

# The Paradox of Ambition

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## Abstract

The last three election cycles suggest that we may be experiencing a surge in black political ambition. Barack Obama's historic election is sandwiched between the failed efforts of people such as Denise Majette, Harold Ford Jr., Artur Davis, and Kendrick Meek. Combined with Cory Booker's senatorial run, scholars have argued that there is a need for a reevaluation of black political ambition and a new classification for black politics itself. If we are experiencing a genuine emergence of a new ambitious breed of black politicians, then the paradox of ambition—that black electoral success is detrimental to black agenda setting—would suggest that we may also be experiencing a major abandonment of black politics. This paper begins to investigate this possibility in terms of individual bill sponsorship for black members of Congress from 1947 to 2010.

## Keywords

black politics, bill sponsorship, agenda setting, political ambition

In the first 132 years (1870–2002) of black Americans serving in Congress, only three sitting black members of Congress (MCs) voluntarily left their seats to pursue higher office: Yvonne Burke, Harold Washington, and Alan Wheat. Five black MCs have left Congress to pursue higher office over the past nine years: Denise Majette, Harold Ford Jr., Barack Obama, Kendrick Meek, and Artur Davis. Although only one of these five candidates was successful, Obama's election as president is safely described as “kind of a big deal.” Smith (2009) argues that this apparent surge of black candidates for statewide office suggests a new structure of ambition, and political scientists and pundits alike have asked what these newly ambitious black politicians might portend for black politics (Bai 2008; Gillespie 2010; Ifill 2009). In this paper, I investigate the potential consequences of having more ambitious black representatives in Congress.

Beginning with the first big-city black mayors in Gary and Cleveland, each major advance in black electoral success has been accompanied by both declarations of rebirth and eulogies for the death of black politics (Gillespie 2009; Nelson and Meranto 1977; Preston 1987; Smith 1990). These constant reincarnations of black politics focus primarily on questions of electoral strategy, and they try to infer policy consequences from those electoral strategies. The basic idea is that achieving higher levels of electoral success necessarily requires a greater ability to attract white voters. McCormick and Jones (1993) argue that campaigns that are most effective at attracting white electoral support will tend to involve some level of “deracialization”—black candidates will deemphasize

policy issues that directly appeal to either race or the (potentially controversial) concerns of black voters. Given the prominence of this concept in the black politics literature, there has been surprisingly little work that seeks to make connections between deracialized campaigns and deracialized governance. I begin to fill in that gap by asking, “are ambitious black MCs less active in black agenda setting?”

The “death of black politics” interpretation of black electoral success can be thought of as a paradox of ambition: black electoral success is detrimental to black agenda setting. I conclude that both the death and rebirth of black politics might be overstated. Using data on the biographical features of black MCs throughout the history of Congress, I show that there are relatively few changes observed over time. However, there is evidence to suggest that black MCs with Ivy League pedigrees are a relatively recent development, black Ivy Leaguers are more likely to be ambitious, ambitious black MCs are less active in sponsoring legislation that commemorates or celebrates black achievements, but the Ivy Leaguers have a strong commitment to fighting against explicit racial discrimination. These findings support two overarching points: debates on the death or rebirth of black politics cannot be premised upon real changes in black representation; to the

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small extent that black representation has changed, the consequences of those changes are ambiguous.

The rest of the paper proceeds in five sections. The next section elaborates on what a “Paradox of Ambition” is conceptually and offers a hypothesis to guide the empirical investigation. The section “Data and Method” briefly describes how the data on biographies, ambition, and bill sponsorship were collected. The section “Biography and Ambition” explores whether the nature of black representatives has changed and how these changes relate to ambition. The section “The Costs of Ambition” presents the results on the relationships between biography, ambition, and black agenda setting. The “Conclusion” includes a discussion of how this research fits into a broader understanding of the role of black MCs in black agenda setting.

### **A Paradox of Ambition**

As stated above, black MCs must attract white votes to secure any higher level of office. Ambitious black MCs want to establish crossover appeal by showing that their policy interests and expertise extend beyond the parochial issues of their black constituents. We should observe ambitious black MCs developing legislative portfolios with both offense and defense in mind. Offensively, these MCs should sponsor bills that create a reputation for addressing some set of problems that are important for the intended nonblack voting audience. Defensively, black politicians want to avoid a legislative record that potential challengers could racialize and/or portray as narrowly geared toward “black special interests.” The consequence of these offensive and defensive considerations is that ambitious black MCs should be less active in furthering a black issue agenda.

There are three key claims embedded in the paradox of ambition. First, there is a connection between presentation of self and legislative behavior. Second, ambitious MCs should behave differently than their nonambitious colleagues. Third, white voters are more likely to support a black candidate who is racially neutral. There is support for all three claims in the literature.

