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Identity in Congress: How Ethnicity is Shaping Caucus Membership

Michael Herndon
maherndon@unomaha.edu

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Michael Herndon
Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado

University of Nebraska at Omaha

maherndon@unomaha.edu

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There are more than 600 caucuses in Congress, and although most of these groups have little power on the Hill, there are a few that have serious influence and critical roles in policy-making. One such group is the Congressional Tri-Caucus which is comprised of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), and Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC). Currently, there are over 100 members in the House of Representatives that belong to one or more of these three groups. Each of the three caucuses have legislative priorities that reflect their corresponding racial/ethnic membership. Previous research has explored the behavioral overlap of Congressional representatives belonging to different racial groups, but with the recent election of bi-racial representatives in Congress, new research is needed to explore how these members navigate tri-caucus membership and the legislative priorities that each of the caucuses have. This study takes a group of 4 bi-racial/multi-ethnic members of Congress and examines their voting behavior concerning legislation critical to the caucuses corresponding to their racial identity. Results of this analysis suggest that bi-racial members of Congress vote in line with each of the caucuses corresponding to their racial identities-regardless of actual membership in the caucus.

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Introduction

Every day, the United States becomes more and more racially and ethnically diverse. One result of this is more a more diverse Congress. After the recent election of the 116th Congress, Pew Research Center announced that the last five Congresses have each been the most racially and ethnically diverse in history (Bialik 2019). For political scientists interested in representation and identity, the data provided by these recent Congresses opens the door for a whole new world of research. Never before has there been so much data on Latino, Black, or Asian representation at the federal level in the United States.

One demographic that is especially interesting in the recent Congresses is biracial/multiethnic representatives. Before the recent wave of diversity in Congress, there were only one, two, or sometimes three biracial/multiethnic members of Congress at a time. In our current Congress, I have identified five. There are two Afro-Latinos in Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D-NY) and Rep. Antonio Delgado (D-NY) and three Black/Asian members in Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), Rep. Al Green (D-TX) and Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA). Each of these five members of Congress are in unique situations because of the different communities that they represent while in office. For example, Adriano Espaillat, a Dominican, self-identified Afro-Latino, (Caygle 2017) represents both the Black *and* Latino communities in his district and across the country.

One of the best ways for *any* Black, Latino, or Asian member of Congress to represent their racial or ethnic community is by joining one of the three caucuses in the Congressional Tri-Caucus. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) are all Congressional communities with the goal to advocate for their respective racial/ethnic group. Individually, the three caucuses

are powerful and have important roles in policy-making, and combined, the Tri-Caucus is probably one of the most influential caucuses in Congress behind the Democratic and Republican Caucuses/Conferences in the House and Senate. In the current Congress, there are more than 130 voting members in the Tri-Caucus. Size doesn't always mean power or influence though. The largest caucus in the 115th Congress was the Diabetes Caucus with 290 members (Langhorne 2018). Although the Diabetes Caucus has an important role in health policy, it is very niche and not nearly as broadly influential as one of the caucuses in the Tri-Caucus.

The power and symbolism of each of the three caucuses in the Tri-Caucus make membership an important part of any Congressional member's resume. Membership means an avenue to influence policy relevant to a racial/ethnic community. Furthermore, membership can make it clear to constituents and observers that the member is a part of the racial/ethnic community or at least cares deeply about it.

For the five members of Congress identified earlier, there are certainly things to gain from being a member in both of the caucuses that they identify as having a connection to. However, this does not always happen. Despite identifying as an Afro-Latino, Rep. Espaillat was not granted membership in the Congressional Black Caucus after his election in 2016 (Caygle 2017). Additionally, in 2018, Rep. Antonio Delgado, a half Black, half Puerto Rican freshman Congressman decided himself to not join the Congressional Hispanic Caucus for reasons not made entirely clear to the public, but will still be explored later in this paper.

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Research Question

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As Congress and other legislatures in the United States continue to become more diverse, it will be important to understand how representatives with multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds like Espaillat, Delgado, and the other three identified members navigate caucus membership,

legislation, and identity more broadly. This paper will explore these concepts by asking the

question: **Can the Congressional Tri-Caucus maintain its cohesive nature with the**

introduction of bi-racial/multiethnic members of Congress?

Literature Review

Before diving into an analysis on the members themselves, it is important to understand

the context of the three caucuses and how they function. Each caucus has their own traditions,

histories, and norms. Figure 1 displays how each caucus has historically approached

membership.

