

## **TWEETING RACIAL REPRESENTATION:**

*How the Congressional Black Caucus used Twitter in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress*

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### **Abstract**

In recent decades Twitter has emerged as both a vehicle for political expression and powerful tool for political organizing within the African American community. This paper examines the extent to which members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) utilize Twitter to communicate with their constituents about racial issues. An analysis of CBC members' tweets during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress (2013-2014) shows that the organization's members do talk about race and occasionally use racially distinct hashtags. It also shows that CBC members talk about racial issues much less than they talk about other issues. Moreover, statistical models show that the best predictors of a members' engagement with racial issues on Twitter are being a woman, the size of their margin of victory in the 2012 elections, and the percentage of whites living within the boundaries of their district.

**Keywords:** Black Members of Congress; Black Twitter; Congressional Black Caucus; Race Relations; Representation; Twitter

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media in the last two decades has transformed human social interactions in a number of ways (Couldry 2012; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Van Dijck 2013). In the political arena, social media platforms like FaceBook and Twitter have become important resources for organizing protest activities (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011 Langman 2005). These tools have also emerged as important means for politicians in advanced democracies to directly communicate with the public during their campaigns for office and also as they carry out their representative duties once elected (Conway et al., 2013; Druckman et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2010; Towner and Dulio 2012).

This paper examines how members of the Congressional Black Caucus used Twitter to communicate their ideas about racial issues during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress (2013-2014). Twitter is a popular social networking and microblogging website. The service allows registered users to send text messages of 140 characters or less or share photos and videos. The process of posting messages or visual media to the service is called “tweeting” in the parlance of the social network. Twitter also allows registered users to follow the accounts of other users in the network for the purpose of reading their public “tweets” and or engaging in direct communications.

During the first quarter of 2017, the site reported that it averaged 328 million users per month. Given Twitter’s reach, it is not surprising that members of Congress have embraced the website as a means of direct communication with their constituents (Golbeck et al., 2010; Peterson 2012; Shogan 2010). The scholarly consensus on the Twitter usage by members of Congress is that they primarily turn to the service to engage in forms of

communication aimed at bolstering their prospects for reelection (Druckman et al., 2010; Golbeck et al., 2010; Peterson 2012). In other words, the social network is utilized for both the “position-taking” statements that David Mayhew (1974) describes as essential for all members of Congress hoping to win reelection and for engaging in the empathetic rhetoric that Richard Fenno (1978) claims is key to developing a “home style” that fits one’s district.

Scholars have long-noted how important it is for African American members of Congress to engage in position-taking on racial issues and deploy empathetic speech about race relations in order to develop and maintain robust “home style” connections with their constituents (Fenno 2003; Singh 1998; Smith 1981; Tate 2001; Tate 2003; Tillery 2006). The main questions asked in this paper are: Do Black members of Congress use Twitter to take positions on racial issues? Do they tend to use Twitter to make symbolic statements about race or to advance policy proposals to advance the interests of their African American constituents? Finally, is Twitter use to engage racial issues uniform across the membership of the Congressional Black Caucus or do some African American legislators use it more than others for these purposes?

Why study the tweets of CBC members? There are three answers to this question. First, Twitter is heavily utilized within the African American community. Indeed, African Americans are 25 percent of the population of the American Twittersphere despite the fact that they are only 13.5 percent of the population of the United States (Brock 2012). Moreover, several recent studies have shown that African Americans access the service on a daily basis at a much higher rate than their white counterparts (Fox et al., 2009; Horrigan 2009; Smith 2010; Smith and Brenner 2012). In short, Twitter is the space where the digital divide between African Americans and whites evaporates. It is important to

understand the extent to which African American members of Congress are aware of this reality and seeking to capitalize on it to expand their strategic communications operations.

Second, Twitter is the space where African Americans are deeply engaged in a national conversation about both the meaning of race and race relations (Carney 2016; Nakamura 2008). Several studies have demonstrated that African American discourse on Twitter tends to replicate the unique idioms and verbal patterns—known in both common parlance and academic studies as “signifyin” (Gates 1983; Mitchell-Kernan 1999)—that have long circulated in the community’s oral traditions (Brock 2012; Fiorini 2013; Manjoo 2010). Some of these same studies also assert that, just as with their face-to-face speech acts, signifyin’ on Black Twitter is often a form of resistance to racism and racial exclusions (Brock 2012; Fiorini 2013). Recent studies have also elaborated how the use of hashtags that make reference to racial issues—so called “Blacktags”—can quickly transform Black Twitter into a counterpublic space where African Americans can join debates about the important issues affecting their racial group in real time (Carney 2016; Sharma 2013). Determining how much CBC members participate in and seek to drive these conversations on Black Twitter has the potential to shed light on the value that individual African American legislators place on taking positions on racial issues in the post-Civil Rights era.

Third, studying the tweets of Congressional Black Caucus members also provides us with an opportunity to further develop predictive models of racial representation in the US Congress. The Congressional Black Caucus was founded in 1971. Studies of the organization in this period have shown that the thirteen African Americans serving in the House of Representatives at that time had a set of experiences in the Civil Rights Movement that gave them very similar ideas about how to achieve racial progress (Barnett 1975;

Barnett 1982; Henry 1977; Singh 1998). In this context, it was not very difficult for the individual CBC members to achieve what Representative William Clay, one of the founders of the organization, called in his memoir a “solidarity of purpose and program” to advance the racial group interests of African Americans (Clay 1993, 117).

