted from a delegate model of voter-legislator alignment to a partisan model of ideological conformity. By tracing the structural erasure of demographic influence, this paper offers a revised account of political representation in an emerging era of nationalized partisanship and cautions against equating electoral diversity with substantive policy inclusion.

Introduction

State legislatures are where national ideologies confront the stubborn facts of local demography. Despite having less scholarly prestige than Congress, the nation's 7,383 state legislators collectively wield immense institutional power. They draft and enact far more bills per biennium than their federal counterparts, allocate over \$1.5 trillion in public funds, and pilot policy regimes, from environmental deregulation to Medicaid expansion, that routinely cascade upward to the national stage (Squire, 2012; Carey et al., 2006). These areas are not merely provincial echoes of Washington politics, but are foundational to the American policy ecosystem and indispensable to understanding democratic responsiveness at scale.

Yet while political science has made great advances in mapping the ideological terrain of Congress, the micro-foundations of roll-call voting in statehouses are often less known. Roll-call voting, when legislators' individual votes are publicly recorded, offers a rare window into how personal beliefs, party pressures, and constituency interests collide in real time. Yet what drives the policy behavior of state legislators? Two theories offer contrasting answers. One, rooted in democratic representation, casts legislators as delegates of their constituents. In this "constituency-centered" view, electoral accountability binds representatives to local preferences: voters punish deviation, and legislators, in turn, align their voting behavior with district interests (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999). Especially where racial identity is politically salient, as in the post-Voting Rights Act South, the Black population share should, according to this theory, predict more liberal roll-call behavior, consistent with theories of racially linked fate and symbolic representation (Welch & Bledsoe, 1985; Browning et al., 1990; Grofman & Handley, 1991; Broockman, 2013).

A second, increasingly dominant paradigm emphasizes parties, not voters, as the central actors. Party-centered theories describe legislators as agents of ideologically cohesive caucuses—intra-party groups that coordinate strategy, messaging, and collective action within a legislature—whose voting decisions reflect organizational discipline and partisan branding rather than constituency preferences (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty et al., 2006; Levendusky, 2008). In this framework, district-level characteristics may affect who wins an election, but exert little influence on how that individual votes once in office. The emergence of strong partisan sorting and elite polarization over the past three decades has only reinforced this interpretation (Shor & McCarty, 2011; Carson et al., 2019).

This study tests two paradigms by analyzing roll-call voting across 18 state legislatures from 1995 to 2000. These legislatures were selected for their demographic relevance, with average Black district shares exceeding 10 percent. Drawing on the Shor–McCarty Net Promoter-score framework (Shor & McCarty, 2011), I examine whether the Black population share predicts liberalism in legislators' ideological positions. *The Shor–McCarty NP-score framework is a cross-state ideological scaling method that places state legislators and members of Congress on a common liberal–conservative dimension using survey and roll-call data.* The analysis is guided by three core research questions:

1. **Unconditional association.** Do districts with higher Black population shares exhibit lower (more liberal) legislator NP scores?
2. **Robustness to context.** Does any such association persist after conditioning on party affiliation and state fixed effects?
3. **Moderation by institutional features.** Are these effects attenuated in more professionalized chambers or among Republican legislators?

Theory and Prior Evidence

Understanding whether and how district demographics shape legislative behavior requires untangling the mechanisms of political representation and the constraints imposed by institutional structures. Existing research offers competing theories, which I organize here into three thematic strands: the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, the institutional dominance of parties, and the conditional nature of statehouse dynamics.

1. Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation

At the heart of democratic theory lies a tension between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation emphasizes shared identity characteristics between voters and elected officials (race, gender, religion, etc.), while substantive representation asks whether those officials advance policies aligned with their constituents' preferences. Mansbridge (1999) identifies four distinct ways that shared identity between representatives and constituents can shape policy responsiveness. First, promissory representation occurs when legislators seek to keep their campaign promises once in office. Second, anticipatory representation involves acting in ways that pre-empt future voter punishment, anticipating how constituents will judge them in the next election. Third, surrogate representation refers to advocating for people outside one's own district who share similar identities or experiences. Finally, gyrosopic representation describes legislators who rely on their own internalized values and sense of duty, rather than external pressure, to guide their decisions, assuming those values align with their constituents.

Empirical evidence supporting these pathways, however, is uneven. Early urban studies, such as Welch and Bledsoe (1985) and Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1990), found that Black mayors and council members often brought modest but real changes in urban spending priorities, particularly toward social services and minority hiring. Yet as the scope of governance expands from cities to states, these effects become harder to trace. Grofman and Handley (1991), for instance, observe that while the Voting Rights Act increased Black officeholding in southern states, it did not always yield commensurate policy changes. More recent work by Broockman (2013) suggests that Black legislators may exhibit stronger intrinsic motivation to champion racial equity, but their effectiveness is still mediated by institutional rules, partisan caucuses, and the broader legislative environment. If shared racial identity does not robustly predict more liberal voting even in majority-Black districts, then the mechanisms of substantive representation may be fundamentally constrained by other forces.

2. The Partisan Constraint

A powerful counter-narrative to identity-based representation is the growing dominance of parties in structuring legislative behavior. Rooted in spatial theories of roll-call voting, this literature holds that legislators act as agents of their parties, constrained by median voter preferences within their caucus rather than their district (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). In this view, representation is a byproduct of party competition, not constituent alignment. The rise of elite polarization accelerated by gerrymandering, closed primaries, and nationalized media has reinforced this dynamic, rendering party labels increasingly reliable cues for ideological behavior (Levendusky, 2008; Shor & McCarty, 2011).

This logic has two important implications. First, it suggests that the racial or economic composition of a district may influence election outcomes (e.g., which party wins) but not policy outcomes conditional on party control. Once elected, a Democrat from a majority-Black district is expected to vote much like a Democrat from districts with a greater percentage of white residents, regardless of local demographic nuances. Second, it implies that intra-party variation, the range of ideological differences among members of the same political party, is shrinking. The "southern Democrat" or "northeastern Republican" is increasingly a historical artifact, replaced by ideological homogeneity within each party's legislative wing.

