

## The Multiracial Legislator (Dis)Advantage

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### **Abstract**

Numerous studies have examined whether legislators from racial minority groups are better advocates for those communities. While the two-or-more races, or multiracial, population has rapidly grown, we know little about the politics of *multiracial legislators*. How do multiracial legislators make sense of their identities? What are the implications of their presence for legislative relations? I present preliminary findings from interviews with multiracial legislators.

I thank Andra Gillespie and Molly Reynolds for helpful questions, suggestions and feedback on earlier drafts. I thank Camille Busette, Mark Hugo Lopez, Daniel Stid, and participants in the US 2050 project for thoughtful comments, questions, and conversations. I thank Neil Foley, Jennifer Cook, Jim Hollifield, and attendees of the Clements Center Monthly Noon Lecture Series for thoughtful comments and suggestions. I thank the Peterson Foundation for making this research happen. I thank Grace Reon for fantastic research assistance (transcribing interviews, stripping identifying information (including generating pseudonyms) and thoughtful insights/chats on the challenges of interview-based data collection/generation. Lastly, I thank all research participants who gave me the opportunity to learn from them and share my findings.

This working paper was made possible by the US 2050 project, supported by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

## 1. Introduction

Democracy post-2050 rests on the political representation of racial minorities. Numerous studies have examined the role of race in legislative representation (e.g., Brown 2014a, Casellas 2011; Grose 2011, Rouse 2013,2016; Swain 1993), but we know little about multiracial legislators, or legislators identified with two-or-more races. Yet with increasing intermarriage (Wang 2012), the growing multiracial population (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a), and more complex ways of understanding racial identity (Masuoka 2017; Davenport 2018), the multiracial population is poised to play a larger role in representational politics. How do multiracial legislators draw linkages between their racial backgrounds, their identities, and their work as legislators?

Previous work suggests that multiracial legislators, especially those who are racially ambiguous, may choose their identities, and in turn, this choice appears to inform their politics (Lemi 2018). This study extends previous work to explore how multiracial identity works in legislative contexts beyond that sample. I conducted interviews with legislators across the country between July – December 2018. 15 of these interviews were with offices represented by multiracial legislators. I present very preliminary findings from interviews with multiracial legislators.<sup>1</sup> The findings suggest that multiracial legislators face advantages and disadvantages. I discuss the implications of these findings for representation in 2050.

## 2. Who counts as “multiracial”?

One challenge with identifying whether multiracial identity is consequential for politics is locating the relevant point of admixture—if someone had interracial great-grandparents, does it even matter that they have multiracial ancestry?<sup>2</sup> In this report, I define multiracial legislators as those who reported multiracial ancestry—whether through parentage or grand-parentage and

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<sup>1</sup> Data collection and analysis is ongoing.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Andra Gillespie for raising this question.

beyond. While this definition may lump together individuals who have distinct processes of political socialization (e.g. Davenport 2016), casting a broader definition offers the opportunity to explore narratives of those with interracial parentage or grand-parentage.

### **3. Multiracial Legislators**

Previous work on multiracial state legislators suggests that multiracial legislators choose their identities, and that this choice has ramifications for relationships in the legislature (Lemi 2018). The patterns appeared consistent with what we might expect when there are so few multiracial legislators (Kanter 1977). While most work on minority legislators tends to assume legislators identify as persons of color, in theory, multiracial legislators may select any identity they wish. In Lemi (2018), multiracial legislators with White parentage tended to think of themselves as persons of color, while those with dual minority backgrounds had the advantage of joining multiple racial caucuses. Multiracial legislators seemingly chose their identities, and it appeared that this choice in identity explained the link between their race and their self-expressed politics. Additionally, there were differences between multiracials in their ability to assert their identities. Multiracial-Black legislators encountered obstacles to asserting their identities, largely because their phenotype confused others. In what follows, I expand previous work to explore multiracial identity beyond the sample in Lemi (2018).

### **4. Data and Method**

The goal of this study was to explore whether the findings in Lemi (2018) generalized beyond that sample and nationwide. In Lemi (2018), the goal was to maximize variation in race and potential identity by comparing multiracials and monoracials for a more precise understanding of the link between race and representation. As such, this study initially used a most-similar-case design in which multiracials and monoracials were matched along gender, race, party, and district racial composition (Gerring, 2007), and the goal was to obtain a racially diverse sample with regional variation. Implementing the most-similar cases design across states

quickly became a challenge with legislators' schedules and the composition of legislatures around the country. Thus, for now, I focus my findings on those who were multiracial, either through parentage or earlier generations.