A number of studies have revealed how both the growth and diversification of the CBC’s ranks in terms of age, experience, and representational context over the past four decades have generated cross-pressures that make it more challenging for the larger group to hang together on racial issues of national import (Cannon 1999; Singh 1998; Tate 2003; Tate 2014; Tillery 2011, 125-149; Whitby 2007). The statistical analyses presented in this paper will allow us to ascertain whether these same trends hold in the Twittersphere as well or if other patterns or cleavage emerge.

To answer these questions, I present a systematic analysis of the tweets of the 41 members of the Congressional Black Caucus who served in the House of Representatives during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. The 113<sup>th</sup> Congress provides an excellent window to explore the ways that CBC members use Twitter for several reasons. First, at the time that its members were sworn in, the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress was the most diverse in the history of the republic (Hicks 2013). Moreover, for the first time in U.S. history, women and minorities comprised the majority of the Democratic Party’s caucus in the House of Representatives. Second, the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress was the first seated after Barack Obama won reelection to a second term as president of the United States of America. If CBC members use Twitter in the same strategic ways that they now pursue legislative activities, we can expect these dynamics to generate incentives for individual African American legislators to talk more about race on Twitter.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section places this study within the theoretical context of the extant literature on African American representation and articulates the hypotheses that will be evaluated through quantitative analyses. The paper then shifts to a description of the data and methods. From there, the paper presents both the summary statistics about CBC members' Twitter usage and statistical models of the factors that predict the behavior of African American MCs in the Twittersphere. The concluding section describes how the relevance of the main findings for ongoing debates about the nature of African American representation and the internal dynamics of the Congressional Black Caucus.

## **THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND HYPOTHESES**

The Congressional Black Caucus was formed in 1971 (Barnett 1975; Bositis 1994; Singh 1998). The organization was predicated upon the expansion of the ranks of African American legislators that occurred in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Between 1928, when Oscar De Priest (R-IL) ushered in the modern era of African American service in the House of Representatives, and 1955, there were no more than two African Americans serving in Congress at the same time. Between 1955 and 1965, three more African American members entered Congress from new majority-black districts in Detroit, MI, Philadelphia, PA, and Los Angeles, CA. The influx of new African American voters into the electorate in the elections of 1968 and 1970 swelled the ranks of African Americans serving in the House of Representatives to thirteen by the start of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress.

As Singh (1998, 54-56) has underscored, while the African American legislators that served between 1955 and 1965—Dawson, Powell, Diggs, Nix, and Hawkins—did

communicate with one another about racial issues, the notion of a formal organizational structure did not emerge until the influx of new members in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress. In January 1969, Representative Charles Diggs (D-MI; 1955-1980) proposed to the nine members then serving in the House of Representatives that they establish the Democratic Select Committee (DSC) to foment bonds of attachment between them and facilitate their joint communications with the Democratic leadership of the House of Representatives (Barnett 1975; Clay 1993; DuBose 1998; Singh 1998). Although the DSC certainly represented the beginning of what the political scientist Marguerite Ross Barnett (1975) termed the “collective stage” of black representation in Congress, it was ineffective because it “only met sporadically” (34-35).

By the start of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress, the eight African American legislators elected in the 1968 and 1970 elections—many of whom had substantial credentials as activists in the Civil Rights Movement—began to press for the development of a more robust organization (Clay 1993; Dellums 2000; Singh 1998). Representative William L. Clay (D-MO; 1969-2001), describes the impetus to establish the CBC in his memoirs as growing out of the fears of the “new members” that the DSC would “degenerate into a Kongressional Koffee Klatch Klub” without a more robust organizational structure (1993, 117). In his memoirs, Representative Ronald “Ron” V. Dellums (DA-CA; 1971-1998) shares Clay’s recollections of why the CBC replaced the DSC in 1971 (Dellums 2000). He also states that the cohort of African American legislators elected during the elections of 1968 and 1970 felt a tremendous “burden of representing...the 12 percent of the United States population that was black and which had historically been underserved by government and [despite the recent electoral gains] was still underrepresented in Congress” (Dellums 2000, 94). In

other words, the founders of the CBC saw their organization's role as an explicitly racial one—providing representation to both their home districts and a national African American constituency.

The first academic studies of the CBC focused on the legitimacy of the group's decision to organize along racial lines and exclude whites from full membership (Barker and McCorry 1976; Henry 1977). These studies, which were partly responses to criticism of the mere idea of racial caucuses proffered by the conservative historian Daniel Boorstin (Raspberry 1975), contextualized the formation of the CBC by locating the organization squarely within the history of race relations in the United States and the long Civil Rights Movement. Charles Henry (1975), for example, pointed out that the formation of the CBC was a response to the historical realities that “the Southern bloc has repeatedly declared itself for the white race” and that African Americans are and would remain underrepresented in Congress for decades after the CBC's founding (149-150).

Henry also argued that the extreme minority position of the CBC within the larger Congress—in 1971 African American legislators were two percent of the population of the House of Representatives—meant that they would have to “persuade [some] non-black members to support” their “racial public policy” (150). In short, Henry believed the long-term legitimacy of the CBC would be predicated upon their ability to provide both symbolic and substantive representation. Moreover, his analysis of the organization's legislative agendas in the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 94<sup>th</sup> Congresses showed that African American legislators appeared to be aware of their dual mission to provide their constituents with “both symbolic leadership and tangible benefits” (152).