Thus, if the observed effect of Black population share on roll-call ideology weakens or disappears after accounting for party and state fixed effects, this suggests that legislators' ideological positions are shaped primarily by partisan alignment rather than by constituency demographics. In other words, once we control for "party", the institutional expression of partisan constraint, the remaining variation reveals how strongly party affiliation channels or overrides demographic influences. In polarized legislatures, this means that racial representation may hold symbolic rather than substantive significance, as party incentives largely determine legislators' policy behavior.

3. Why States Could Differ

Nonetheless, state legislatures are flexible, and it would be unwise to dismiss the potential for constituency influence without considering institutional variation. As Squire (2012) shows, statehouses differ dramatically in their levels of professionalization, defined by salary, staff support, session length, and legislative capacity. In low-professionalized chambers (e.g., in Arkansas and Montana), legislators often hold other jobs, face fewer procedural restrictions, and operate in a looser partisan environment. Such conditions may reduce the effectiveness of party discipline and open the door to more district-responsive behavior.

Electoral rules, too, play a critical role. States with term limits may incentivize short-term constituency service over long-term party loyalty, especially in members' final sessions (Carey, Niemi, & Powell, 2006). Conversely, states with multi-member districts, nonpartisan primaries, or public financing regimes may induce broader electoral coalitions, potentially heightening responsiveness to racial or economic heterogeneity within districts.

Moreover, the salience of race itself varies by region and historical legacy. In Deep South legislatures with a history of racial bloc voting (where voters of different racial groups consistently support opposing candidates) and constrained Black access to power, descriptive representation may carry different symbolic and mobilizational consequences than in racially diverse coastal states. Studies by Grose (2005) and Batista (2020) suggest that even when Black legislators represent Black-majority districts, their roll-call behavior is shaped more by institutional context than by co-ethnic solidarity alone. These conditional dynamics underscore the need for a multi-level empirical approach: one that tests not only for aggregate relationships between racial composition and ideology, but also for heterogeneity across states, chambers, and partisan environments.

Methods

This paper evaluates whether racial constituency composition (specifically, the percent of African American residents in a state legislative district) predicts the roll-call ideology of the elected

representative. To do so, I constructed a novel, legislator-level dataset using the Gov 2474's Optical Character Recognition (GOOCR) algorithm. I developed this AI algorithm extract tables and numerical data from scanned or photographed pages of physical books. It merges roll-call ideal points with detailed socioeconomic and demographic attributes of each legislator's district. The resulting data portrait offers an unusually fine-grained lens on constituency-legislator linkages across 18 states during a formative period of American polarization (1995–2000). The empirical strategy proceeds in three phases: (1) documenting raw descriptive relationships, (2) estimating causal effects via fixed-effects regression models, and (3) probing the stability of findings across institutional and partisan contexts.

Unit of Observation and Dataset Structure

The dataset consists of 2,630 unique legislators observed between 1995 and 2000, each represented by a single row reflecting five-year averages of both outcome and covariates. This collapsed cross-section minimizes volatility due to short-term shocks or legislative turnover while preserving meaningful variation across districts and states. By focusing on incumbents only, I ensure that the ideological measures reflect actual voting behavior rather than campaign signaling or appointment bias. I then combine this dataset with the Shor and McCarty (2019) dataset to receive all the NP scores (discussed in the next section) calculated for each representative in each district.

The sample includes both chambers (85% House, 15% Senate) and both major parties. States were selected if their average district-level Black population exceeded 10 percent, a criterion that ensures sufficient racial variation while anchoring the analysis in geographies where race plausibly shapes electoral incentives. Five states—Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi—account for 26 percent of the sample and contain nearly all majority-Black districts, making geographic balance and fixed-effects particularly vital. This was made possible with the advent of OCR algorithms to help digitize this robust data for in-depth analysis.

Measuring Ideology: The NP Score

The dependent variable is the NP Score, a continuous ideal-point estimate developed by Shor and McCarty (2011) using state-level roll-call data. It places each legislator on a latent ideological spectrum anchored by party caucus medians, scaled to allow comparison across states and chambers. NP scores in the dataset range from -2.65 (very liberal) to 2.35 (very conservative), with a mean near zero and a standard deviation of 0.78. The inter-party difference is vast: Democrats average 0.39 while Republicans cluster at 0.83, a partisan gap that makes within-party variance seem negligible ($SD = 0.42$ for Democrats, $SD = 0.34$ for Republicans).

This strong polarization introduces both an empirical challenge and an inferential opportunity. Because party affiliation predicts ideological position, meaningful estimation of racial constituency effects must occur within-party. Accordingly, all models are conditioned on party or are estimated in split samples to avoid mistaking party sorting for constituency responsiveness.

Focal Independent Variable: Percent African American

The primary explanatory variable is the percentage of African American residents in a legislator's district, derived from the 2000 U.S. Census and joined to legislative boundaries. This variable is

sharply skewed: roughly two-thirds of districts fall below 15 percent Black, while a concentrated right tail includes a substantial number of districts above 50 percent, and a handful above 80 percent. This bimodal distribution is quite fortunate. It enables comparisons across starkly different racial contexts while preserving a broad mid-range for detecting marginal effects.

A naive bivariate regression suggests a dramatic relationship: NP scores fall nearly 1.5 units when moving from the bottom to the top decile of district Black share. Yet this pattern almost certainly reflects compositional factors (party, geography, and socioeconomic context) rather than a direct causal effect. Since the distribution is analytically central, we are able to discern nonlinear patterns (e.g., thresholds or saturation points), conduct stratified modeling (the 10–50% “competitive” band), and perform robust tests of responsiveness across the full range of demographic variation.

Covariates and Fixed Effects

Multivariable models included: average income (per \$1,000) to capture socioeconomic status, college attainment, to control for educational composition, party affiliation, and state fixed effects, to absorb unobserved institutional, regional, or partisan differences. Together, these controls isolated the independent effect of race from correlated social, economic, and geographic factors. State fixed effects in particular were essential, as several high-Black-share districts clustered in Southern states with sharply distinct political cultures. Robust standard errors were clustered by state throughout, accounting for intra-state correlation and variance heterogeneity.

