

Representation and Rhetoric: An Exploratory Study of Descriptive Representation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Government Institutions and Popular Discourse

Topic and Thesis

Descriptive representation of the American citizenry in government institutions denotes the mirroring of objective demographic variables, such as ethnicity, race, religion, income, age, gender, and educational attainment. I am interested in extending past research I completed on descriptive representation in U.S. congressional committee staff to examine the existence of, potential for, and relevance of descriptive representation in the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the federal government. Further, I wish to examine the correspondence between descriptive representation in these institutions, either through their composition or their handling of policies relevant to ethnic and racial minorities, and the rhetoric concerning racial and ethnic minorities espoused by elected officials, candidates, print and broadcast media, and think tanks representatives of the ideological right and left.

Proposed Project Objectives and Responsibilities

My objective in undertaking research on descriptive representation is to prepare to write my Political Science Honors thesis on descriptive representation beginning in fall 2004. I wish to come away from a summer of research on this topic with a clear picture of which institutions are most receptive to descriptive representation. I also seek to identify valid methods for assessing the conditions under which descriptive representation fosters substantive representation.

In addition to studying descriptive representation in government, I seek to determine whether the rhetoric used in discussing ethnic and racial minority groups in public speeches and documents by elected officials, candidates, think tanks, print and broadcast media is a relevant influence on descriptive representation that I should explore in my Political Science Honors thesis in addition to examining the government institutions legally charged with representing the people. That is, I would like to study whether there is correspondence between dominant rhetoric concerning ethnic and racial minorities, legislation proposed affecting these groups, and these groups' representation in government. Ono and Sloop (2002) suggest such a correspondence in California drove support for Propositions 187, 209 and 227 in the 1990s.

Relevance

There are persuasive reasons to study descriptive representation. Article I of the U.S. Constitution indicates the Framers' intention to structure Congress as both a *representative* and *deliberative* body (Davidson and Oleszek, 2002). The political theories underlying the *Federalist Papers* and the U.S. Constitution reveal an intent to structure government to be descriptively representative of American society in various dimensions. John Locke indicated that government's institutional divisions should mirror society's natural divisions. James Harrington argued in *Oceana* that government's political structure should change over time to accommodate its economic structure. Predecessors to these philosophers, such as Aristotle, argued that the most sustainable form of government is one that represents society's heterogeneity (Gunnell 04/08/04). These pronouncements reflect a notion that substantive representation of an individual's or group's interests and policy views to an extent relies upon that individual's or group's descriptive representation.

Simultaneously, however, writers such as John W. Burgess (1895) articulate the position that ethnic and racial heterogeneity violates the foundations of the American state. He explicitly argues that the U.S.'s viability as a state requires that it "admit to its membership only such non-Aryan race-elements as shall have become Aryanized in spirit and in genius" (407). The protection of liberty Burgess goes on to vehemently define as the function of the state thus is, in his view of the ideal state, reserved for only one nationality. The debate as to the merits and demerits of Burgess' anti-immigrant and assimilationist arguments aside, Otto Santa Ana (2002) argues that the curtailment of affirmative action and bilingual education, as well as intangible economic

competition and social tension with other groups, precludes assimilation even by those immigrants who desire it (4).

Ethnic and racial descriptive representation thus warrants study when we consider how it potentially affects legislation concerning immigration, services for undocumented residents, criteria for defining state enemies after crises such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11, policies more subtly affecting racial and ethnic minorities in welfare, affirmative action, and bilingual provisions, and structural designs affecting these groups' electoral voice, such as how legislative districts are drawn and how naturalization is granted. Indeed, while descriptive characteristics do not necessarily shape substantive policy interests, and while elected officials who descriptively represent some group may or may not represent the majority of that group's policy views, the very presence of various ethnic studies departments at universities and research institutions suggests that race or ethnicity do have some bearing on the interests and views of descriptively defined groups and potentially their individual members. For example, Mexican Americans' political agenda emphasizes economically and politically incorporating new immigrants and previously excluded groups by making gains in education, social services, job training, and public safety. Twenty-three percent of Latinos identify education access as Latinos' most pressing need; 12 percent cite economic opportunity (DeSipio: 11/04/03). These statistics differ across subsets of Latinos but also differ between Latinos and Anglo Americans.