The dichotomy between symbolic and substantive representation was a consistent



theme in other early studies of the CBC. Marguerite Ross Barnett's (1975; 1977) landmark studies of the internal dynamics and legislative agendas of the CBC during the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 94<sup>th</sup> conceptualized the two types of representation as the polar ends of a continuum of power. In Barnett's view, the CBC had behaved almost exclusively as a group interested in symbolic representation during their "collective stage" of development in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress. In this period, the CBC engaged in a large number of extra-institutional activities aimed at demonstrating that they were "Congressmen at large for 20 million Black people" (Barnett 1975, 36). While this collective stage certainly raised the visibility of the CBC within the black community, it did very little to burnish the legislative profiles of either the organization or its individual members.

Moreover, it became very clear during the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress that, despite their shared commitment to improving the lives of African Americans, there was often a lack of consensus among CBC members about what symbolic activities they should pursue to further this end (Barnett 1975, 36-39). Thus, Barnett reports that at the start of the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, the CBC entered an "ethnic stage" of development in which African American legislators began to behave as if there was a "parallel between the political assimilation of blacks and the political assimilation of white ethnic group" (Barnett 1975, 40). In other words, CBC members began to adopt the attitude that their legislative profiles in service of their individual constituencies were their top priorities and that some degree of political assimilation within the House of Representatives would be necessary to achieve these profiles. At the start of the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, the CBC adopted a series of reforms aimed at smoothing their assimilation into the Democratic Party Caucus and boosting their effectiveness as legislators within the House chamber (Barnett 1975, 41-44; Barnett 1977,

23-25).

Barnett saw the CBC's efforts to pare down their symbolic activities and focus more on legislation in the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress as largely a success. Despite this fact, she remained somewhat circumspect about the future prospects of the CBC for two reasons. First, she believed that racial politics in the United States would always create conditions that would make it necessary for African American legislators to "oscillate" between the collective and ethnic representational styles (1977, 48-50). Second, Barnett feared that the cross pressures African American legislators faced to "represent blacks collectively as a holistic unit" and deal with their "individual political circumstances" might stifle their ability to pass legislation (1977, 50).

The ranks of the CBC have grown by more than 300 percent since the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress. Throughout this entire period, Congress scholars have consistently revisited the questions posed by Henry and Barnett in their pioneering studies of the organization. The consensus within the literature is that African American legislators are now fully integrated into the Democratic Party's Caucus in the House of Representatives. Indeed, CBC members routinely serve as the chairs of powerful standing committees and in senior leadership posts within the Democratic Party's hierarchy (Bositis 1994, 18-21; Haynie 2005; Minta 2011, 62-64; Singh 1998, 175-178; Tate 2014, 22-25). Moreover, a raft of recent quantitative studies examining the roll-call votes of CBC members have found that more often than not they take their cues from the Democratic leadership on most pieces of legislation (Cannon 1999; Sinclair-Chapman 2002; Tate 2003; Tate 2014). In short, the CBC has achieved a level of legitimacy and institutionalization within the House of Representatives that the first generation of scholars to examine the organization could not

have foreseen in the 1970s.

However, the fact that the median members of the CBC and the Democratic Party's Caucus in the House of Representatives now tend to converge on roll-call votes does not mean, as Swain (1992) has argued, that African American and white legislators provide identical representation to African American constituents. On the contrary, the recent literature has identified several ways in which African American legislators provide unique benefits to their African American constituents and the entire nation. Katherine Tate's (2003) analyses of the 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Congresses, for example, found that "Black Democrats' voting behavior as measured by Poole and Rosenthal [was] significantly more consistent with the liberal Democratic party agenda than that of White and other minority Democratic legislator" (p. 85). In other words, despite voting with their party on the overwhelming majority of roll call votes, African American legislators have demonstrated a persistent willingness to break ranks in order to promote and defend liberal policies on the floor of the House of Representatives. Moreover, several studies have shown that African American legislators are far more likely than their white counterparts to introduce and champion bills advancing the interests of African Americans in both committees and on the House floor (Canon 1999; Gamble 2007; Grose 2011; Minta 2009; Minta and Sinclair-Chapman 2013; Sinclair-Chapman 2003; Tate 2003; Whitby 1998).

The fact that African American legislators as a group demonstrate a higher-level commitment to representing the interests of African Americans does not mean that there is unanimity within the CBC on every policy matter. Nor does it mean that every CBC member demonstrates an equal commitment to carrying the burden of representing African American interests in Congress. Indeed, there is broad consensus within recent studies of

the CBC that the expansion and institutionalization of the group has led to greater fragmentation on policy matters (Bositis 1994; Singh 1998; Tate 2003; Tate 2014; Tillery 2011).

The extant literature suggests that this fragmentation became particularly acute after the 1992 national elections. The results of this first election after the 1990 reapportionment of Congress boosted the number of CBC members serving in the House of Representatives from 24 to 38. The fourteen-seat pickup in the House of Representatives was the largest gain in black membership in a single electoral cycle in the history of the institution (Bositis 1994; Singh 1998). The persistent collective action problems stemming from the distinct legislative priorities and homestyles of CBC members intensified with this large expansion of the organization's ranks. "Larger black numbers," writes the political scientist Robert Singh, "served more to exacerbate further the already strong internal fragmentation and collective action problems facing the CBC than to assist its organizational strength" (1998, 173). Many studies have pointed to the incredible heterogeneity in terms of the ages, career trajectories, and political experiences of the CBC members that arrived after 1992 (Singh 1998; Tate 2003). Moreover, the fact that most of the new members were elected from southern districts with higher proportions of rural residents meant that the CBC, which had historically focused on urban issues, would need to incorporate a new set of policy agendas if they were going to hang together (Canon 1999; Champagne and Rieselbach 1995; Singh 1998; Tate 2003).

