

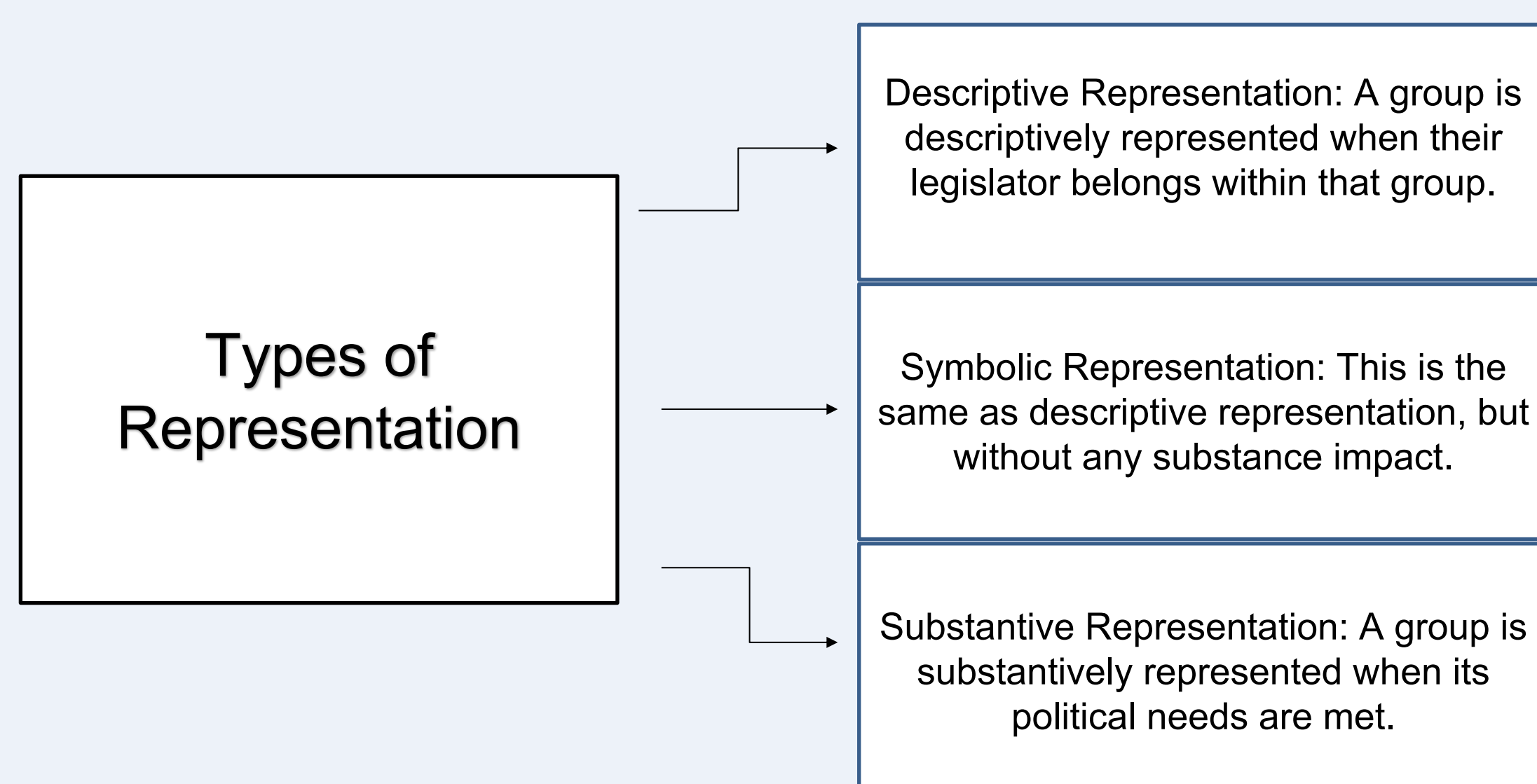
# The Underrepresentation of African Americans in Government and Its Effects on Democracy

## Abstract

My research presents the lack of representation of African American interests in the American political system, particularly in Congress. It explores the causes of this underrepresentation and the effects that it has on democracy within the United States. Although there has been a vast increase in black leadership over the last 50 years, there is still a divisive gap in terms of racial equality within American politics. I seek to understand the nature of this gap, and the impact that it has on American democracy and representation for the black population in public policy.

## Background

Since the Civil Rights Movement, the United States began to see an upturn in the amount of African Americans serving in governmental office. However, blacks continue to experience unequal representation descriptively, symbolically, and substantively. Although African Americans make up 12% of the population, only about 2% of elected offices in the entire country are held by African Americans (Tate). Additionally, political interests of black people are disproportionately represented in policy, regardless of the race of the legislators representing them (Griffin). This exemplifies a lack of *substantive representation*.



(Tate)

## Causes of Underrepresentation

One of the main reasons why African Americans face unequal substantive representation is because they are represented by less active and less well-positioned members of Congress. Legislators of districts with large African American populations tend to back legislation that corresponds with blacks' interests, but these tend to face greater challenges in the law-making process. As seen in the table below, provided by John D. Griffin, in the 101<sup>st</sup> to 106<sup>th</sup> Congresses, representing a greater African American population had a negative relationship with a legislator's bills introduced, bill passage, committee portfolio, and party leadership. Some explanations for the weaker effectiveness of these legislators include the less competitive nature of districts with large black populations, the difficulty of African American members of Congress to receive valuable committee assignments, and the general preference of blacks to be descriptively represented rather than substantively represented (Griffin). Another major cause of blacks' lack of substantive representation is racial gerrymandering (Overby).

Table 1. Legislator Activity and Position, 101st to 106th Congresses, by District Percentage African American

	Bills Introduced	Bill Passage	Average Cosponsors	Committee Portfolio	Party Leader
1 District > 40% African American	7.9 (214)	0.74 (203)	19.3 (198)	0.209 (234)	0.41 (227)
2 District < 40% African American	11.2 (2,450)	1.12 (2,409)	17.0 (2,409)	0.251 (2,436)	0.47 (2,428)
1 / 2	71%	66%	113%	83%	87%
3 District > 25% African American	8.6 (350)	0.87 (334)	17.4 (329)	0.229 (371)	0.39 (363)
4 District < 25% African American	11.2 (2,314)	1.12 (2,278)	17.2 (2,278)	0.251 (2,299)	0.47 (2,292)
3 / 4	77%	78%	101%	91%	83%

Note: Ns in parentheses. All differences in means are significant at  $p < .05$ , except the difference in average cosponsors between districts greater than and less than 25% African American. See the text for data sources.

## Effects on Democracy

African Americans who have a greater sense of group consciousness tend to more easily recognize the disadvantages that they face due to a political system that upholds racial inequality. It is shown that as blacks realize that the blame is on the political system and not on themselves, they tend to show decreasing trust in democracy and government. This mistrust sparks the will to participate in protests and movements with the goal of political change (Avery).

## Conclusion

While democracies are meant to effectively represent the people, the United States does not reach that standard for African Americans, who continue to face unequal descriptive and substantive representation in government. Although many African Americans do tend to favor descriptive over substantive representation, many do not see how disadvantageous that is for their interests. Legislators of districts with particularly high African American populations have a difficult time succeeding in Congress, and they have an even more difficult time if they are African American themselves. African Americans who feel a great sense of group consciousness understand this illegitimate inequality, and have a harder time trusting their political system because of it.

## References

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