Figure 1

CAPAC	Historically allowed members of from other racial/ethnic backgrounds	Historically both Democrats and Republicans
CHC	Historically allowed members of from other racial/ethnic backgrounds	Historically only Democrats
CBC	Historically only Black Members of Congress	Historically both Democrats and Republicans

CAPAC is the most inclusive of the three caucuses allowing members of either party and of any

racial or ethnic background to join. The other two caucuses are each a bit more exclusive in who

they allow to join. It should be noted that although the CHC only allows Democrats to join, there

is also a Congressional Hispanic Conference that is comprised solely of Latino Republicans.

Each of the three caucuses allows for multi-membership, meaning that joining one does not bar a

member from joining another. Bobby Scott, Kamala Harris, and Al Green are all full members of

both the CBC and CAPAC. There are also Latino members of Congress that are members of

CAPAC such as Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA)

Each of the three caucuses were created at different times. The CBC in 1971, the CHC in 1976, and CAPAC in 1994. All have been able to leverage their collective voices for the betterment of their communities. One example of this came at the onset of the CBC's creation. President Nixon initially refused to meet with the new group, but when its founding members decided to not attend Nixon's 1971 State of the Union, the president finally decided to meet the members and hear their concerns (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives 2008). It is exactly this sort of cohesive behavior that makes the caucuses a force to be reckoned with. Congress scholar Alan Fiellin wrote that in any Congress, members will try to acquire influence in order to further constituency interests and that the bloc voting and resulting collective influence gained by being a part of a cohesive caucus like the CBC, CHC, and CAPAC can be a substitute for individual influence (Fiellin 1962). Being a part of a larger, much more powerful group like one of the three caucuses can certainly increase visibility and influence.

Caucuses Outside of Congress

Caucuses like the Tri-Caucus in Congress also exist in state legislatures. New York's State Senate has a Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, Arizona has both a Latino Legislative Caucus and Black Legislative Caucus and a number of other states have similar groups in their legislatures. These groups serve similar purposes, but depending on the legislature, there are varying levels of utility in being in one of the caucuses. Arizona's Latino Legislative caucus for example doesn't publicize who it's official members are which off the bat decreases some of the usefulness of membership.

Racial/Ethnic Tension

Relations between groups of people are very dependent on context and environment and it is no different when it comes to relations between different racial/ethnic groups. There is a large body of literature that explores race relations in the United States. One study by Dr. Paula McClain examines the views of Latino immigrants' views towards Black Americans in the South and finds that for the most part, they hold negative stereotypical views of Black Americans citing them as being "lazy" or "hard to get along with" (McClain et al. 2006). The same article looks back in history of times when non-white minorities were in close contact with each other and found similar results. During Reconstruction, Southern planters brought in Chinese men to fill in jobs previously done by Black Americans. One result of this was Chinese disdain towards Black Americans and the Chinese in Mississippi even challenged segregation laws in order to not be grouped together with Blacks (Loewen 1971). Indeed, much of the narrative that is told in media and the literature is that non-white minorities are all struggling for the same limited resources like jobs, housing, and social status.

What's more, different non-white minorities have different agendas and priorities. A 2017 study by Pew Research Center found that while 88% of Black Americans feel that more needs to be done to give Black Americans equal rights, only 69% of Latinos agree (Pew Research Center 2017). The 19% disparity is notable and also indicative of larger disagreements between the two groups and other racial/ethnic groups. The same study found that although 83% of Latinos say immigrants strengthen the country, only 70% of Black respondents feel the same way.

There is agreement on some issues though. 82% of Blacks and 83% of Latinos saw affirmative action programs to be good (Pew Research Center 2017). Another issue there is

agreement on is education. 49% of Blacks and 41% of Latinos are reported to believe that there is racial discrimination in the education system (Pew Research Center 2017).

Racial/Ethnic Relations in Congress

The environment between different racial and ethnic groups in Congress is a bit different though. A study done by Rodney Hero and Robert Preuhs analyzes Roll Call votes for the 104th-108th Congresses to determine how much cohesion there is between Latino and Black Democrats and the results indicate that for the most part, there is a great deal of cohesion and like-mindedness, at least when it comes to policy (2010). The study takes scorecards from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA) and compares how well Blacks and Latinos scored.