Although Katherine Tate (2003) was initially a proponent of view that the growing southern bloc within the CBC after the 1992 elections was a source of fragmentation, her recent work casts doubt on this thesis. Indeed, Tate's (2014) landmark study of the roll call

activity of African American legislators between 1977 and 2010 shows that: “The [CBC’s] move from more radically Left positions to more moderate ones and the move to vote more frequently with the House majority when their party is in power has occurred independently of the change in membership brought about by the election of new black moderates from the South, such as Mike Espy (D-MS) and Artur Davis (D-AL)” (4). Tate argues that when you view the legislative activity of CBC members over the longer term, it becomes clear that “incorporation in the system has made Black legislative leaders less radical and more pragmatic” and “less likely to challenge party and Democratic presidential leadership through ideological debate” (2014, 4-5).

The rich literature on the CBC and racial representation has largely elided the rhetoric of African American legislators. This is not surprising given the traditional barriers associated with constructing a comprehensive dataset of the speech acts of members of Congress from government documents and media sources. While technological developments like computer-assisted content analysis now make it possible to evaluate large volumes of text in a short time, the digitization of public records and local media sources remains spotty at best. Although tweets—with their 140 character limits—are not a perfect representation of all of the complex speech that members of Congress likely engage in during a session, their wide accessibility and public-facing nature make them an excellent proxy for the more complex speech acts. In other words, since members of Congress know that their tweets are public, it is likely that they approach the Twittersphere with the same strategic lens that they apply to their speech acts on the floor of the House and other dimensions of their legislative behavior.

Building on this assumption, I transpose the following four hypotheses from the

literature on roll call voting to this study of CBC members' Twitter usage during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress:

- H1: CBC members elected after the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress are likely to talk less about race on Twitter than their colleagues elected after this time.
- H2: CBC members who hold leadership positions within the party structure are likely to talk less about race on Twitter than their colleagues who do not hold such positions.
- H3: CBC members from more rural districts are likely to talk less about race on Twitter than their colleagues from districts with geography.
- H4: CBC members from districts with higher concentrations of white voters are likely to talk less about race on Twitter.

I will test these hypotheses as part of statistical models that utilize with control variables to approximate other member-level and district-level characteristics.

Confirmation of these hypotheses will suggest that there is verisimilitude between the ways African American members of Congress approach their legislative activities and Twitter usage. It will also provide evidence that the institutionalization of the CBC shapes the way that African American members communicate with their constituents. The following section explicates the data sources and methods that I utilize to test these hypotheses.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The systematic study of media representations or content analysis has long been a tool employed by social scientists in multiple fields (Lasswell 1965; Holsti 1969; Weber

1990; Neuendorf 2002; Krippendorff 2004; Franzosi 2004). Scholars of racial and ethnic politics have become particularly adept at using the method in recent years (e.g., Cohen 1994; Reeves 1997; Entman 1997; Mendelberg 2001; Lee 2002; Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; Parker 2009; Tillery 2011). This study used content analysis to determine how members of the Congressional Black Caucus used Twitter during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Two independent coders read the entire universe of 71,905 tweets that appeared on the public feeds of the 41 members of the CBC during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress (which was in session between January 3, 2013 and January 5, 2015). The most comprehensive study of Congressional Twitter usage to date found that members of Congress tend to use the service more to share information about government services and their daily activities with their constituents than to discuss political or policy problems (Golbeck et al, 2010). This study reinforces this finding, as 70 percent of the universe of tweets conforms to this pattern of behavior. Moreover, the vast majority of these informational tweets were initially generated by other users—i.e., federal government agencies, state and municipal agencies, and news organizations—and subsequently shared (or “retweeted”) by CBC members.

Since the main goal of this study is to glean whether CBC members use their Twitter feeds to communicate directly about racial issues, only the 21,692 original tweets authored by the member and or their personnel are included in the dataset. The coders culled the tweets about race from this larger sample and categorized them by issue area, the racial group (or groups) referenced in the tweet, and whether its content was symbolic or substantive. The coders also indicated whether or not the tweet used a hashtag to make it

more visible on Twitter; and recorded the content of these hashtags when they were utilized.

The intercoder reliability for the 41 content analyses that serve as the foundation for this paper is .81 percent. In the 19 percent of cases where the coders disagreed with one another, a third coder was engaged to break these ties. Once the tweet dataset was completed, I conducted regression analyses in order to test the four hypotheses described above. As is often the case with count data, the distribution of the observations is non-normal. To account for this problem, I utilize the Poisson regression technique, which is a common method for correcting for overdispersed data (Frome 1983; Lawless 1987; Gardner et al., 1995), to develop the statistical models presented below.

## **FINDINGS**

Some very interesting results emerged from the analysis of the subset of 21,692 original tweets made by CBC members during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. The first important finding is that CBC members do indeed talk about racial issues on Twitter. However, when one examines the totality of the original tweets of the 41 members, it becomes clear that as a group they talk about race a lot less than we might have expected given the vital role the organization has historically played in representing minority interests in the Congress.