Moreover, unfulfilled racial and ethnic descriptive representation potentially impacts the state. Michael Omi and Howard Winant indicate that racial minority groups continually interact with and pressure the state in a cycle of unstable equilibrium and racial contestation that changes and creates institutions and laws and that fundamentally shapes civil society (1994: vii, ix). There are thus likely policy ramifications stemming from the fact that, by the measure of ethnic and racial descriptive representation, "Congress does not represent the American public well at all" (Jacobson, 1994, 240). While African Americans composed 12 percent of the electorate, Hispanic-Americans 8 percent of the electorate, and women 52 percent of the electorate, these groups respectively made up only 9, 4, and 13 percent of the House of Representatives, and in the latter two cases, zero and 9 percent of the Senate in 1998 (Jacobson 240). Part of the aim of my proposed project is to study if descriptive representation is fulfilled in some other branch of the federal government and the causes for its success or lack thereof in these institutions.

Method/Approach

Part of my research will consist in preparing a literature review assessing past research on descriptive representation in the three sectors of the federal government as well as in state and local government. The reciprocal side of descriptive representation in American government is the rhetorical language used by institutions and actors to describe racial and ethnic minorities that potentially affects a descriptive groups' access to services. Thus, the other side of my research will entail historical and primary source studies in the rhetoric employed by elected officials, candidates, print and broadcast media, and conservative and liberal think tanks to shape discourses concerning ethnic and racial minorities.

The literature review component of my research will consist of reading and analyzing library resources such as those identified in my attached list of potential reference works. I will also examine primary sources on rhetoric available through records of print and broadcast media such as the *Los Angeles Times* on CD-ROM, from which Otto Santa Ana constructed his data set for analysis of rhetoric surrounding California Propositions 187, 209 and 227 (57). The results I will produce through this research are: (1) a comprehensive literature review on descriptive representation that will allow me to select the most important aspects of this topic to study in my Political Science thesis, and (2) a list of frameworks and methods to study descriptive representation in a systematic manner.

My primary source studies on rhetoric will draw on work I will be completing as an intern at the Center for American Progress. My duties in this internship will involve researching conservative and liberal dialogue about a variety of public policy issues, helping draft press releases and public statements representing the

Center for American Progress' viewpoints, and helping brief CAP's President and Senior Vice President for public speaking engagements. I will thus be able to gain exposure and sensitivity to the language and rhetoric used in conservative and liberal policy discussions today and identify primary source documents and speeches to tap in my research on rhetoric. My rationale for also examining media rhetoric as an influence on descriptive representation is the argument that "media...provide a specific locale, a space, where social issues collide, where political issues are struggled over and subject positions...are constituted," and where "[w]hat is at stake is the power to control what is represented publicly as dominant truths" (Ono and Sloop 3).

To organize my research on rhetoric in a somewhat scientific manner, I will adapt some of the methods and assumptions of Otto Santa Ana (2002) and Kent Ono and John Sloop (2002). Santa Ana performs content analysis of rhetoric in *Los Angeles Times* coverage of issues related to Propositions 187, 209 and 227 "with the help of theories and methods drawn from discourse analysis, cognitive science, and mass media studies" outlined in detail in his book, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse*. He specifically focuses on the rhetoric of metaphors, based on research in cognitive science indicating that "public perception of the social world is constructed in terms of metaphor" and that "metaphors shape commonsense thinking" (9, 26), and the arguments that "[m]etaphors underlie the functioning of social institutions, such as the concepts of law in the judicial system" (39), are the "key element in the way that social situations that require a policy response are conceptualized" (41), and can therefore "begin to explain the function of social policy" (39). Ono and Sloop "examine local, regional, and national mass media rhetoric about Proposition 187," this "dominant civil discourse" rhetoric being organized along a continuum defined at one end by communication presented in generic terms to a large audience and at the other end communication presented for particular groups, including non-media, everyday conversations termed "vernacular discourse" (13-14).

In recording my observations on rhetoric, I will keep in mind Ono and Sloop's mapping of a given statement as being more or less *vernacular* or *civic* discourse and being more or less of the *dominant* or "outlaw" perspective (18). I will also keep in mind Santa Ana's categorizations of rhetoric surrounding different issues that he obtained through unbiased sampling of a number of research subjects.¹ I will employ his dominant, secondary, and occasional source domains and his method of codifying their appearance as the method of categorizing rhetoric in my analyses of rhetoric to minimize the role of my own biases on these issues in the data and to gain the benefits of the random sampling of subjects Santa Ana originally used to develop these categories. I will attempt to guard against biases in completing my literature review and rhetoric analysis, particularly the bias that "communication that is politically resistant or...marginal...should necessarily be valorized" (Ono & Sloop 14).