Table 1. NAACP Ratings by Party and Racial/Ethnic Background, 104th to 108th Congresses

Congress	Member Type	Mean	Median	SD	Cases
104th (1995-1996)	Black Democrats	82.91	77.78	9.14	39
	Latino Democrats	68.69	66.67	17.79	11
	White Democrats	51.08	55.56	17.86	159
	Black Republicans	22.22	22.22	11.11	3
	Latino Republicans	16.67	16.67	7.86	2
	White Republicans	15.76	11.11	12.11	232
105th (1997-1998)	Black Democrats	96.85	100	8.18	37
	Latino Democrats	89.29	91.67	11.98	14
	White Democrats	86.88	83.33	10.21	162
	Black Republicans	25.00	25.00	11.79	2
	Latino Republicans	36.11	33.33	20.97	3
	White Republicans	17.92	16.67	14.85	226
106th (1999-2000)	Black Democrats	94.44	92.86	6.18	36
	Latino Democrats	84.82	89.29	17.86	16
	White Democrats	84.08	85.71	15.17	162
	Black Republicans	21.43	21.43	NA	1
	Latino Republicans	44.65	50.00	16.88	4
	White Republicans	32.42	28.57	14.18	221
107th (2001-2002)	Black Democrats	92.37	94	6.37	35
	Latino Democrats	93.25	94	6.44	16
	White Democrats	84.04	89	12.78	159
	Black Republicans	22	22	NA	1
	Latino Republicans	26	28	3.46	3
	White Republicans	26.62	28	6.02	211
108th (2003-2004)	Black Democrats	93.89	97	5.56	35
	Latino Democrats	91.83	93	6.58	18
	White Democrats	88.07	90	9.78	152
	Black Republicans[a]	NA	NA	NA	NA
	Latino Republicans	30.6	30	2.51	5
	White Republicans	31.91	30	6.99	225

Note: NAACP = National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Cases represent numbers of members of Congress where data were available and do not necessarily add up to 435.

a. No Black Republicans served in the 108th Congress.

Each scorecard has between 10 and 33 key votes. Table 1 is from the Hero and Preuhs study and

shows the rates that each group voted for the key policy points outlined by the NAACP

scorecard. Table 2 shows the rates that each group voted for the key policy points outlined by the

NHLA scorecard.

Table 2. NHLA Ratings by Party and Racial/Ethnic Background, 105th to 108th Congresses

Congress	Member Type	Mean	Median	SD	Cases
105th (1997-1998)	Black Democrats	92.31	96	7.38	35
	Latino Democrats	84.83	92	23.64	12
	White Democrats	83.15	83	11.84	160
	Black Republicans	20.50	20.50	17.68	2
	Latino Republicans	47.33	42	17.62	3
	White Republicans	19.05	13	15.04	223
106th (1999-2000)	Black Democrats	88	91	6.45	36
	Latino Democrats	82.81	86.50	12.19	16
	White Democrats	74.96	82	14.91	162
	Black Republicans	0	0	NA	1
	Latino Republicans	22.75	4.50	39.73	4
	White Republicans	5.50	0	8.27	221
107th (2001-2002)	Black Democrats	83.03	83.33	8.07	37
	Latino Democrats	83.68	83.33	4.74	16
	White Democrats	71.06	72.22	13.42	158
	Black Republicans	11.11	11.11	NA	1
	Latino Republicans	22.22	22.22	0.0	3
	White Republicans	12.39	11.11	7.54	222
108th (2003-2004)	Black Democrats	96.62	100	14.09	37
	Latino Democrats	99.67	100	1.41	18
	White Democrats	93.94	100	15.19	156
	Black Republicans[a]	NA	NA	NA	NA
	Latino Republicans	33	33	10.42	5
	White Republicans	19.91	17	10.63	232

Note: NHLA = National Hispanic Leadership Agenda. Cases represent numbers of members of Congress where data were available and do not necessarily add up to 435.
a. No Black Republicans served in the 108th Congress.

The tables show that Black Democrats vote in favor of Latino issues and vice versa,

particularly for the 107th and 108th Congresses where the highest disparity is only 3%. What is

especially notable is that Black Democrats voted higher than Latinos on the NHLA scorecards

for the 105th and 106th Congresses. For each Congress, there are a few key votes that are present

in both the NHLA and NAACP scorecards. The 105th had four, the 106th had three, the 107th had

five, and the 108th had 2. For these 14 key overlapping votes, Black and Latino Democrats each

voted at 100% rates.

These findings suggest that at least for the 104th-108th Congresses, Black and Latino Democrats are fairly cohesive when it comes to legislation critical to Black and Latino communities. The Hero and Preuhs study didn't examine Asian American votes in Congress partly because finding a third party legislative scorecard similar to that of the NAACP and NHLA's is near impossible. When applying these findings to the earlier discussion on caucuses, it can be postulated that the CBC, CHC, and most likely CAPAC vote as a block on issues relating to their respective racial/ethnic communities.