Indeed, the entire universe of race tweets was only 2,403 or 11 percent of the total number of original content tweets. This means that the average CBC member tweeted about race only 59 times during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. As Figure 1, which displays the universe of CBC members' tweets by content category, tweets about economic issues (29



percent), symbolic politics (18 percent), and constituency service (16 percent) are all much larger percentages of the total than are tweets about racial issues.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This does not mean that communicating about racial issues is unimportant to CBC members. On the contrary, as Figure 1 also shows, they tweet about race more than they tweet about partisan politics (10 percent), legislative activities on the floor of the House of Representatives (7 percent) and their own campaigns for reelection (2 percent).

Moreover, the content analyses conducted for this study did find evidence that CBC members engage in the practice of using racially distinct hashtags or “Blacktags” for some of their tweets. Indeed, thirty-one CBC members—76 percent of the caucus—used at least one Blacktag during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. As Figure 2 shows, the most frequently used Blacktag was #TrayvonMartin, which CBC members tweeted a total of 55 times during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. This is not surprising given the fact that Trayvon Martin’s tragic death at the hands of George Zimmerman ignited a national conversation within the African American community about racial profiling and racial bias in the justice system (Hodges 2015; Schmittell and Sanderson 2015).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The second most frequently used Blacktag was #BlackMenEnroll. CBC members marked their tweets using this racially distinct hashtag 55 times during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. The

#BlackMenEnroll marker was created by CBC members to encourage African American men to sign up for coverage under the Affordable Care Act.

What is missing from the Blacktags of CBC members during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress is also interesting. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti in 2013 in direct response to the Trayvon Martin murder case (Garza 2014). Since that time, it has become one of the most widely utilized Blacktags on Twitter (Freelon and McIlwain 2016). Despite the fact that many CBC members took part in BLM rallies and activities throughout the country, the hashtag had not gained any traction with CBC members by the close of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. Indeed, only one member, Representative Frederica Wilson (D-FL), marked a tweet #BlackLivesMatter during the term of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress.

It is not surprising that Representative Wilson was the first CBC member to use #BlackLivesMatter in one of her tweets. She is the most active tweeter on racial issues in the Congressional Black Caucus. Again, the average CBC member tweeted 59 times about racial issues during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. Representative Danny Davis's (D-IL) eight tweets represented the minimum number in the sample. Representative Wilson's 420 tweets about race was seven times the average number.

So, what separates frequent tweeters about racial issues like Representative Wilson from average and low commitment tweeters in the Congressional Black Caucus? To answer this question, I used Poisson regressions to develop a model the behavior of CBC members in the Twittersphere. The four hypotheses described above are the foundations of the equations used to fit the models reported in this section. Recall that H1 (CBC members after 1992 will talk less about race on Twitter) and H2 (CBC members holding a leadership

position within the Democratic Party Caucus will talk less about race on Twitter) suggest that member characteristics are strong predictors of a CBC member's likelihood to tweet about racial issues. The paper tests these hypotheses using the following model:

$$(1) \quad \text{Log}(\text{Number of Race Tweets}) = \text{Intercept} + \beta_1(\text{Pre-1992 Cohort}) + \beta_2(\text{Leadership}) + \beta_3(\text{Gender}) + \beta_4(\text{Age}) + \beta_5(\text{CBC Founder}) + \beta_6(\text{MOV2012}).$$

Table 1 presents a summary of the results of the Poisson regressions coefficients for this model under the heading "Model 1: Member Characteristics." Of the six variables included in the regression model, the only statistically significant finding is that CBC members elected prior to 1992 tend to tweet less about race than their colleagues who were elected after this time. H1 predicted just the opposite trend based on the consistent findings within the literature on CBC members' roll call votes that the pre-1992 cohort was more prone to introduce legislation focused on race and challenge party leadership about these issues. The finding that the pre-1992 cohort in this sample speaks less about race than their colleagues certainly casts doubt on the validity of H1. Moreover, the fact that serving in the leadership structure of the Democratic Party is not a statistically significant predictor of the propensity of CBC members to tweet about race—and that sign of the coefficient for the variable is positive—undermines support for H2 within this model.

H3 (CBC members from more rural districts will talk less about race on Twitter) and H4 (CBC members from districts with more white voters will talk less about race on Twitter) point toward the role of district demographics as an explanatory factor. Equation 2 specifies the general model of the role that district demographics play in explaining the behavior of CBC members on Twitter.

$$(2) \quad \text{Log}(\text{Number of Race Tweets}) = \text{Intercept} + \beta_1(\% \text{White}) + \beta_2(\% \text{Rural}) + \beta_3(\% \text{Unemployed}) + \beta_4(\% \text{Poverty}) + \beta_5(\% \text{Foreign Born}) + \beta_6(\text{Median Age}) + \beta_7(\text{Median Age}).$$