Fenno (1978) argues that we cannot understand what happens in Congress unless we consider how members present themselves to constituents back in the district. Mayhew (1974) simplifies the argument even further by placing reelection at the center of congressional motivations. Both of these works touch on the same central idea: the necessity of reelection forces MCs to consider how their legislative behavior will be interpreted by voters. As a result, MCs strategically shape that interpretation. One of the tools legislators have for shaping that interpretation is bill sponsorship. Mayhew (1974) refers to this kind of behavior as position-taking, but for Fenno (1978), it fits

under a larger umbrella of presentation of self. Sulkin (2005) makes this connection between elections and behavior explicit through her research on issue uptake—incumbent MCs introduce bills on the policy topics of their electoral challengers. Recent studies have shown that MCs use visual images in their advertisements to signal their legislative commitments (Sulkin and Swigger 2008), MCs campaign on the issue priorities they establish through bill sponsorship (Sulkin 2009), and MCs alter the policy priorities of their bill sponsorship when new constituent concerns are introduced by redistricting (Hayes, Hibbing, and Sulkin 2010). Sulkin’s research provides strong, consistent evidence that members’ choices of how to construct legislative portfolios are heavily influenced by how they want to present themselves to voters. Herrick and Moore (1993) show that we can further distinguish between MCs’ behaviors based on the scope of voters to whom they are appealing. They argue that MCs who are progressively ambitious—those who are seeking some higher office—seek to create broader reputations to appeal to the larger electorates they will have to face. Using data on bill introductions and floor activity, Herrick and Moore (1993) find that ambitious MCs are, indeed, more active. They sponsor more legislation and give more speeches than their unambitious counterparts. Thus, we find support in the literature for the first two claims: MCs use bill sponsorship to shape voters’ perceptions, and we should expect differences in the bill sponsorship patterns for progressively ambitious MCs.

A paradox of ambition builds on this general process by including a racial dimension. The purpose of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its crucial amendments in 1982 were not just to place black faces in positions of authority. Instead, the idea was that black elected officials would be able to, at worst, provide greater articulation of black interests, and, at best, alter policy decisions in ways that improved black Americans’ lived conditions (Guinier 1994; King 1957; Walters 1992). Research on black representation has generally found that black representatives have pursued that goal through their legislative behavior (Baker and Cook 2005; Gamble 2007; Minta 2009). Although there has been some dispute about whether black substantive representation is a product of black voting districts or the black MCs those districts elect (Grose 2005; Lublin 1997), when black MCs represent majority-minority districts (like the overwhelming majority of black House members do), this dispute becomes moot. Any racial affinity that black MCs possess is aligned with the motives that all MCs have to represent their constituents’ interests, so it makes sense that these members introduce more black interest legislation than their nonblack colleagues who represent nonblack districts.

Ambition upsets the alignment of racial affinity and constituency motivations. Ambitious black MCs not only have to appeal to a larger audience, but they also have to account for the broader range of concerns that a racially diverse electorate might have. The last claim is that these broader appeals have an effect. Racial differences in political attitudes have been well-documented (Kinder and Winter 2001), and these diverging attitudes still manifest in racial bloc voting (Ansolabehere, Persily, and Stewart 2010). Griffin and Flavin (2007) show that white constituents are more likely to hold black representatives accountable for being ideologically out of step. The implication is that if a black MC adopts a black legislative agenda (which will inevitably be more liberal) that is out of step with their nonblack constituents, then there is a higher chance of electoral repercussions. Similarly, Hajnal (2007) uses data on black mayors to demonstrate that white attitudes toward black leadership do change in response to the reality of governance. Basically, establishing a strong reputation as a race neutral candidate can help black MCs to overcome white voters' negative stereotypes about black leadership. There is a consistent racial divide in American public opinion, the attitudinal divide is reflected in persistent racial bloc voting, and there is evidence that white voters are more likely to punish black MCs who step out of line and reward black mayors who demonstrate racial neutrality. Combining this racial dimension with what we generally know about ambition, presentation of self, and legislative behavior, the paradox of ambition offers a clear hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Ambitious black MCs will sponsor fewer black interest bills than nonambitious black MCs.

The next three sections are devoted to providing a test of this hypothesis.

## Data and Method

In her examination of recent events in black politics, Ifill (2009) makes the point that has seemed to become the conventional wisdom: black politicians today are just different from their predecessors. Despite the warning in Gillespie (2009) that there is diversity among the group that she calls the "third wave" of black politics, the popular imagination has envisioned a cadre of Barack Obamas and Cory Bookers who are presenting a radically distinct approach to black political leadership. This perceived difference is at the core of this study of the paradox of ambition. If we are experiencing the genuine emergence of a new ambitious breed of black politicians, then the paradox of ambition would suggest that we may also be experiencing a major abandonment of