As great as the Hero and Preuhs study is on shedding light on race relations in Congress, the 108th Congress has not been in office for almost fifteen years. This is important because as mentioned earlier, it has only been in recent elections that Congress has found itself to be more racially and ethnically diverse. The addition of biracial and multi-ethnic members of Congress is especially of interest. Previous research has found that non-white minorities that are either Latino *or* Black are able to act cohesively in Congress, but it is still unknown how bi-racial and multi-ethnic members would behave (legislatively speaking). This mystery is the motivation behind this paper's research question and the Robert and Preuh's study informs the hypothesis.

Hypothesis

Based on the data from Tables 1 and 2, it can by hypothesized that: *If current bi-racial and multi-ethnic members of Congress are able to balance their commitment to their respective racial/ethnic communities, it will bel reflected via votes/co-sponsorships in lockstep with their respective caucuses.*

This means that an Afro-Latino or Asian/Black member of Congress will not have to break ranks with either of their respective caucuses when voting on key pieces of legislation relating to one of their communities. Figure 2 visualizes this hypothesis.

Figure 2
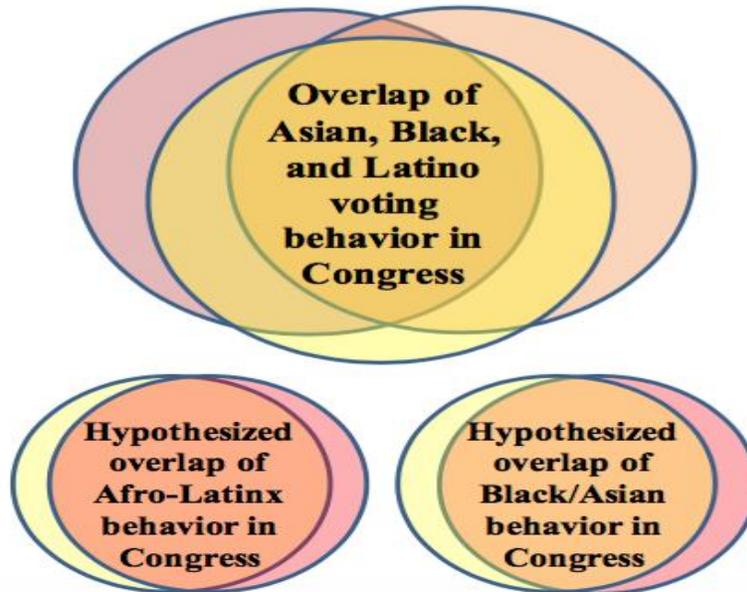
Methodology

To test this hypothesis, I will employ a research design similar to that of the Hero and Preuhs study, but with two main differences. The first main difference is that I will be focusing on the 115th Congress which was in session from 2016-2018. I'm choosing this Congress because it includes the four of the five bi-racial and multi-ethnic members of Congress that I identified earlier. Although I would have liked to analyze the current 116th Congress, there is not enough data on their votes and not enough time has passed to determine what the key pieces of legislation pertaining to racial and ethnic groups are.

The second main difference is that instead of using third-party scorecards to measure legislative behavior, I use co-sponsorships or lack of co-sponsorships of key legislation cited on

caucus websites. Between the three racial/ethnic groups, there is only one available legislative scorecard for the 115th Congress (NAACP), and so to have a baseline of support, co-sponsorships are the next best thing. Actual votes would be ideal, but the legislation cited on the caucus website only sometimes makes it to the House or Senate floor.

Each caucus in the Tri-Caucus has a website, and on the websites there are tabs that outline the priorities of the caucus and cite key pieces of legislation. It is from these sources that I create my own quasi-legislative scorecard for Latinos and Asian Americans. Below is a table of 10 key pieces of legislation critical to the Asian American community found on CAPAC's website under their task force tab.

CAPAC "Key Legislation"

H.R. 1498	H.R. 4261	H.R. 1957	H.R. 2019 S. 561	H.R. 12 S. 549	H.R. 3440 S. 11615	H.R. 1628 S. 168	H.R. 2266 S. 248	H. Res. 257	H.R. 5942 S. 3660

Of these 10 House pieces of legislation, 6 have Senate versions. This allows for at least a partial examination of how Senator Harris votes in cohesion with CAPAC.