The results of the Poisson regression used to fit this model are presented under the column entitled “Model 2: District Demographics.” The coefficient for %Rural, the variable that measures the percentage of the land in each district classified as rural, carries a negative sign; while this finding is consistent with the expectations of H3, the variable is not a statistically significant predictor in the model. The percentage of white residents within a district is a statistically significant predictor of CBC members’ tweets about race at the .10-level. This finding, however, does not confirm H4 because the sign on the variable’s coefficient is positive. In other words, H4 predicts that a higher concentration of whites within the district will lead CBC members to tweet less about race but Model 2 yields the opposite effect. The other statistically significant predictor in Model 2 is the median age of the district. As median age of their districts increases, CBC members tweet more about racial issues.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Table 1 also reports the results of a Poisson regression model that combines the member characteristics and district demographics into one equation. The equation is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
(3) \text{ Log}(\text{Number of Race Tweets}) = & \text{Intercept} + \beta_1(\text{Pre-1992 Cohort}) + \\
& \beta_2(\text{Leadership}) + \beta_3(\text{Gender}) + \beta_4(\text{Age}) + \beta_5(\text{CBC Founder}) + \beta_6(\text{MOV2012}) + \\
& \beta_7(\% \text{White}) + \beta_8(\% \text{Rural}) + \beta_9(\% \text{Unemployed}) + \beta_{10}(\% \text{Poverty}) + \\
& \beta_{11}(\% \text{Foreign Born}) + \beta_{12}(\text{Median Age}).
\end{aligned}$$

The results of the Poisson regression testing this equation are reported in the column labeled “Model 3.”

As Table 1 illustrates, the combined model, with its R2 of .54, holds greater predictive power than either Model 1 or Model 2. Moreover, several variables emerge as statistically significant predictors of CBC members’ racial discourse on Twitter. Gender is the strongest predictor of CBC members’ engagement with racial issues on Twitter. On average, women CBC members tweeted about race .695 more times than their male counterparts during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. This result was significant at the .01 percent level. Two other variables in the model—the CBC member’s margin of victory in 2012 (MOV2012) and the percentage of whites living within the member’s district (%White)—were also significant at this level. The persistence of the finding that more whites in their districts leads CBC members to tweet more about race on Twitter undermines the traditional view that representing more racially diverse districts leads African American legislators toward greater moderation on racial issues.

Model 3 also yielded three predictor variables that were significant at the .05 percent level. CBC members belonging to the Pre-1992 cohort tweeted about race .603 times less than their colleagues elected after 1992. The variable “Median Age” moved to the higher level of significance in Model 3. Moreover, the variable “%Rural” maintained its negative sign and moved to the .05 percent level of significance. This result provides some

empirical support for H3. The most surprising result in Model 3 is the emergence of the variable “Southern District” as a statistically significant predictor at the .10 percent level and the change in the coefficient’s sign from negative to positive. This cuts against the argument that the election of members from more conservative southern districts was one explanation for the increasing fragmentation within the CBC in the wake of its major growth spurt after the 1992 elections.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the behavior of CBC members on the micro-blogging site Twitter during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. Given the overall popularity of Twitter and its sustained growth and reach within the African American community, I wanted to know if individual CBC members used their accounts to talk about racial issues. I also wanted to know what variables made CBC members more or less likely to tweet about race.

Previous studies had found that members of Congress tend to use Twitter to make statements designed to bolster their prospects for reelection by sharing information about the services they are providing to their districts (Druckman et al., 2010; Golbeck et al., 2010; Peterson 2012). This study confirms that the behavior of CBC members on Twitter follows a similar pattern. As we have seen, 35 percent of the tweets originating from the accounts of CBC members fall into content categories that enhance their ability to claim credit on an issue or otherwise reinforce their home styles. Moreover, an additional 18 percent of the CBC members’ tweets during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress are crafted to reinforce their standing as symbolic representatives of their districts. The analysis also showed that CBC members’ tweets about racial issues comprised only 11 percent of their total activity

on the site during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. This figure made it the fourth most frequent content category after economic issues (29 percent), symbolic politics (18 percent), and constituency service (16 percent).

As stated above, there is considerable discussion in the extant literature on Twitter about the service's role as a component of the black counterpublic (Carney 2016; Nakamura 2008). A good deal of this discussion revolves around the ways that African Americans replicate their distinct cultural idioms on the site through "signifyin" behaviors and the use of racially distinct hashtags (or "Blacktags"). This study found that CBC members do not tend to "signify" on Twitter. Moreover, while they do use "Blacktags," they do so quite sparingly. For example, in the same year that #BlackLivesMatter burst into the national consciousness on Twitter, only one CBC member, Representative Frederica Wilson (D-FL), who was the most active Twitter user in the CBC during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, marked a tweet with the designation.

The empirical results from the Poisson regressions used to test Models 1, 2, and 3 shows that gender is the best predictor of whether or not a CBC member will speak about race on Twitter. The women in the CBC spoke out on racial issues with somewhat greater regularity than their male colleagues. Moreover, this finding maintains its robustness even when you remove Representative Frederica Wilson (D-FL), who tweets about race at six times the rate of the average CBC member, from the analysis. The finding that the women of the CBC are the most outspoken about racial issues on Twitter is consistent with several recent studies about the importance that African American women attach to providing racial representation within legislative bodies as part of their intersectional politics (Brown 2014; Brown and Gershon 2016; Smooth 2008; Smooth 2011).

The two other most important predictors of CBC members' tweets about race during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress were their margins of victory during the 2012 election and the percentage of whites living within the boundaries of their districts. Since the literature on legislative studies has long held that politically safe members of deliberative bodies are freer to assume political risks (Fiorina 1973; Mayhew 1974; Sullivan and Uslander 1978), the finding that winning by a larger margin in the previous election freed up CBC members to talk more about race on Twitter is not at all surprising. By contrast, the finding that higher concentrations of whites within their districts encouraged CBC members to talk more about race on Twitter does cut against the conventional wisdom within legislative studies.