Modeling Strategy

We conducted the following regression analyses to better understand the phenomenon.

A. Bivariate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS)

Initial models regressed the NP score on the Percent Black without controls. These regressions established raw associations and match prevailing assumptions in the literature. Both pooled and party-stratified models were estimated.

B. Multivariable OLS with Fixed Effects

Subsequent models added income, party, and state dummy variables. These tested whether the racial coefficient survives once confounding variance was absorbed. The fully specified model was:

$$NP_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{BlackShare}_i + \beta_2 \text{Income}_i + \beta_3 \text{Party}_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon_i$$

Where:

- NP_i is legislator i 's ideological (NP) score,
- BlackShare_i is the percentage of i 's district that is African American,
- γ_s is the state fixed effects, and
- ϵ_i is the heteroskedasticity-robust error term, clustered by state

This specification tested the core hypothesis of whether district racial composition independently shapes legislative ideology after controlling for party and geography.

C. Band-Restricted Models (10–50%)

Because the racial extremes (less than 10%, greater than 50%) dominate the bivariate slope, models were also estimated within the 10–50% Black range, where racial composition may generate

more cross-group electoral competition. This subset comprised moderate, interracial districts where policy responsiveness should be highest.

D. Per-State Regressions

To assess local robustness, separate OLS regressions were run within each state. This allowed the recovery of state-specific slopes and a test of whether the null finding reflects an average over diverging subnational trends. In most states, bivariate slopes remained negative, but these models did not control for the party, and their attenuation in multivariable settings further reinforced the central findings.

E. Diagnostic Tests

Model integrity is assessed via:

- Variance inflation factors ($VIF < 1.5$) to rule out multicollinearity
- Oster coefficient stability tests ($\delta^* = 1.46$) to assess omitted variable bias
- Moran's I on residuals to test for spatial autocorrelation ($I = 0.015, p = .34$)

We utilized the inspection of LOWESS curves (locally weighted regressions that fit a smooth line through scatterplot data, which help reveal nonlinear patterns), scatterplots, and residual distributions for functional form and heteroskedasticity analysis.

Overall, this design allowed for a clean test of the competing models of legislative behavior. If a constituency-centered model holds, we should observe a robust, negative relationship between district Black share and liberalism, even within party and within state. If a party-centered model holds, the racial slope should collapse under control, and ideology should be driven by partisan identity rather than demographic context.

By estimating each model with layered controls, restricted bands, and disaggregated subpopulations, the empirical strategy revealed where and when race matters, and where its influence was entirely dulled or nullified.

Results

1. Descriptive Patterns: Strong Raw Associations

The bivariate association between district racial composition and legislator ideology is striking in magnitude. Across 2,630 legislators from 18 Black-salient states between 1995 and 2000,

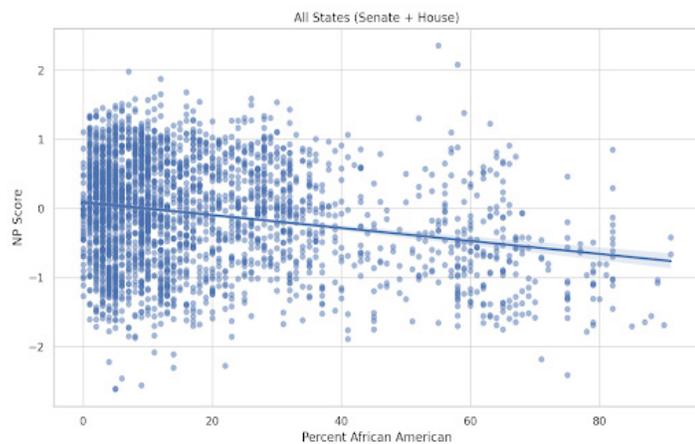


Figure 1. NP Scores vs. Percent African American in Each District

a simple OLS regression of NP score on percent Black yields a highly significant negative slope: every additional percentage point in Black population correlates with a 0.010 decrease in NP score ($p < .001, R^2 = 0.168$). The ideological difference between a district at the 10th percentile of Black share ($\approx 2\%$) and one at the 90th percentile ($\approx 52\%$) exceeds 1 full NP unit, equivalent to moving from a centrist Democrat to a committed progressive.

Party-stratified bivariate models, however, appear to support competing interpretations. Among Democrats, the slope remains negative ($\beta = -0.0039, p < .001$), suggesting that Blacker districts elect more liberal Democrats. Among Republicans, the sign flips ($\beta = +0.0051, p < .001$), indicating a mild conservative shift in more racially diverse constituencies.

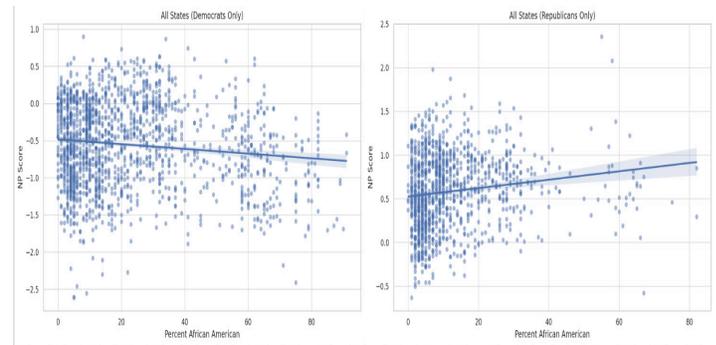


Figure 2. Percent African American and Relative NP Score Separated by Political Party

Yet the low R^2 values in both cases ($\sim .02$) signal that race explains little of the within-party variance, prompting a deeper investigation.

2. Conditioning on State and Party: The Collapse of Constituency Effects

The strong negative relationship between district Black population share and legislator ideology seen in the pooled data collapses under even minimal statistical conditioning. Introducing state fixed effects, a necessary adjustment given the geographic clustering of majority-Black districts in the Deep South and urban Rust Belt, helps attenuate the apparent relationship and shifts its substantive interpretation.