I report preliminary findings from offices represented by multiracial state officials. Multiracial officials were located using third-party lists and webpages, and recruited via email and phone. In-depth interviews were conducted in-person and by phone. Snowball sampling was used to locate additional multiracial interviewees. Interviewees were promised confidentiality, and the identifiers used in this report are necessarily vague to protect participants.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Findings

I explore two themes related to identity socialization and legislators' views of their jobs: familial socialization (e.g. Davenport 2016) and linked fate (e.g. Tyson 2016).

### 5.1 Making Sense of Identity

#### *Familial Socialization*

Some legislators learned their identities from family members, specifically parents and grandparents. Familial socialization tended to differ by the race of each legislator, where multiracial-Black and multiracial-Indigenous legislators' family members made conscious efforts to instill specific identities into their children. For example, Representative Locke, who is multiracial-Black, learned from their parents the importance of recognizing who they were. Locke learned about race from their parents as a young child:

*they wanted me to [be] confident and prepared, and they always, um, told me, you know, 'People are going to try to put you in a box,' and so when you're biracial you often get that question of, 'Well what do you identify as?'...I was raised with both cultures, and also, I'm not going to deny*

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<sup>3</sup> As such, I do not specify ethnic groups. All legislators with indigenous ancestry are referred to as "Indigenous" to mask identities. Words in brackets indicate changes to direct quotes.

*a parent, or half of my own culture or identity just because that's kind of what makes other people more comfortable.*

Locke's language of “*deny[ing] a parent*” is consistent with the rhetoric advanced by activists of the Multiracial Category Movement in the 1990s (Williams 2005; 2006,2008). The idea was that demographic measures resulted in multiracial people “being forced to choose one parent and deny the other” (Williams 2005, 55; Williams 2006,2008 Chapters 3-4). Placed within the larger discourse of identity and the one-drop-rule (Davis 1991; Daniel 2001), it is significant that this legislator's parents socialized them to reject being socially forced to identify with just one category.

Representative Rios's grandfather was formative in instilling a salient Indigenous identity into Rios. Rios described their grandfather as someone who

*very much cherished his [Indigenous] heritage and it was extremely important to him that all of his kids be enrolled into the tribe. And that's not a simple task. You don't get it at birth right? You have to lay it all out, all kinds of stuff. So as a consequence, because of his strong hand on the family, that got imprinted pretty strongly on me.*

Rios's story about learning the importance of formally enrolling into a tribe illustrates a larger “ethnic renewal” among those with Indigenous ancestry (Nagel 1995, 950).

By contrast, other legislators tended not to focus on the role of family members in instilling specific identities. Some drew attention to class issues. For instance, when asked about how they identify, Representative Solano, who is Asian and Hispanic, identified with a non-racial category. When asked about their racial identity, they simply said, “*Both. [Interviewer: Why?] Because that's what I am.*” As our conversation progressed, Solano described their grandmother working as a custodian and needing to take public transit to run errands. Solano described their grandfather as an agricultural worker who persevered through discrimination without feeling “*resentful.*” For Solano, the classed experiences of their grandparents informed

their focus on “*improv[ing] the community [they] live in.*” Throughout our conversation, Solano put minimal emphasis on their race or racial identity, and issues of ‘picking a side’ did not appear to be salient.

### *Linked Fate*

A striking finding in the literature on multiracial identity is that combinations matter for how individuals process their identities and experience race, where multiracial-Black people have specific experiences with discrimination and the social freedom to select their identities (e.g. Lee and Bean 2010, Chapters 6-7). In these interviews, the multiracial legislator experience differed across combinations, where some expressed a sense of linked fate (Dawson 1994,1995), or the belief that their individual destinies were tied to the rest of their racial groups. For legislators with multiracial-Indigenous ancestry, this was rooted in a recognition of the importance of resisting erasure by the state, through personal actions and through policy. For multiracial-Black legislators, this was rooted in solidarity with Black people and an understanding of the group struggles Black people in America face.