The extant literature of elections in "bi-racial" districts suggests that African American legislators with more integrated districts should exhibit greater caution when dealing with racial issues (Austin and Middleton 2004; McCormick and Jones 1993; Perry 1991; Smith 1990). The fact that CBC members whose districts had higher concentrations of white voters during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress tweeted more about racial issues than their counterparts suggests that it is time to rethink this axiom. Perhaps CBC members who represent districts with high concentrations of white voters even see it as in their interests to talk more about race on Twitter in order to keep their African American constituents mobilized against electoral threats.

The findings that the cohort of CBC members that served prior to the election of 1992 speak less about racial issues on Twitter and that CBC members representing southern districts tweet more about race both challenge the conventional wisdom about the nature of ideological change with the organization. As we have seen, roll call voting



studies done in the 1990s and early 2000s found that the expansion of the CBC after the 1992 election shifted the nature of the group because more conservative southern members joined the organization (Bositis 1994; Canon 1999; Tate 2003). Tate's (2014) landmark study of the roll call voting behavior of African American legislators between 1977 and 2010 has raised questions about the validity of these assumptions because the cohort that entered in 1992 does not look substantially different within the broader context of the data. In other words, the longer time horizon of Tate's study shows that many of the assumptions formed by studying the one or two Congresses that clustered around the election of 1992 were snapshots that applied only to those particular moments in the CBC's history. While this study bolsters Tate's claims, it is important to note that as a study of CBC members' rhetoric in one Congress it faces the same limitations as the studies of roll call voting referenced above.

It is also important to recognize that this study is a snapshot that was taken in a moment just after the CBC had experienced a higher than average number of retirements. In order to build truly durable theories about the public-facing racial rhetoric of CBC members in the post-Civil Rights Era, it will require scholars to examine the group's behavior over multiple Congress. As stated above, even with advances in computer-assisted content analysis, building such a multi-Congress database will require a considerable investment of time and intellectual resources. This study should serve as a baseline for these efforts.

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## **APPENDIX:**

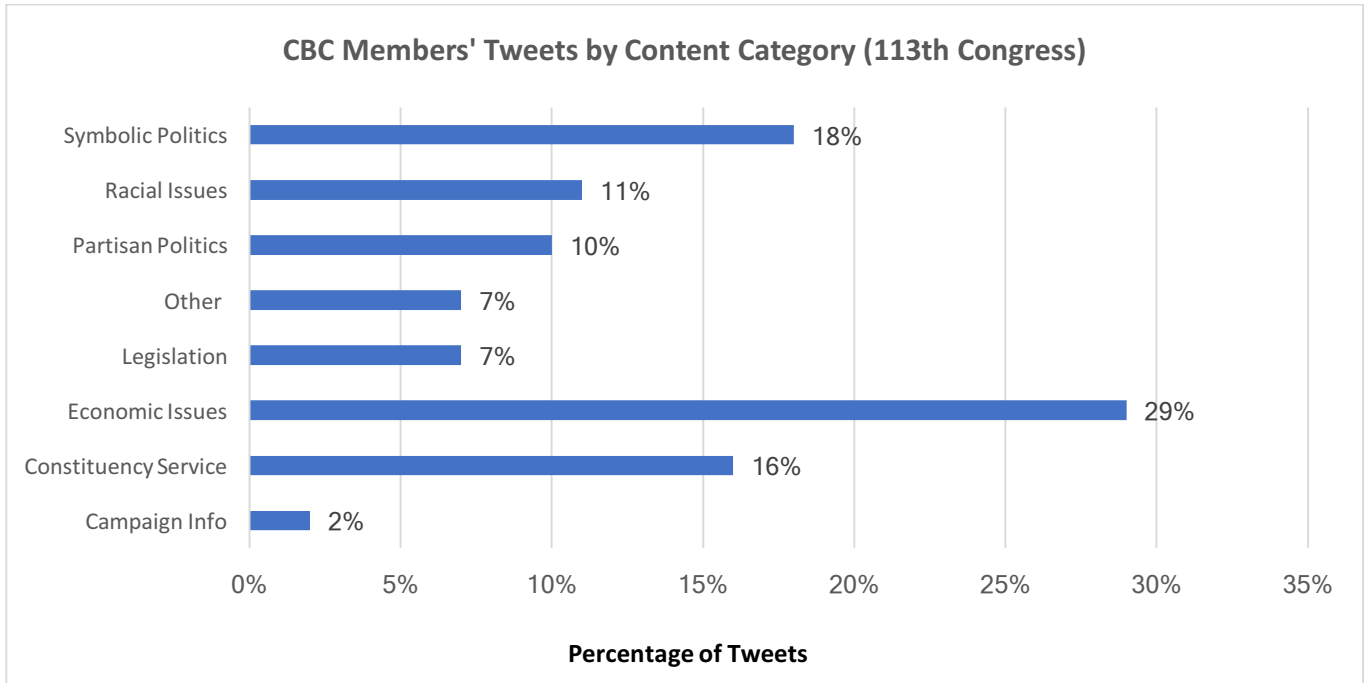
### *Description of independent variables and coding*

The coding schemes for the independent variables utilized in the Poisson regression analyses are listed below. The variables are listed in alphabetical order.

- 1.) Age: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 38 to 85.