H.R. 3440	H.R. 2266	H.R. 3671	H.R. 2451	H.R. 4548	H.R. 1516	H.R. 2911	H.R. 771	H.R. 5942	H.R. 2073

CHC "Key Legislation"

CBC "Key Legislation"

For the CBC key pieces of legislation, the NAACP provides a legislative scorecard. The scorecard has 18 Senate measures and 20 House measures (NAACP 2018). All of the measures in the three "legislative scorecards" range from civil rights, health, and education policy.

Because these are all measures from the 115th Congress, Rep. Antonio Delgado can not be analyzed, but the co-sponsorship or lack of co-sponsorship for Senator Kamala Harris, Rep. Bobby Scott, Rep. Al Green, and Rep. Adriano Espaillat can all be analyzed. If my hypothesis is true, these four members will vote at near 100% rates across both of the scorecards that pertain to them.

Results

Figure 3

Rep. Bobby Scott

Caucus	Support	Percentage Support
CAPAC Co-Sponsorships	9/10	90%
NAACP/CBC Votes	20/20	100%

Rep. Al Green

Caucus	Support	Percentage Support
CAPAC Co-Sponsorships	10/10	100*
NAACP/CBC Votes	18/18	100%

Senator Kamala Harris

Caucus	Support	Percentage Support
CAPAC Co-Sponsorships	5/6	83%
NAACP/CBC Votes	18/18	100%

Rep. Adriano Espaillat

Caucus	Support	Percentage Support
CHC Co-Sponsorships	10/10	100%
NAACP/CBC Votes	20/20	100%

Figure 3 makes it exceedingly clear that bi-racial and multi-ethnic members of Congress are able to act cohesively with each of the caucuses that they have connections to. Rep. Al Green and Rep. Adriano Espaillat each have 100% co-sponsorship rates for the key pieces of legislation outlined in the scorecards made earlier. Senator Kamala Harris and Rep. Bobby Scott each only have one piece of legislation that they chose to not co-sponsor.

Conclusion/Further Research

These findings on bi-racial/multi-ethnic members of Congress further highlight the feasibility of multi-caucus membership, and as a result, places responsibility on the caucuses to be more inclusive of who they allow in. Rep. Adriano Espaillat is just one example of someone who was barred membership because of an underdeveloped understanding of how identity can operates in office. To be fair, part of the reason Espaillat was not allowed membership was political, as he had unseated just Rep. Charles Rangel, a founding member of the CBC (Caygle 2017). However, the CBC should have never argued that the Latino agenda is not parallel enough to the African-American agenda for there to be multi-membership in the case of Espaillat. Especially considering the three CBC members who are full members of CAPAC. If those three are able to balance the two groups' agendas, there is no reason why an Afro-Latino would not be able to. Which brings me to the case of Rep. Antonio Delgado.

There is hardly any media that covered Delgado's decision to not join the CHC, and part of the reason is that his campaign did not focus much on his Puerto Rican ancestry, but rather his Black background. However, Delgado's campaign received endorsements from the Latino Victory Fund and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Bold PAC (Antonio Delgado 2018).

Furthermore, his district in New York is about 7% Latino (Antonio Delgado 2018). I called the

DC office in February about Delgado's decision to not join the CHC, but no comment was given.

I'm sure the decision came down to a combination of things, but what is certain is that there had

to be an air of *uncertainty* if he wanted to join both the CHC and the CBC considering what had

happened two years prior with Espaillat. Hopefully moving forward, the Tri-Caucus creates a

more welcoming environment for all of the future Espaillats and Delgado's. Especially

considering the fact that Congress is very likely to get more bi-racial and multi-ethnic members

and that these very same members have every right to join any caucus that they have valid

connections to.

Further Research

Further research on the subject ought to do a few things. First, it would be interesting to

see a similar research design with Delgado included. The more units of analysis in a design like

this the better, and Delgado would be a great case to study. Similarly, having a research design

like this be extended for multiple Congresses could also be more informative. The Hero and

Preuhs study examined five consecutive Congresses, so it would be interesting to see what an

extended version of this study would reveal.

Another area that future research could explore is how bi-racial and multi-ethnic officials

navigate similar caucuses at other levels of government. I mentioned earlier that some state

legislatures have racial/ethnic based caucuses, but there is limited data on caucus membership

and the backgrounds of state representatives. With more time and resources, interviews and

direct access to these legislatures could make for a larger study.

Lastly, future research in this area may benefit from waiting until NHLA puts out another

scorecard, as they don't seem to do it every year. With both the NHLA and NAACP scorecards,

actual votes can be used as a measure rather than co-sponsorships, which are not always the best way to measure support for a measure. If a third-party scorecard for the Asian-American agenda in Congress exists, I could not find it despite hours of searching, but it would also be incredibly useful.

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