Representative Castillo, who had Indigenous ancestry, was clear about where their politics stood: “*In this building, uh, all my colleagues understand that uh, you know if— if it's gonna be— if it's a decision between [Indigenous people] and [non-Indigenous people], they know where I'm gonna be.*” Furthermore, Rep. Castillo was blunt when describing how people “*know [they are Indigenous]*”: “*I tell them. [Interviewer: Mm-hm.] And I vote that way. And we create legislation that way.*” That this legislator’s response was “*I tell them,*” rather than “it’s obvious,” or “because of how I look,” for example, indicates a recognition that their phenotype is racially ambiguous. During our interview, the representative discussed Indigenous politics in the state, showing the importance of Indigenous issues to them as a person and a legislator.

Representative Rios described the importance of making themselves ‘count’ as an Indigenous person when they were younger. This decision was prompted by the inability to identify as multiracial on demographic forms and due to the perception of having a closer

“*connection*” to their Indigenous ancestry through parentage. As such, Rios would identify as Indigenous on demographic forms: “...*I felt like that was the most marginalized group and that maybe they could use an extra number...*” While Rios would eventually “*become much more comfortable to honor and reflect and acknowledge*” their entire background, the choice to identify as Indigenous for the explicit purpose of boosting Indigenous counts represents an act of political linked fate.

The stigma attached to interracial unions involving a Black spouse was salient to some multiracial-Black legislators. For example, Representative Locke described the obstacles their parents faced to their union: “...*my mother was disowned when she married my dad. And so that was a reality that we knew of growing up my whole life that because my mother had married someone of a different race, that the consequence was that she lost most of her family over it, including her own mother...*” While Locke understood “*a certain privilege to being biracial*” they noted that, “*I also still face the exact same bigotry and racism, and uh, discrimination that anybody of color would.*” By that they meant: “*Just anyone that would be considered Black.*” Despite growing up in an interracial household and recognizing both heritages, Locke recognized that they were still subjected to anti-Black racism as a Black person in America, illustrating a sense of linked fate with Black people.

Again, by contrast, non-Indigenous and non-Black multiracial legislators tended not to describe their identities in terms of linked fate. Representative Woolf, for instance, has White and Asian ancestry. Woolf understood their identity from the perspective of *reflected appraisals*—how we view ourselves depends on how others view us and how we think we fit in with others (Khanna 2004). Woolf described identifying more with their Asian ethnic group because of their phenotype and because they grew up with other co-ethnics. Woolf indicated they saw themselves as more phenotypically Asian, and suggested that in contexts with more Asians, “*people will say, 'You don't look very Asian.'* But in [contexts with fewer Asians], *people will say, 'You look very Asian.'*” Unlike Rios and Locke, Woolf's identity formation appeared to be a largely sociological process disconnected from larger group politics (e.g. Lee and Bean 2010).

## 5.2 The Multiracial Advantage

Multiracial legislators, specifically those with ambiguous phenotypes and who belong to multiple minority groups, may enjoy the advantage of selectively highlighting specific identities at opportune moments and leveraging their backgrounds for tangible political gains through a legislature's “diversity infrastructure,” or the minority caucuses (Minta and Sinclair-Chapman 2013). That these legislators can do this at all distinguishes them from legislators who are not racially ambiguous—they tacitly benefit from various constituents claiming them as a descriptive representative (e.g. Brown 2014b).

### *Highlighting Identities*

At times, political strategy factored into the choice of sharing specific identities at opportune moments. When talking about the role of race in their campaign, Representative Yates described the importance of ethnic outreach in their district. Within this context, this legislator also showcased their specific backgrounds when it was strategic:

*I'm also [ethnic group] and I represent [ethnic enclave], so when I, you know I go to [ethnic enclave], I make sure I hark that a little bit extra...they might see me and might think I'm [ethnic group], but if I let them know, you know, it just opens up doors. I don't know if it's a direct advantage, but at least they might be a little more friendly to me knowing that I'm [ethnic group].*

For this legislator, reading the social and political context and disclosing identities accordingly was an important aspect of making sure co-ethnics knew they were 'one of' them. That this legislator felt they had to “*make sure*” they disclosed their co-ethnic background indicates awareness that their group membership may not be obvious to the rest of the ethnic group.

In other cases, disclosing one's race was less explicit. For example, Representative



Hudson, shared how in the past, they had to find ways to disclose their background to co-racial voters because people do not always know it. Rep. Hudson noted that they would disclose family histories and traditions, as a way of communicating, *“we share this.”* By referencing various aspects of family and culture, this legislator, prior to even being elected, cultivated a strategy of building community with co-racial voters who might otherwise not view them as a group member.