Past and Ongoing Work Completed on Project

The motivation for the project I am proposing rests on my past and current coursework and research surrounding racial and ethnic minorities' legal representation and social reception in the United States. By the end of spring quarter, I will have completed coursework and research the following areas:

- Descriptive representation in the U.S. legislative, executive and judicial branches through my current Political Science 199 independent study course on descriptive representation and my earlier UROP project on *Congressional Staff: An Alternative Means of Descriptive Representation*.

¹ For example, on the issue of bilingual education, he identified two dominant "source domains," or categories, of metaphors: (1) paths and sports, as in metaphors such as "holding foreign speaking students back," and "bilingual education is a training-wheel program," and (2) body, disease, and clothing, as in "loosen the grip on the primary language." He identified metaphors stemming from images of war, crime, and violence as secondary source domains, and metaphors related to machines, nature, religion, science, water, and money as occasional source domains. In addition to bilingual education, he performed such analysis for issues and concepts of affirmative action, the U.S. Mexico border, community, language, Latina/o, polity, public opinion, public sentiment, politics, racism, referenda, school achievement, curriculum, and school (324-331).

- Mexican Americans' policy agenda, representation in local, state, and federal institutions, grassroots organization, convergence with and divergence from Mexican immigrants to the U.S., other Latino subgroups, including Puerto Rican Americans and Cuban Americans, African Americans, and Anglo Americans.
- The historical foundations and theories concerning representation, immigration, and ethnic homogeneity to which present day scholars refer in constructing arguments supporting and opposing ethnic and racial minorities' and immigrants' presence in "the people" of the United States. My current Political Science 139A course *Imagining the American Polity* focuses on these historical documents and theories and how words such as *representation, democracy, the people, and individual liberty* have represented different concepts and practical meanings throughout American history.
- The evolution of language and rhetoric from 1960 to present in publicizing and popularizing what scholars including Otto Santa Ana, Omi and Winant, and Ono and Sloop define as anti-immigrant initiatives in California, including Propositions 187, 209, and 227 through my current Political Science 124C *Comparative Minority Politics* course. This course is also providing me background on the interaction of race and racial groups' demands with state institutions and on different racial and ethnic groups' legal and de facto experiences in the United States. It will require me to complete an independent research project on one California voter initiative.
- Quantitative research on the relationship between bank failures and Mexican immigrant into and out of Texas cities, which is the focus of my 2003-04 UROP project in Economics on *Pluralism and the Great Depression: The Impact of Bank Suspensions, Mergers, Liquidations, and Reopenings from 1929-1939 on Mexican American Political Power*. Through this project, I am more broadly assessing the relationship between economic downturns and anti-immigrant sentiment that appears again in the 1970s and in the early 1990s.
- Quantitative research on the relationship between demographic composition in California counties, prevailing economic conditions, and voter support for what Propositions 187, 209, and 227. I will complete this project to fulfill the independent, econometric research project required for my current Economics 124CW *Data Analysis-Writing* course. This project will extend Hero and Tolbert's 1996 statistical research indicating that California counties with large Latino and white populations, as well as homogeneous counties with few minorities, strongly supported Proposition 187. It will thus examine in a different time period the same relationship between economic downturns and anti-immigrant sentiment that I am studying in my current UROP project on the Great Depression era.

Timeline

March – June

- Qualitative research: Complete reading, papers, and research assignments for Political Science 139A *Imagining the American Polity*, Political Science 124C *Comparative Minority Politics*, Political Science 199 Independent Study on Descriptive Representation. I am completing the assigned reading for these classes with an eye toward compiling information for my proposed research project. I am also focusing the papers and research projects I complete for these classes to relate to my proposed research project, as described under the *Responsibilities* section of this proposal.

Quantitative research: Complete my project in Economics on *Pluralism and the Great Depression: The Impact of Bank Suspensions, Mergers, Liquidations, and Reopenings from 1929-1939 on Mexican American Political Power*. Its relationship to my proposed research project is described under the *Past and Ongoing Work Completed on Project* section.

- Quantitative research: Complete independent study project in Economics 124CW *Data Analysis-Writing* on the relationship between demographic composition in California counties, prevailing economic conditions, and support for Propositions 187, 209 and 227. Its relationship to my proposed research project is described under the *Past and Ongoing Work Completed on Project* section.

June- September

- Independent research in Washington D.C. the following areas:
 1. Literature review of descriptive representation in federal judiciary, executive and legislative branches.

2. Rhetoric and language used in ideologically conservative and liberal arguments, particularly with respect to public statements by elected officials, candidates, think tanks, and media on policies and laws affecting racial and ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in the United States. I will record my observations in these areas as primary source documents from the 2004 campaign season.
3. Secondary and primary source research as described in *Responsibilities* and *Method and Approach* sections.

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