black agenda setting. This section addresses those concerns by focusing on two related questions: (1) Are there changes in black MCs' educational, political, and professional backgrounds that are associated with a rise in ambition; and (2) How do these backgrounds and ambitions shape black agenda setting through bill sponsorship? Finding answers to this second question should provide a clear test for our H1. To explore changes in black leadership over time, I began with biographical data on MCs collected by McKibbin (1997). This data set provides variables for a range of individual characteristics for all members from the First to the 104th Congress. Using the Congressional Biographical Directory and the biographical sketches from the Office of the Clerk's "Black Americans in Congress" website, I was able to expand the biographical data up to the 111th Congress. These data provide measures of educational, professional, and political backgrounds for the analysis that follows. I also used these data to construct my measure of ambition. Following the logic of Herrick and Moore (1993), MCs were coded as ambitious if they ever seriously considered a run for higher office. In the case of black MCs, higher office includes running for mayor of a big city, such as Chicago. "Seriously considered" is based on press reports that a black MC has formed some sort of exploratory committee for a given position. Last, the coding is retroactive, so if a member considers higher office once, then they are coded as ambitious for every year prior to and every year after the actual expression of ambition.

Finally, I needed a measure of black agenda setting. Since I am interested in measuring individual contributions to a black agenda, I use bill sponsorship as the measure of agenda setting. The Congressional Bills Project provides sponsorship data for all MCs from 1947 to 2010. I coded all of these bills for whether or not they addressed black issues. Based on the concept of "pragmatic black solidarity" developed by Shelby (2005), I define black issues as policies that attempt to fight racism and/or promote racial justice in the United States. In a less abstract sense, black issues must satisfy at least one of the following conditions:

1. **Antiracist:** Policies that erect legal protections against racial discrimination and remedies for the negative effects of past discrimination. Hate crime legislation, civil rights bills, the voting rights acts, minority set asides, and affirmative action are all examples of this criterion.
2. **Cultural:** Cultural policies are those landmarks, commemorations, holidays, and monuments that celebrate black achievements and history while simultaneously undermining negative racial stereotypes of inferiority.

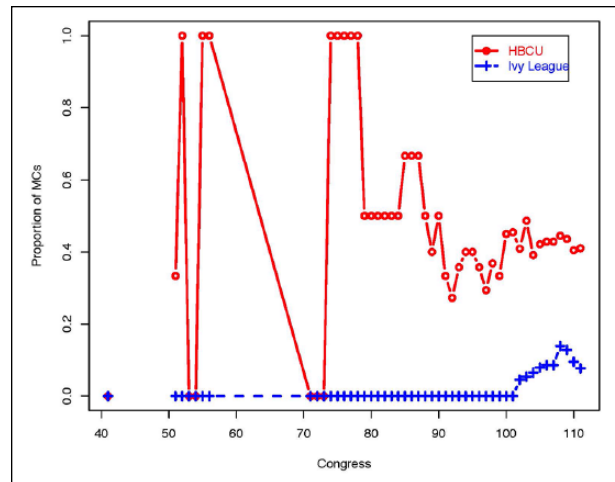
- Social Welfare:** Social welfare is limited to policies that explicitly address some crucial racial disparity. “Crucial” disparities are of two kinds: disparities that are caused by structural inequality/institutional racism—think of wealth gaps or persistent urban poverty; and disparities that perpetuate the stereotypes that reinforce racial inequality—mass incarceration would be the clearest example.

Throughout the paper, whenever I speak of black issues, I am referring to a policy idea that meets at least one of the criteria outlined above. Table 3 in the appendix (online) provides an example of a black issue for each of the nineteen policy areas provided by the Congressional Bills Project. In what follows, I provide descriptive statistics, and the specific methods used to generate a table/figure are discussed within the context of that particular point.

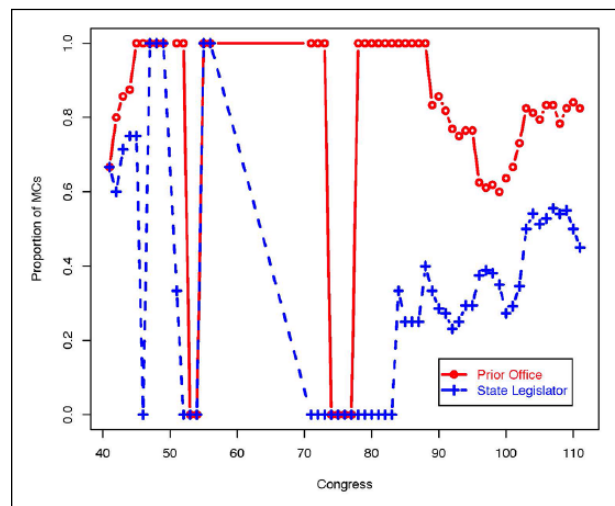
### Biography and Ambition

The first step in testing a paradox of ambition is to see whether there have been any important changes in black congressional ambition over time. Looking at the biographical data for all black MCs since Oscar de Priest reveals that there are only two meaningful changes: the rise of Ivy League-educated black politicians and the post-1992 surge in black MCs with state legislative experience. There were no meaningful differences in either educational attainment or professional experience—modern black MCs have tended to be highly educated lawyers, professionals, and educators.<sup>1</sup> A possible rebuttal to this finding of stasis is that, although educational attainment has been stable, those degrees now come from more elite institutions.