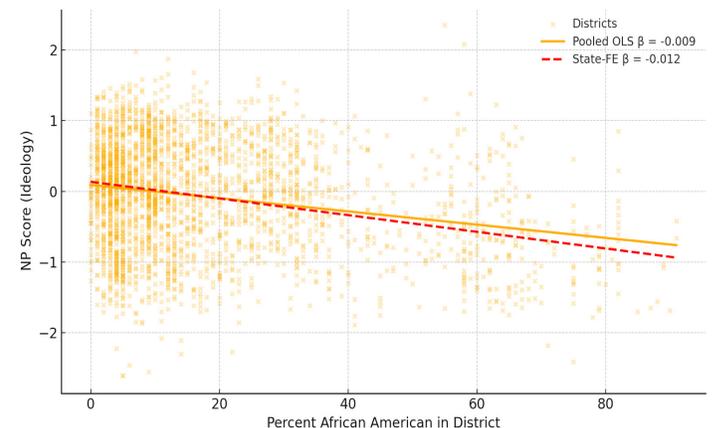


Figure 3. % African American Districts and NP Score with Pooled OLS and State Fixed Effects

The solid orange line represents the simple bivariate OLS relationship, showing a slope of about $\beta = -0.009$. After adding state fixed effects (dashed red line), the slope becomes slightly steeper, at $\beta = -0.012$. This means that, within individual states, districts with larger Black populations tend to elect somewhat more liberal legislators, even more so than the pooled estimate suggests. Visually, the fixed-effects line looks flatter in the middle of the distribution and bends downward only in the far right tail (above roughly 50% Black population). This aspect of the model reflects where observations are most concentrated, not a weaker overall effect. Statistically, including state fixed effects actually increases the magnitude of the relationship. In other words, once we account for differences between states (such as the fact that liberal, heavily Black districts often coexist with conservative, mostly white states), the link between race and ideology not only persists but becomes sharper within states. This indicates that the connection is rooted in in-state demographic variation, not merely in cross-state political clustering.

When party affiliation is introduced into the model alongside state fixed effects and socioeconomic controls, the racial coefficient shrinks further, and in most cases disappears entirely. In the districts that have a 10-50% Black population (which includes the majority of electorally competitive, racially mixed districts), the multivariable regression finds that a 10-point increase in Black population share raises a Democrat’s NP score by 0.023 ($p = .260$), and raises a Republican’s NP score by +0.014 ($p = .518$).

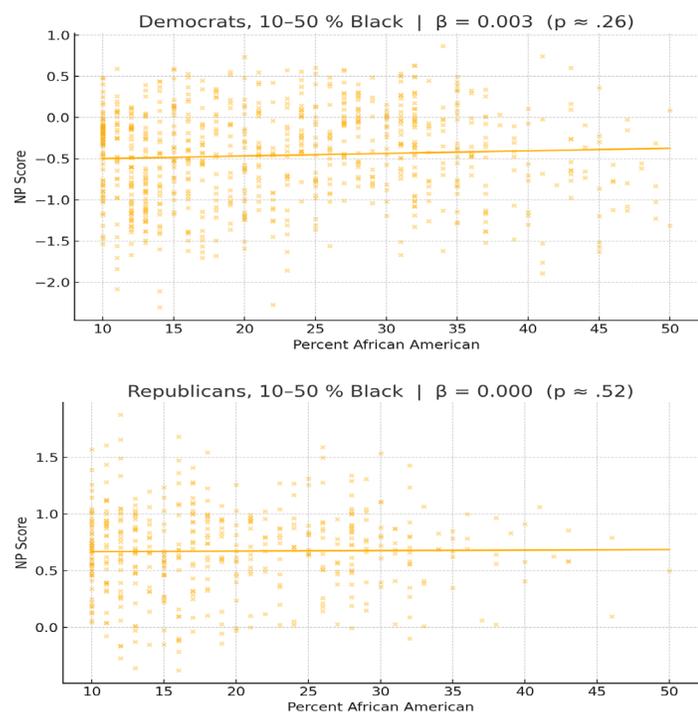


Figure 4. 10-50% Black Districts and Relative NP Score Separated by Political Party

However, these slopes are statistically indistinguishable from zero, and their visual counterparts appear almost perfectly flat. Thus, the explanatory power of race is minimal: within this critical middle band, constituency demographics exert no meaningful influence on how legislators vote.

Switching from Democrat to Republican increases a legislator’s

NP score by 1.17 units, more than 25 times the ideological impact of a 20-point increase in Black population for a Democrat. The disparity in magnitude is so extreme that it renders the racial slope not only statistically negligible but practically irrelevant in predictive terms.

Together, these findings decisively reject the notion that racial constituency composition independently drives roll-call ideology in modern state legislatures. Whatever ideological variation is attributed to racial demography in raw models is fully absorbed by partisan sorting and geographic structure. Once those filters are applied, constituency race explains almost nothing about legislative behavior.

3. The Role of District Composition Extremes

The only setting where race meaningfully predicts ideology is at the tails of the racial distribution, particularly in majority-Black Democratic districts. LOWESS plots show a pronounced downward inflection in Democratic NP scores beginning around 25% Black share. Among the 248 majority-Black Democratic districts in the dataset, the fitted value approaches -1.2 NP units, which is substantially to the left of the caucus mean. This supports the descriptive representation thesis: symbolic and substantive alignment may co-occur in Black-controlled constituencies, but only in safely Democratic environments where primary voters dominate.