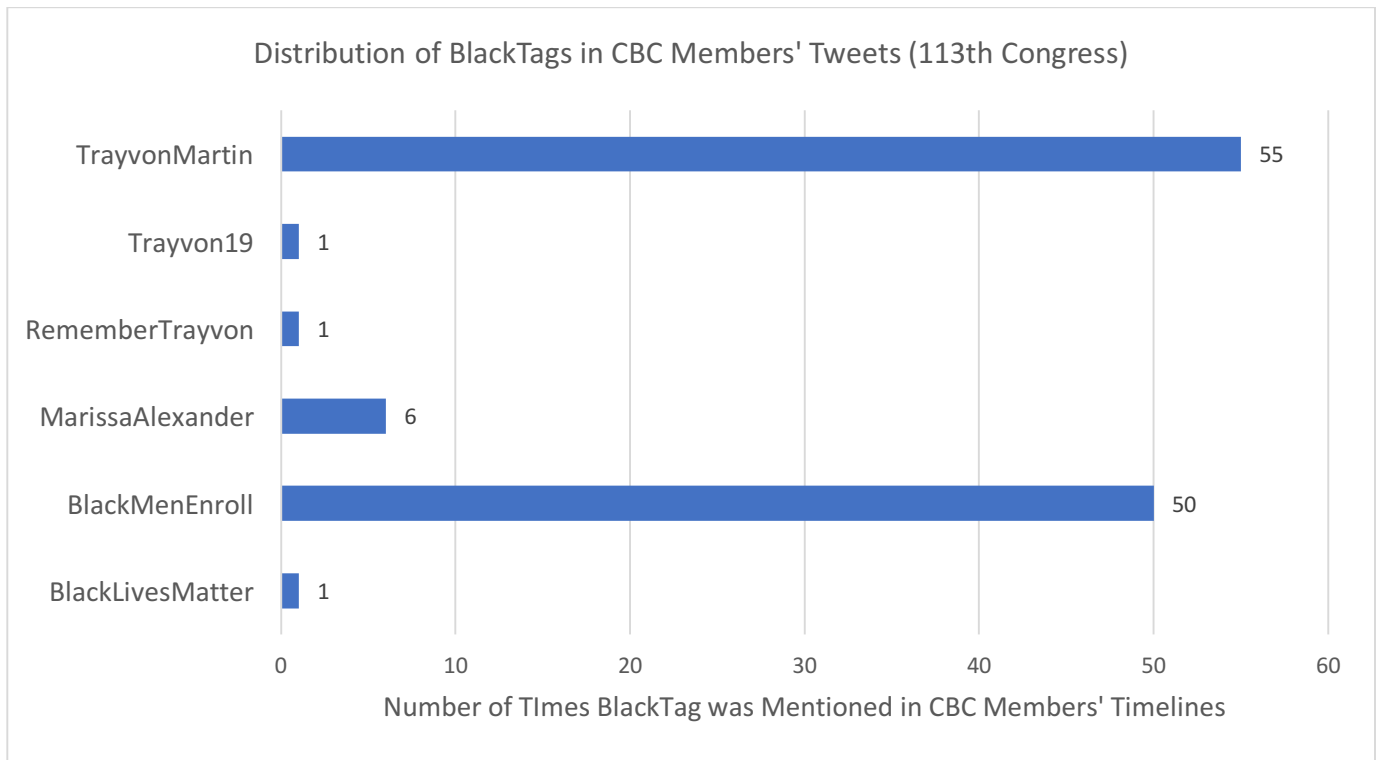
- 2.) CBC Founder: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for members who were not part of the founding cohort and 1 for members who were founders.
- 3.) Gender: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for male and 1 for female.
- 4.) Leadership: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for members who do not serve in the Democratic Party's leadership and 1 for members who serve as leaders.
- 5.) Margin of Victory 2012: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 30 to 88.
- 6.) Pre-1992 Cohort: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for members elected after 1992 and 1 for members elected before this time.
- 7.) %Foreign Born: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 3 to 52.
- 8.) %Homeowners: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 10 to 66.
- 9.) %Poverty: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 0 to 28.
- 10.) %Unemployed: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 8 to 18.
- 11.) %White: This is ratio variable; the range is from 10 to 66.
- 12.) Median Age: This is a ratio variable; the range is from 31 to 40.
- 13.) Southern District: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for members who represent districts outside of the South and 1 for members who represent southern districts.

Figure 1



Source: Twitter

Figure 2



Source: Twitter

**Table 1: Poisson Regression Models of CBC Members' Tweets about Racial Issues**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Model 1: Member Characteristics</b>	<b>Model 2: District Demographics</b>	<b>Model 3: Characteristics + Demographics</b>
Age	.010 (.013)	—	.077 (.012)
CBC Founder	.668 (.476)	—	.339 (.517)
Gender	.492 (.326)	—	.695*** (.235)
Leadership	.129 (.389)	—	-.034 (.303)
MOV2012	.011 (.011)	—	.022*** (.006)
Pre-1992 Cohort	-.888** (.392)	—	-.603** (.286)
%Foreign Born	—	-.001 (.122)	.003 (.010)
%Homeowners	—	.021 (.016)	.015 (.013)
%Poverty	—	.080 (.049)	.046 (.011)
%Rural	—	-.019 (.012)	-.023** (.009)
%Unemployed	—	.004 (.052)	.068 (.049)
%White	—	.018* (.010)	.040*** (.011)
Median Age	—	.086* (.050)	.131** (.062)
Southern District	—	-.109 (.464)	.526* (.314)
Constant	2.57*** (.973)	-1.95 (2.41)	-6.73* (3.206)
R2	.22	.26	.54

Data Sources: Twitter; US Census Bureau

\* =  $p \leq .10$ ; \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.