Figure 1 addresses this claim by plotting the proportion of black MCs who received their degrees from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) versus those whose degrees came from an Ivy League institution.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the Ninety-First Congress, there are too few black MCs for proportions to provide much substantive meaning. It is also not surprising that black MCs prior to the Ninety-First Congress would overwhelmingly be alumni of HBCUs<sup>3</sup>; the plot simply illustrates the limited options of the Jim Crow South. The rise of southern black MCs in the 103rd Congress has helped to sustain the proportion of HBCU graduates between 0.4 and 0.5. Black Ivy Leaguers are rare and recent phenomena. At the time of this study, only seven black people with undergraduate degrees from an Ivy League school have ever served in Congress.<sup>4</sup> Based on these data, observers are correct: there are more black MCs with an elite educational pedigree. Whether these seven MCs constitute the beginning



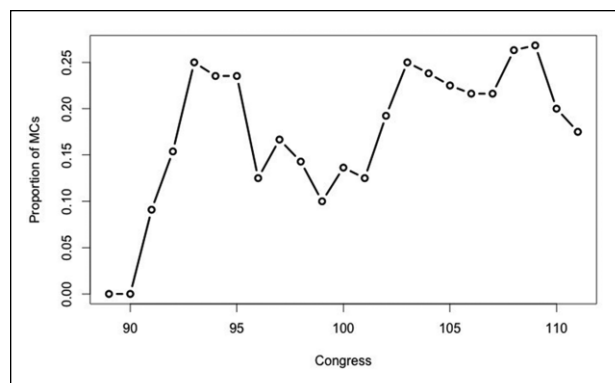
**Figure 1.** HBCUs versus the Ivy League. This plot shows the proportion of black MCs with college degrees who attended HBCUs compared with the proportion who attended an Ivy League institution. HBCUs = historically black colleges and universities; MCs = members of Congress.



**Figure 2.** Elective and legislative experience. This plot shows the proportion of black MCs who held a prior elective office (red circles and solid line) and served in a state legislature (blue cross and dashed line). MCs = members of Congress.

of a trend or behave differently than other black MCs is a question to address later.

There is also an upward trend in the proportion of black MCs with experience in state legislatures. After a trough between the Ninetieth and Ninety-Third Congresses, Figure 2 shows dramatic growth in the pool of legislative experience possessed by black MCs. There is a particularly strong surge with the creation of southern majority-minority districts that led to the large cohort of black MCs in the 103rd Congress. This sort of trend fits in well with the supply-side explanation of black representation in



**Figure 3.** Black progressive ambition, Eighty-Ninth–111th Congresses.

The plot shows the proportion of black MCs who demonstrated progressive ambition at any point during or after their tenure in Congress. Prior to the Eighty-Ninth Congress, there were no cases of demonstrated progressive ambition by black MCs. MCs = members of Congress.

Canon (1999). In terms of holding prior office, we see a similar surge in the 103rd, but officeholding was already fairly common among black MCs. To reiterate, there are two changes in biographical characteristics: first, black MCs who were undergraduates at Ivy League schools is a category that did not exist prior to the 102nd Congress; second, black MCs now enter the chamber with more legislative experience at the state level.

I am interested in how changes in the biographies of black MCs are reflected in levels of ambition and types of bill sponsorship. Figure 3 shows the proportion of black MCs in each Congress who demonstrated progressive ambition.

The twin peaks in the 108th and 109th Congresses suggest that notions of a more ambitious class of black politicians are not wholly fictional. However, the peaks in the Ninety-Third and 103rd Congresses reiterate that these recent changes are not entirely unprecedented. Indeed, the pattern from Figure 3 suggests a connection between ambitious politicians and general surges in the number of black MCs. Between the Ninetieth and Ninety-Third Congresses, the black delegation grew from seven to sixteen members. This growth reflected the new electoral opportunities available in the wake of the gains of the civil rights movement. Similarly, creating majority-minority districts in the South prior to the 103rd Congress allowed ambitious black state legislators to move into Congress, and some of these politicians attempted to use their congressional seats as stepping stones to still higher offices. The high levels of black ambition in the 108th and 109th Congresses can perhaps be explained by the trend noticed in Figure 1—the introduction of Ivy League-educated black politicians.