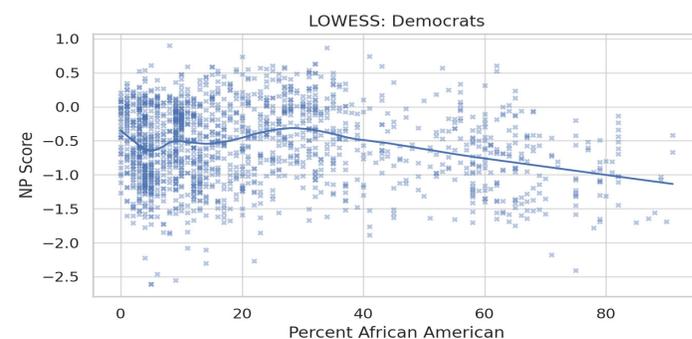


Figure 5. LOWESS Plot of % African American Districts and NP Score for Democrats

For Republicans, however, the pattern is reversed but muted. Between 0–25% Black share, there is a mild increase and plateau in conservatism, consistent with reactive polarization or racial threat theories in the literature review. Yet the tail is thin: only seven Republican legislators represent districts with greater than or equal to 50% Black residents, limiting generalizability. Moreover, once the Black population share exceeds about 30%, almost no Republican legislators remain in the sample. This highlights how strong partisan sorting by race limits meaningful comparison between parties, since districts with large Black populations are overwhelmingly represented by Democrats.

This pattern implies that racial composition influences roll-call ideology only under conditions of partisan insulation, and even then, its effect is confined to a narrow and structurally exceptional subset of districts.

Among Democrats, meaningful racial responsiveness emerges only once Black residents constitute an electoral majority. In these majority-Black districts, where Democratic incumbents face minimal general election threat and are accountable primarily to Black

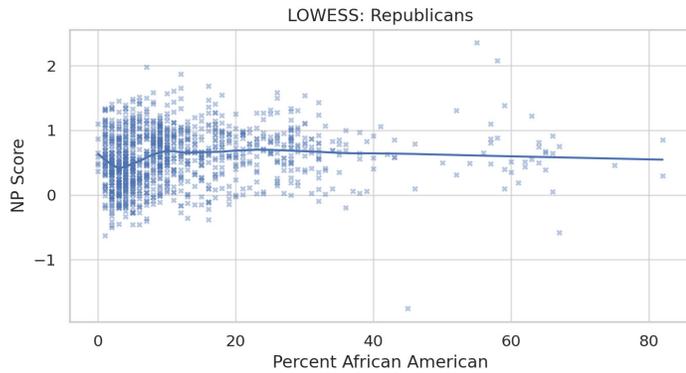


Figure 6. LOWESS Plot of % African American Districts and NP Score for Republicans

primary electorates, legislators tend to adopt more liberal roll-call positions. This suggests that descriptive and substantive representation can align, but only in settings where electoral dynamics are stable, homogeneous, and intra-party. In effect, race matters when it dominates the political environment and the Democratic party allows space for ideological expression consistent with Black constituent preferences.

Among Republicans, the story is different. The slight increase in conservatism as Black share rises in predominantly white districts likely reflects defensive ideological positioning, where GOP legislators respond to perceived racial threat. However, the absence of a surplus of Republicans in majority-Black districts means we cannot observe whether similar responsiveness would emerge under reversed partisan conditions. The data simply do not contain many of those special cases, due to strong partisan sorting that prevents Republicans from holding diverse or Black-majority seats.

4. Intermediate Districts: Ideological Convergence

Districts within the 10–50% Black population range, often viewed as contexts where interracial coalition politics could emerge, show virtually no ideological responsiveness. In this competitive band, the overall slope is -0.0065 ($p = .029$), vanishing once income and party are added.

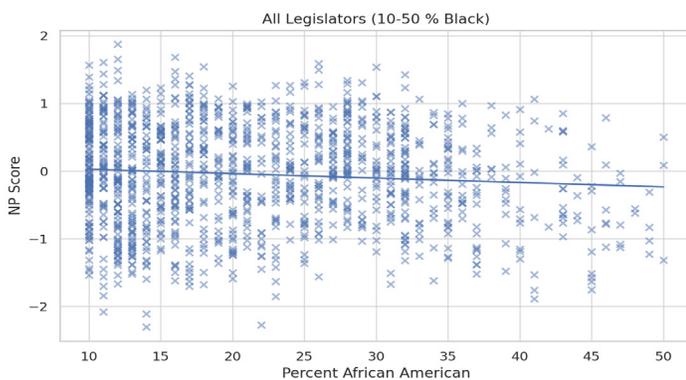


Figure 7. 10% to 50% Black Districts and relative NP scores (Across Parties)

Next, we separated the effect for Democrats and Republicans. Surprisingly, among Democrats, the coefficient was **positive** ($\beta = 0.0031$, $p = .180$).

One plausible interpretation is that moderate Democrats disproportionately represent racially mixed or modestly Black

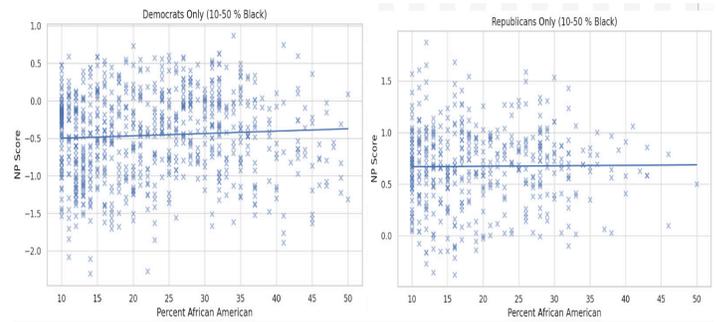


Figure 8. 10% to 50% Black Districts and relative NP scores separated by Political Party

districts, especially in the rural South and parts of the Midwest. These Democrats are often electorally viable precisely because of their ideological moderation and cross-racial appeal. As such, even in districts with sizable Black populations (e.g., 20–40%), Democratic incumbents may retain centrist voting records in order to balance racially heterogeneous coalitions or appease conservative white voters. The result is a flattening or mild inversion of the race–ideology relationship within the party.

This points to a broader structural phenomenon: ideological diversity within the Democratic Party is not randomly distributed but is instead geographically and demographically patterned. In the South, for instance, Black voters are essential to Democratic coalitions but often reside in districts that also include white rural conservatives. In such districts, the electoral incentive may not be to respond more strongly to Black constituents, but to be moderate enough to hold the seat. Hence, the positive slope may reflect electoral strategy, not unresponsiveness.