### *Bridging Groups*

Multiracial legislators may be afforded greater political and legislative presence because of the different ‘identity doors’ their backgrounds give them. Because they can join multiple identity caucuses in any given legislature, they may have *“a running start to get [their] bills passed.”* Thus, having the ability to lay claim to multiple identity caucuses may grant multiracial legislators greater power for advocating for their constituents through policy.

The advantages extend to the national level as well, even to those for whom identity is not salient. For instance, Representative Solano said that they were *“not obsessed about [their] ethnic background,”* but when asked about the circumstances under which they perceived an advantage, highlighted that being both Asian and Hispanic gives them the opportunity to join *“different conferences and different activities”* that cater to politicians from specific groups. In sum, multiracial identification within legislative settings has the potential to create interpersonal obstacles while simultaneously giving multiracial legislators greater leverage to pass their bills.

## **5.3 The Multiracial Disadvantage**

### *Interpersonal Challenges*

Some interviewees reported interpersonal challenges within the legislature that manifested in perceived questions of loyalty and group belonging. For example, when one can join multiple identity caucuses, doing so may create confusion from caucus members who wonder about one's loyalty between the caucuses. Some suggested this may be magnified in

debates on contentious issues where the multiracial legislator is figuratively torn between the preferences of multiple racial caucuses. Furthermore, multiracial legislators, particularly those who do not ‘look’ whatever it is they are, may grapple with their identities not being accepted by others (e.g. Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002). For instance, some legislators may feel they must remind others that they are indeed a member of a particular group when one's phenotype reads otherwise to outsiders. Thus, within the legislature, much like in everyday life, identity is a multidimensional process—one may identify any way they wish, but others may not view them as a member of a given group (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002; Khanna 2004).

## 6. Implications for U.S. 2050

These findings raise new questions about the implications of increasing diversity for American democracy. By 2050, the Census Bureau estimates that the two-or-more races population will make up about 5% of the American population, about 10% of which will be under 18 (U.S. Census Bureau 2018b). This population is part of our future leadership. The preliminary findings from this report suggest that multiracial identification complicates political representation for minority groups from two vantage points: internally and externally.

First, to the extent that multiracial legislators are rare (Kanter 1977), multiracial identification within the legislature may raise questions about group loyalty and belonging. While the evidence thus far does not speak to *legislative* implications, such that multiracial legislators face challenges passing their bills, some of the evidence thus far *does* suggest that multiracial identification complicates interpersonal relationships. Although seemingly tangential to the legislative process, as others have shown, interpersonal relationships are critical (e.g. Brown 2014b, Caldeira and Patterson 1987, Tyson 2016). This suggests that as multiracial legislators remain rare (Kanter 1977), their presence within the legislature may be confusing for other legislators. While this is unlikely to undermine substantive representation (Grose 2011), there may be instances in which some multiracials may feel forced to ‘choose’ a side. While the

multiracial population will be larger in 2050 than today, unless multiracials are electorally successful enough to cross that threshold, these interpersonal challenges may persist.

Second, externally, in terms of *inter*-group cooperation and national representation, multiracial legislators may ultimately “stand” for many (Pitkin 1967, Chapters 4-5). As the narratives show, multiracial legislators may capitalize on their identities by gaining membership to multiple racial caucuses within the legislature. Multiracial legislators may have the opportunity to bridge multiple racial groups to pass legislation to serve communities of color while tacitly benefiting from racial ambiguity. Nationally, this suggests that multiracial politicians may use their identities as a resource to expand their political influence as individuals, building larger racial networks and putting their constituents' interests on the national agenda along the way (e.g. Clark and Little 2002, 42-43). Although legislative bodies such as Congress become more diverse with each passing year, the continued relative underrepresentation of communities of color suggests that multiracials will have the opportunity to capitalize on their backgrounds and “stand” for many for the foreseeable future. Given these findings, I contend that as the multiracial population grows, we must rethink how we conceptualize what constitutes a *descriptive* representative and open a conversation on *identity* representatives. By 2050, when a representative lacks shared descriptive characteristics with a group, perhaps what will matter most to the representation of minority interests and the benefits thought to result from descriptive representation will be shared *identity*, *not* shared *descriptive characteristics* (Mansbridge 1999, 629).

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