In her typology of black politicians, Gillespie (2009) argues that a group of “Ivy League Upstarts” is

**Table 1.** Relationship between Biography and Ambition.

Variable	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	-1.616	0.378
Ivy League	2.910	0.708
HBCU	0.838	0.413
Lawyer	-0.762	0.462
Republican	-0.3042	1.192
Senate	-0.368	1.177
Experience	0.156	0.401
N	171	
AIC	188.13	
Res. Deviance	174.13	

HBCU = historically black college and university. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

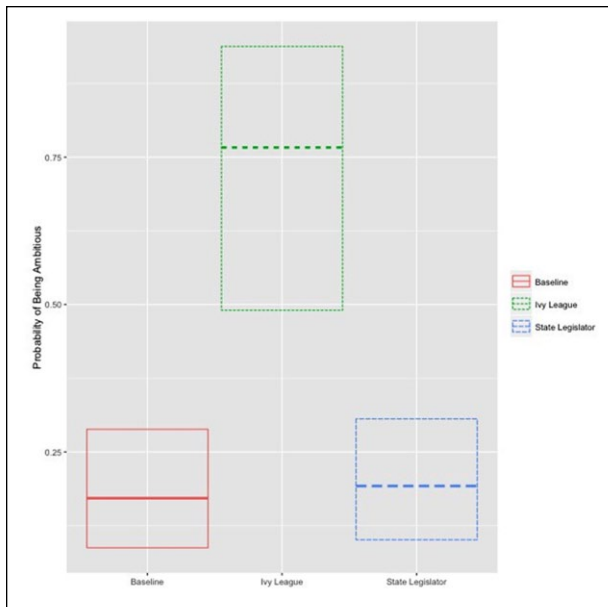
characterized by broad crossover appeal and relatively weak ties to a traditional black political establishment. Due in part to their elite educations, these black politicians are viewed as having career trajectories that take them beyond entrenched incumbency within the House of Representatives. Using a logistic regression, I examine the relationship between an Ivy League education and progressive ambition. The dependent variable is dichotomous for whether or not an MC displayed progressive ambition, and key explanatory variables were an Ivy League education and whether an MC had served in a state legislature. There were additional controls for party, attending an HBCU, serving in the Senate, and being a lawyer.

Table 1 presents the full table of coefficients, and the key results are presented in Figure 4. The figure is a bar plot of the predicted probabilities for a baseline<sup>5</sup> black MC, a black MC who graduated from an Ivy League school for undergrad, and a black MC with prior experience in a state legislature.

Figure 4 lends support to the argument in Gillespie (2009). Black politicians with an Ivy League education are far more likely to demonstrate progressive ambition than those without such elite credentials. Looking at the underlying data, only two of the seven black Ivy Leaguers in Congress have not shown any progressive ambition to this point: Sheila Jackson-Lee and Robert Scott. Whether individuals’ latent ambition leads them to pursue elite credentials or elite credentials create more opportunities to explore one’s ambitions is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is that black MCs with Ivy League educations are a relatively new development, and that development has real consequences for the behavior of these politicians.

## The Costs of Ambition

Now that we have seen some evidence of a relationship between education and ambition, the last task is to explore



**Figure 4.** Ivy league education, legislative experience, and ambition.

The plot compares the predicted probabilities for whether a black MC will be ambitious. The boxes provide the 95% confidence interval, and center lines show the mean effects. Moving from left to right, the bars represent the baseline, an MC who went to an Ivy League undergrad, and an MC with state legislative experience. MC = member of Congress.

how these biographical features shape agenda-setting behavior. In particular, I am interested in whether a black MC's background and ambition are related to the number of black issue bills he or she sponsors.

Figure 5 shows the simple bivariate relationships between ambition and black bill sponsorship for all black MCs from 1947 to 2010. These graphs make clear that the most active sponsors of black issue bills are nonambitious MCs rather than their ambitious counterparts. Although the differences in mean sponsorship are significant across the two groups, the magnitudes of those differences are relatively small:  $-0.414$  for all black bills,  $0.209$  for antiracist bills,  $0.110$  for cultural bills, and  $0.076$  for social welfare bills.

To gain a greater sense of the relationships between these variables, it was necessary to engage in more sophisticated data analysis. Unlike the analysis of biographies and ambition, now the unit of analysis is the member-year, and the dependent variable is the number of black issue bills a given member introduced in a given year. Given the nature of the dependent variable, I employed a standard count model. I wanted to control for changes in political time that could account for exogenous shocks to black agenda setting, so I included dummies for each Congress, with the Eightieth Congress serving as the reference category. Bill introduction data