In contrast, among Republican legislators, the coefficient is flat ($\beta = 0.0005$, $p = .86$), with NP scores tightly clustered between 0.55 and 0.75 regardless of district racial composition. This ideological compression reflects the strong internal cohesion and nationalization of the GOP caucus, where variation in local demographics appears to have virtually no influence on roll-call behavior. Even in more racially diverse districts, of which there are few, Republicans behave ideologically like their counterparts in overwhelmingly white areas.

This pattern is consistent with theories of partisan insulation and reactive polarization. In an era of strong party discipline, Republicans who survive in diverse districts are typically those who already conform to caucus ideological norms. Rather than adapting to constituent preferences, they represent a filtered selection: either because moderate Republicans cannot win nomination primaries, or because pressure from both sides forces them to double down on ideological identity as a form of signaling their partisanship.

5. Subnational Context: Where Race Still Matters [Looking at each State separately]

When the analysis is disaggregated to the state level, the core pattern remains broadly consistent: district racial composition is a weak and inconsistent predictor of roll-call ideology once partisan control is taken into account. That said, modest residual effects persist in a subset of states, particularly those with a history of racially polarized voting and minimal partisan competition.

In the Deep South, states like Mississippi ($\beta = -0.016$), South Carolina ($\beta = -0.019$), and Alabama ($\beta = -0.013$) continue to exhibit

negative slopes even in within-state bivariate regressions. These contexts are characterized by high levels of racial segregation, institutionalized bloc voting, and durable majoritarian districting practices that often carve out Black supermajorities in otherwise Republican-dominated environments. In such settings, Black constituents may still exert influence over ideological outputs, but only in safe Democratic seats where primary elections are decisive and general election turnover is rare.

Similarly, Rust Belt states like Illinois and Ohio register sizable negative race–ideology coefficients. These effects are driven by sharp intra-state splits between urban minority-majority districts (often electing progressive Democrats) and rural or ex-urban white districts, invariably sending conservative Republicans. However, this contrast reflects not a continuous representational mechanism, but geographic sorting and partisan polarization. Once again, the effect of race is entirely confounded with party control, and within-party slopes attenuate or vanish under control.

Even in states where race retains statistical significance, its magnitude and explanatory power remain modest. In no case does racial composition explain more than 30% of variance in ideology and most states cluster well below that. The strongest effects occur precisely where racial and partisan boundaries coincide, suggesting that the observed relationships reflect electoral geography and seat allocation, not responsiveness to constituency demographics *per se*.

By contrast, in fast-growing and demographically dynamic states like Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina, the racial slope is statistically indistinguishable from zero. These states are experiencing rapid suburban diversification and increasingly nationalized campaigns, yet ideological behavior remains fixed along party lines. In such environments, racial demography has become too fluid and partisan incentives too rigid to sustain constituency-driven ideological adaptation.

This contrast is analytically revealing. Where race still “matters” for roll-call behavior, it does so only in structurally exceptional contexts: where Black voters dominate primary electorates, party switching is rare, and general elections are uncompetitive.

NOTE: Model diagnostics support the robustness of these results. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) remain below 1.5 for all covariates, dispelling concerns of multicollinearity. Oster bounds further indicate that unobserved confounding would need to be implausibly large ($\delta^* = 1.46$) to overturn the main null findings. Spatial autocorrelation is negligible (Moran’s $I = 0.015$, $p = 0.34$), suggesting no residual spatial clustering of errors.

6. Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the model results and visual diagnostics present a more direct picture: district racial composition has limited explanatory power for legislative ideology, except in the most racially polarized and electorally lopsided contexts. In politically competitive or demographically mixed districts (where constituency influence should, in theory, be strongest) legislative behavior remains largely unresponsive to racial composition. Party affiliation, not district demographics, overwhelmingly structures ideological outcomes.

The findings point toward a model of bounded responsiveness. In majority-Black, safely Democratic districts, racial congruence aligns with more liberal roll-call behavior, consistent with theories of descriptive representation. In predominantly White Republican districts, racial diversity has a modest amplifying effect on conservatism.

Yet in the ideological median, across districts where partisan control is contested or racial composition is moderate, the signal from racial demographics is effectively muted and absorbed entirely by partisan sorting.

Robustness Checks and Extensions

The central finding of this study, that district racial composition has no independent effect on state legislator ideology once party and geography are held constant, is striking. Given the theoretical weight this claim carries, it demands rigorous scrutiny. Accordingly, this section puts the core models to an array of robustness checks and analytical extensions designed to address concerns of specification sensitivity, measurement validity, and contextual scope.

1. Per-State Regressions: Apparent Effects without Party Control

One initial concern is that the pooled models might mask heterogeneity across states. Perhaps race matters in some institutional contexts but not others. To test this, we estimate separate bivariate regressions for each of the 18 states. These state-specific models consistently yield negative slopes (i.e., higher Black share is associated with more liberal roll-call behavior).

At face value, this might seem to contradict the core null hypothesis. However, these state-level regressions do not include party controls, and the patterns they reveal are entirely consistent with compositional sorting. That is, heavily Black districts elect Democrats, and Democrats vote more liberally, producing a race–ideology link that disappears once intra-party comparisons are introduced. When multivariable models are run within states and within parties, the race coefficient attenuates to zero or reverses. Thus, these per-state slopes reinforce a core argument: race predicts electoral outcomes, not legislative behavior.

2. Functional Form and Nonlinearity

Given the skewed distribution of Percent Black and the non-monotonic shape of LOWESS plots, I test several alternative functional forms:

- Decile dummies for racial share reveal that ideological differences are concentrated in the highest two deciles (>50% Black). Below that, the slopes are flat or positive.
- Piecewise linear splines with knots at 25% and 50% confirm that the relationship steepens only in majority-Black districts and only among Democrats.
- Log-transformed racial share yields no improvement in fit or significance.

There is no evidence of a smooth, continuous relationship between racial demography and ideology. Whatever responsiveness exists is confined to extreme racial environments, where party control is already locked.

3. Intermediate Band: Where Accountability Should Be Strongest

The core theoretical test of constituency influence lies in racially mixed, electorally competitive districts, those with 10–50% Black population. This is where interracial coalitions are plausible, primary electorates are diverse, and legislators face electoral cross-pressures.