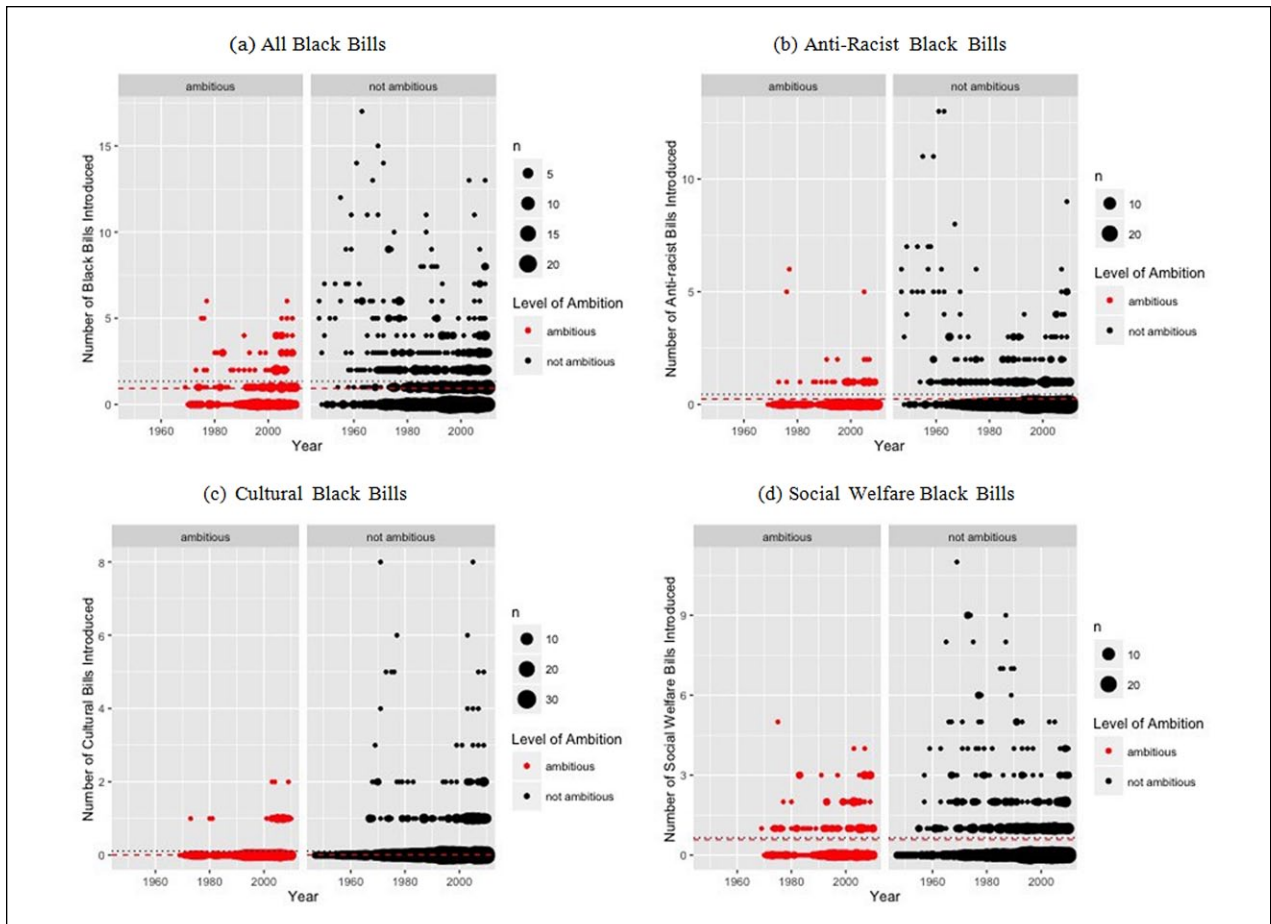
follow a sawtooth pattern because MCs introduce more bills in the first session of Congress, so there is also a dummy for the first session of a Congress. In addition, since I am only looking at black MCs, who are overwhelmingly Democrats, I also allow the congressional dummies to control for when Democrats are in the majority party. The key independent variables are the dummies for ambition, the Ivy League, and state legislative experience. I controlled for ideology using DW NOMINATE Common Space scores, and there is a dummy for gender. MCs differ in the propensity to introduce legislation, so the model includes the total number of bills that an MC introduced in a year as a control for those differences. Separate regressions were run for the total number of black bills and for each type of black bill, respectively (antiracist, cultural, and social welfare). Standard errors are clustered by member for all of the models. Table 2 presents the results of these regressions.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of the controls, more active bill sponsors in general introduce more black issue legislation specifically. None of the other controls is statistically significant. Given that the controls are all member-level variables and some of the idiosyncratic variation is accounted for by the clustered standard errors, these null findings are not surprising. Now, we turn attention to the paradox of ambition.

Figure 6 shows we do not see strong support for the hypothesized paradox of ambition. The crossbar plots are the estimated first differences from our regression of the annual number of black issue bills introduced by a member on the key biographical features. There is no difference between ambitious black MCs and their counterparts in terms of introducing black issue bills overall (Figure 6a), antiracist black bills (Figure 6b), or social welfare black bills (Figure 6d).

However, to the extent that ambition matters for black agenda setting, Figure 6c shows that the impact is negative. Ambitious black MCs introduce fewer bills that celebrate and commemorate black achievements. Many of these cultural black issues are geared toward localized constituencies (naming post offices, for example). A rational, ambitious black politician should not waste resources cultivating a constituency he or she already represents; instead, the focus should be on what will appeal to the larger constituency that he or she is seeking in the future. This result for cultural bills fits that logic. The results illustrated by Figure 6 constitute weak support for a paradox of ambition. Ambitious black MCs are not detrimental to black agenda setting in all cases, but when ambition matters, it is a detriment.

The emergence of black MCs with Ivy League educations was one of the only changes in the backgrounds of black representatives since Oscar DePriest, and this emergence is related to the latest wave of ambition. The effects



**Figure 5.** Black bill sponsorship by ambition, 1947–2010.

This figure compares the number of black bills introduced each year by ambitious black MCs and nonambitious black MCs. The horizontal lines show the means for ambitious (dashed and red) versus nonambitious (dotted and black) MCs. All of the means are significantly different. MCs = members of Congress. To see figure in color, please view the online publication at <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/prq>.

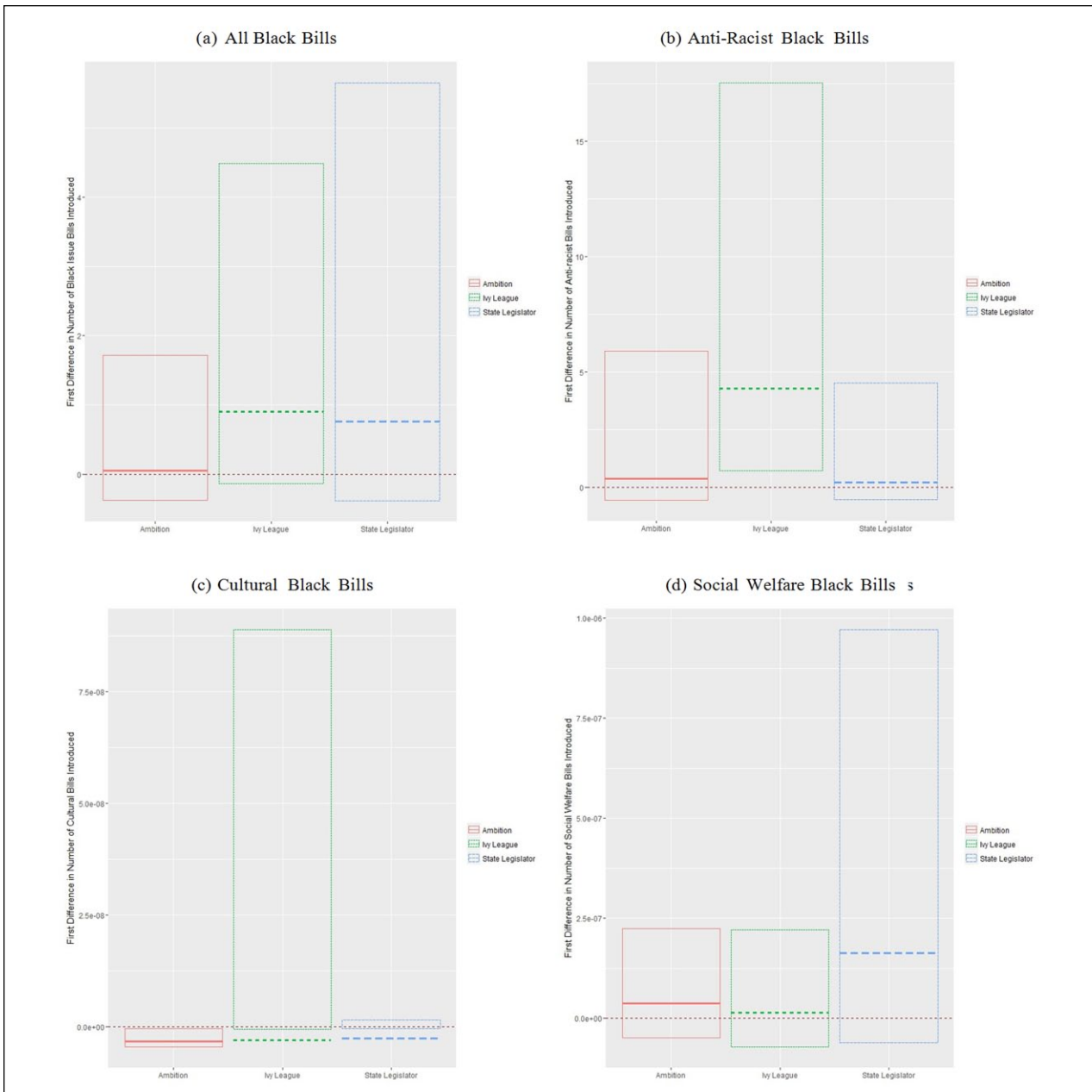
**Table 2.** The Consequences of Ambition: Table Entries Show the Coefficients from Count Models Where the Dependent Variable Is the Number of Bills Introduced in a Year.