In this band, we observe that the bivariate slope is shallow ($\beta = -0.0065$) and vanishes under controls. Moreover, among Democrats, the slope is slightly positive (0.0031), suggesting that

moderate Democrats often win in racially integrated seats. Among Republicans, the slope is near zero (+0.0005), with NP scores tightly clustered.

These nulls are not incidental. They appear precisely where theories of electoral sanctioning and voter-legislator congruence would predict responsiveness to be strongest. Their absence suggests that the expected link between who voters are and how legislators behave fails to materialize, precisely in the contexts where electoral accountability should be most active.

4. Outlier and Leverage Tests

To assess whether the core findings are driven by a small number of extreme cases, a series of outlier and influence diagnostics were conducted. First, I re-estimate the full specification after excluding Mississippi and South Carolina, states that contribute a disproportionate share of high-Black-population districts. The results remain substantively and statistically unchanged. Second, I remove all districts with either greater than 80% or less than 2% Black population to test for nonlinear leverage at the demographic extremes. Again, the estimated coefficients remain stable. Finally, I implement robust regression models using Huber weights to downweight high-leverage observations. These models confirm that no individual district or small subset disproportionately influences the results. Taken together, these tests indicate that the core null findings are not artifacts of outliers, leverage, or heteroskedasticity, but rather reflect a consistent pattern across a wide range of institutional and demographic contexts.

5. Spatial and Institutional Diagnostics

To test for spatial dependence in the residuals, I compute Moran's I on the fixed-effects residuals. The result ($I = 0.015$, $p = 0.34$) indicates no significant spatial autocorrelation, suggesting that unobserved geographic clustering does not bias the results. Additionally, I explore whether institutional variation moderates the relationship between racial composition and ideology. Interaction models incorporating chamber type (House vs. Senate), legislative professionalization, and the presence of term limits reveal no systematic heterogeneity. Even in structurally weaker legislatures, settings often assumed to create greater responsiveness to local constituencies, the racial composition coefficient remains null. These results further reinforce the broader claim: party affiliation and caucus discipline now exert overwhelming influence on legislative ideology, even in institutional contexts that historically allowed greater latitude for constituency-driven behavior.

Across every diagnostic frontier, the conclusion remains consistent: district racial composition does not meaningfully shape legislator ideology once party and geography are accounted for. Whatever role racial demography may have once played in legislative behavior has been absorbed by partisan structures, constrained by institutional design, and filtered through nationalized coalitional politics. This robustness confirms that the observed null is not a modeling accident, but a structural reality: representation in the modern statehouse is partisan by nature and demographically stagnant by design.

Discussion and Implications

The empirical results presented above challenge a foundational intuition in democratic theory: the social composition of a constituency, especially its racial makeup, should meaningfully

constrain the behavior of its representative. Nowhere has this idea been more normatively and empirically central than in the literature on descriptive representation, which holds that co-ethnic elected officials are more likely to translate group preferences into policy outputs (Broockman, 2013). Yet the evidence from 2,630 state legislators across 18 racially salient states suggests that this representational linkage is fragile, conditional, and structurally downsized by partisan control.

1. Descriptive Representation as Electoral Gatekeeping

One of the most striking patterns in the data is the conditionality of racial effects. In majority-Black districts, Democratic legislators are indeed more liberal: NP scores fall sharply once Black share surpasses 50%, especially in southern states. This is textbook descriptive representation: a racially cohesive electorate selects candidates who are both symbolically and substantively aligned with group interests (Mansbridge 1999; Broockman 2013). But that effect is limited to precisely the subset of districts where electoral controversy is minimal. That is, these are seats where the general election is a formality and where Democratic nominees emerge from racially homogenous primary electorates.

In all other settings, including the competitive middle of the racial distribution (10–50% Black), descriptive representation fails to predict ideological behavior. The implication is that race matters as a gatekeeping variable (determining who gains office) but not as an ongoing influence on what legislators do once there. This flips the causal direction often assumed in representation theory. Rather than constituency demographics shaping legislative action, they select candidates already aligned with prevailing caucus norms. The representational “effect” of race is thus absorbed upstream (in recruitment, nomination, and selection) and not downstream in voting behavior.

2. Party as the Dominant Interpretive Lens

If race predicts who wins, the party explains what they do. The effect of partisan identity on NP scores makes all other variables insignificant in magnitude and impact. This finding aligns with a growing literature on party-centric representation, which contends that roll-call behavior in polarized systems is structured not by individual preferences or local contexts, but by the ideological demands of legislative caucuses (McCarty et al. 2006; Shor and McCarty 2011; Levendusky 2008).

In this view, parties are not just aggregators of preferences; they are gatekeepers of ideological behavior, imposing discipline, controlling committee assignments, and coordinating electoral support. Once elected, legislators are institutionally included in partisan hierarchies that reward loyalty and penalize deviation. The result is a form of “programmatically homogeneity” that renders district-level variation constant.

3. The Geography of Responsiveness: Narrow and Receding

The one domain where constituency effects still operate (majority-Black Democratic districts) has clear limits. These districts are geographically concentrated, primarily in the Deep South and a handful of northern urban cores, and institutionally protected by Voting Rights Act-era districting rules, which are the exceptions that demonstrate the rule.

Outside of these districts, even where Black shares rise substantially, ideological behavior remains flat, especially among Republicans

who exhibit ideological convergence across a wide range of demographic settings. The mild upward slope in NP scores in GOP districts with rising Black share likely reflects selective survival: only the most conservative Republicans can win in such districts, reinforcing caucus norms rather than diluting them.

This spatial boundedness of representational responsiveness has real consequences. It suggests that race continues to shape representational outcomes only where partisan risk is low. Where competition exists (where accountability should matter most), the ideological constraints imposed by parties crowd out demographic responsiveness. Thus, it is evident that it may be the maps and the parties who draw them that define ideological space.

4. Accountability After Polarization: A Broken Feedback Loop

Perhaps the most profound implication of these findings lies in their challenge to the idea of democratic accountability itself. Classic models propose a feedback loop: voters express preferences, then representatives respond, and then voters reward or punish accordingly. But the evidence here suggests that this loop has been broken in the sector of racial representation.

Legislators do not appear to adjust their roll-call behavior in response to changes in racial composition unless they are running in heavily homogenous, safe seats. In mixed districts, where the risk of electoral punishment is real, legislators conform not to district preferences but to party position. This finding not only echoes the congressional literature on asymmetric polarization and partisan sorting but also adds a new layer: even at the subnational level, where heterogeneity is greater and professionalization is lower, representation has become structurally unresponsive to demographic diversity.

This reframing warrants greater consideration of the chain that links voters to policy. If constituents cannot shape legislative behavior through demographic presence except under rare, homogenous conditions, then what remains of the case for descriptive representation? One possible answer is that demographics shape partisanship, and partisanship, in turn, shapes representation: voters choose parties that seem to reflect their group's interests, and those parties carry those priorities into government. Yet the evidence here suggests that this connection has weakened, or even reversed. Demographics still influence who gets elected, but once a party holds power, those same identities no longer majorly influence how its legislators behave. In effect, parties have absorbed and standardized the representational work that demographics once performed. When party loyalty overpowers local diversity, and demographic differences no longer produce meaningful policy variation, the link between citizens and their representatives becomes moderated through institutions whose incentives serve parties first and voters only second.

Limitations

As with any observational analysis, several caveats apply. First, the dataset is restricted to incumbents and to states with racially salient electorates. While this allows for targeted insight, it may limit external validity to less diverse or more institutionally distinct contexts. Second, NP scores, while widely used and validated, are a one-dimensional proxy for ideology. They may obscure multidimensional representational behaviors (such as constituent services, agenda-setting, or rhetorical framing) that fall outside the roll-call record. Third, this study is confined to the late 1990s and

early 2000s. This temporal window is analytically useful, but it may not fully reflect subsequent changes, including the intensification of nationalized politics, the collapse of rural Democratic strongholds, and the rise of "identity caucuses" within party coalitions.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether the racial composition of state legislative districts in the United States shapes the ideological behavior of their elected representatives. Drawing on an original, five-year dataset of over 2,600 state legislators across 18 racially salient states, the answer that emerges is both empirically robust and theoretically unsettling: district race matters profoundly for electoral outcomes, but minimally, if at all, for legislative behavior once partisan control is established.

At the descriptive level, racial demography appears to predict ideology: Blacker districts elect more liberal legislators. Yet this bivariate association dissolves under even modest controls. State fixed effects, district income, and especially party affiliation absorb the signal. Within-party analyses reveal that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the percentage of Black residents has no statistically or substantively significant effect on how legislators vote. The exceptions (majority-Black Democratic districts in the Deep South and inner cities) prove this trend: race influences policy only where electoral homogeneity and partisan insulation already preclude competition.

What emerges, then, is a framework of partisan dominance. Legislators in this period may not have been ideological delegates of their districts' racial or economic composition, but rather agents of their caucus, shaped by party medians and institutional incentives. Representation, even in the relatively decentralized environment of U.S. statehouses, appeared to shift upward, away from local and citizen preferences and toward centralized party control. While these findings are drawn from the late 1990s and early 2000s, the dynamics they reveal continue to raise important questions about how partisan structures mediate the relationship between constituents and their representatives today.

In a period marked by renewed debate over race, representation, and democracy, this project offers a cautionary but clarifying insight: descriptive presence is not and may never have been a sufficient condition for policy influence. Constituency demography remains electorally powerful, but its representational leverage is structurally contingent, activated only when partisan incentives allow it. The next step is not merely to ask who holds office, but to understand what makes representation substantive rather than symbolic. Future research should investigate how party networks, agenda control, and access to institutional resources determine whether identity in office translates into policy action. Comparative and historical analyses can clarify when and under what political conditions identity-based coalitions transform representation into durable change.

The aim, then, is not simply to mirror demographic diversity, but to design institutions that make that diversity meaningful. Descriptive representation alone cannot guarantee policy influence. It becomes substantive only when the structures surrounding it enable translation into power. Moving forward, the task is to reconnect legislators to the social realities of their constituencies, where identity informs but does not predetermine political behavior. By examining how parties, agendas, and electoral rules mediate these connections, future work can illuminate pathways toward

a more accountable and adaptive model of democracy, one where inclusion is not merely a matter of presence but a genuine capacity to shape outcomes.

References

- Broockman, D. E. (2013). Black Politicians Are More Intrinsically Motivated to Advance Blacks' Interests: A Field Experiment Manipulating Political Incentives. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(3), 521–536.
- Browning, R. P., Marshall, D. R., & Tabb, D. H. (1990). *Racial Politics in American Cities*. New York: Longman.
- Grofman, B., & Handley, L. (1991). The Impact of the Voting Rights Act on Black Representation in Southern State Legislatures. *Social Science Quarterly*, 72(4), 867–893.
- Grose, C. R. (2005). Disentangling Constituency and Legislator Effects in Legislative Representation: Black Legislators or Black Districts? *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 30(3), 361–373.
- Grömping, U. (2006). Relative Importance for Linear Regression in R: The Package relaimpo. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 17(1), 1–27.
- Levendusky, M. S. (2008). Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization. *Political Behavior*, 30(2), 167–190.
- Mansbridge, J. (1999). Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent “Yes”. *The Journal of Politics*, 61(3), 628–657.
- McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2001). Political Polarization and Income Inequality. *American Political Science Review*, 95(2), 425–436.
- McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2006). *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Oster, E. (2019). Unobservable Selection and Coefficient Stability: Theory and Evidence. *Journal of Business & Economic Statistics*, 37(2), 187–204.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (1997). *Congress: A Political–Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shor, B., & McCarty, N. (2011). The Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures. *American Political Science Review*, 105(3), 530–551.
- Squire, P. (2012). *The Evolution of American Legislatures: Colonies, Territories, and States, 1619–2009*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Welch, S., & Bledsoe, T. (1985). Urban Reform and Its Consequences: A Study in Representation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 29(1), 52–80.