Variable	Black bills	Cultural bills	Social welfare bills	Antiracist bills
Intercept	-0.333 (-1.82, 1.15)	-19.47 (-22.57, -16.37)	-16.50 (-18.06, -14.94)	-0.999 (-3.10, 1.10)
Ambition	0.021 (-0.32, 0.36)	-0.7383 (-1.41, -0.07)	0.187 (-0.35, 0.73)	0.151 (-0.63, 0.93)
Ivy League	0.328 (-0.10, 0.76)	-0.632 (-2.08, 0.82)	0.071 (-0.58, 0.72)	1.089 (0.46, 1.72)
Experience	0.281 (-0.33, 0.89)	-0.518 (-1.06, 0.02)	0.631 (-0.47, 1.73)	0.091 (-0.60, 0.78)
Ideology	-1.521 (-3.64, 0.60)	-0.767 (-2.70, 1.17)	-1.199 (-4.24, 1.84)	-2.324 (-0.92, 0.54)
Female	-0.330 (-0.69, 0.03)	-0.296 (-0.93, 0.34)	-0.409 (-0.97, 0.15)	-0.191 (-0.92, 0.54)
Number of Bills	0.055 (0.02, 0.08)	0.030 (-0.02, 0.08)	0.053 (0.02, 0.09)	0.078 (0.04, 0.11)
Res. Deviance	1,764.1	794.73	1,489.8	921.02
N	1,199	1,199	1,199	1,199

The 95% confidence interval for the coefficient is presented in the parentheses.

of elite educational credentials on black agenda setting are less dramatic. Driven primarily by their heightened attention to antiracist bills, Ivy League MCs introduce more black issue bills overall, but that difference falls short of

standard conventions of statistical significance. They are indistinguishable from other black MCs for the introduction of social welfare and cultural bills. These results have little to say about black representatives with prior legislative



**Figure 6.** Mixed evidence for a paradox of ambition. The bar plot shows the first differences calculated from a regression of black issue sponsorship on biographical attributes.

experience. MCs who come from state legislatures already have an issue identity based on responsiveness to (presumably) black constituencies on the state level, they may have the legislative skills that allow them to be more active in certain areas, and they can possess a higher level of policy expertise than those without prior legislative service. All of these potential advantages could add up to greater sponsorship of black issue bills. However, none of those potential benefits of experience is borne out by the data. These MCs are not significantly different than their less experienced

colleagues. There were only two major changes in the nature of black representatives in the modern Congress: elite college educations and state legislative experience. Figure 6 demonstrates that these developments do not fit cleanly in the death or rebirth categories of black politics.

**Conclusion**

In response to the 1989 elections of black candidates in majority white districts, Smith (1990) argued that these



newly ambitious black candidates marked the death of black politics. His point was that these candidates lacked any meaningful connection to a strong black issue agenda. Proclamations of the death of black politics are premature. Yes, there are trade-offs between advocating a black agenda and pursuing higher elected office. Ambitious black MCs are not as active in promoting the cultural aspects of the black agenda. However, there is not much evidence that an entirely new type of ambitious black politician is emerging. There is truth to the “Ivy League Upstart” category defined by Gillespie (2009), but it is not clear that a huge wave of these politicians is poised to sweep through the Congressional Black Caucus. These results suggest restraint from the exultation of birth announcements and the grief of obituaries. At the very least, we should wait to see who eventually replaces some of the aging members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC; Charles Rangel, John Conyers, Maxine Waters, Jim Clyburn, John Lewis, Danny Davis, and Frederica Wilson are all over seventy), and if Terri Sewell’s educations at Princeton and Harvard align her more with Sheila Jackson-Lee or Denise Majette.

More broadly, this study is part of a larger investigation of the role that black representation has played in black agenda setting over time. The paradox of ambition is about how members behave when faced with potential electoral constraints. The broader aim is to explain how Congress institutionally constrains black representation as an agenda-setting strategy. Black representatives are a small minority in Congress, so they will always have to operate within the limitations of their collective power. Understanding that operation for black agenda setting can teach us about how other racial/ethnic minorities succeed (or fail) in democratic legislatures and how issue-based constituencies work more generally.

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### Notes

1. The charts that illustrate this lack of change are available upon request.
2. The denominator for these plots is the number of black members of Congress (MCs) with a college degree, not the total number of black MCs.
3. Harold Ford Sr. was the first black MC (in the Ninety-Fourth Congress) who could have even attended college after the 1954 Brown desegregation decision, and Adam

Clayton Powell Jr. was the first postreconstruction black MC who was not born in the South.

4. Gary Franks, Robert Scott, Sheila Jackson-Lee, Harold Ford Jr., Denise Majette, Artur Davis, and Barack Obama.
5. The baseline is a non-ivy educated, nonstate legislator, nonlawyer, Democrat in the House who did not attend a historically black college and university (HBCU).
6. The results for the congressional dummies and the session dummy have been omitted from these tables to conserve space.

### Supplemental Material

Replication data for this article can be viewed at <http://www.morehouse.edu/academics/polsci/mplatt-bio.html>

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