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## A Case of Access Denied? Gender, Race and Legislative Influence

### Abstract

*The increasing number of African American women elected to state legislatures coupled with the transferring of power back to the states necessitates an increased focus on the legislative experiences of African American women state legislators. Based on in-depth interviews of African American women in three state legislatures--Georgia, Maryland and Mississippi, this paper chronicles the experiences of African American women as they attempt to translate their policy preferences into legislative realities. Specifically, I consider whether African American women have garnered institutional power in these states and whether or not their colleagues view them as influential actors in the legislature. The findings suggest that context matters most in determining if African American women can garner institutional influence.*

### **Introduction**

Legislative scholars, while differing in their approaches to identifying the influential among legislators conclude that certain institutional attributes contribute more to a legislator's influence than do others. For example, those who are influential in legislatures have commonly been identified according to the positions they hold within the institution (Bell and Price, 1975; Hamm, et. al., 1983; Meyer, 1980), their legislative activity (Matthews, 1960; Frantzich, 1979), and according to their reputations among their peers (Francis, 1962; Best, 1971; Haynie, 2001; 2002). In interviews with state legislators in three states, I find that legislators identified several factors contributing to a legislator's influence, including character traits, legislative activity, and holding institutional positions of power in the legislature. And, in this regard, the legislators' definitions affirm the existing literature on legislative influence.

However, in examining their evaluations of their colleagues in the legislature, it is evident that other attributes also are important in determining influence in the legislature. In this paper, I focus on an examination of not only legislators' definitions of influence, but also I examine the attributes of those they perceive as influential in their state legislatures. According to my findings, in addition to holding institutional positions of power, being legislatively active, and being senior members in the institution there are additional factors that impact whether or not legislators are regarded as influential among their peers.

The data suggests that a legislator's gender and race also play significant roles in determining whether they are regarded as influential members of their legislature. Data collected from interviews of legislators serving in the Georgia, Maryland and Mississippi legislatures suggest that gender and race act as mediating factors negatively impacting legislators' evaluations of one another's influence. For African American women, influence appears at first glance to be beyond their reach because they lack the leadership positions that their colleagues link to influence. Yet, upon closer examination, the data show that African American women's lack of influence is linked to their denied access to the informal circles of power within the legislature. Further, my findings indicate that the legislative context plays an important role in whether or not African American women wield any influence at all among their peers. Among other contextual factors, the level of legislative professionalization impacts the prospects of African American women being regarded as influential among their peers in the legislature.

These findings echo those of Haynie (2002) who finds that African American legislators were not considered effective by their peers, even when holding formal positions of power. For African American women in this study, their limited access to the informal circles of power-- which contributes to their inability to garner influence among their peers-- illustrates the extent to which state legislatures remain not only gendered but also racialized institutions that adhere to the gender and racial norms and preferences that African American women defy by their very existence.

### **Existing Literature and Hypotheses**

As the numbers of African Americans have increased in state legislatures, there has been an increased emphasis in evaluating their activities as legislators. Scholars have examined their committee assignments (Friedman, 1996; Orey, 2000), the types of legislation they introduce (Barrett, 1995; Miller, 1990), and their success in navigating legislation through the process (Bratton and Haynie, 1999; Hamm, Harmel, and Thompson, 1983; Menefield, Shaffer and Jones, 2000). Most studies of these legislators have sought to determine whether these legislators make a difference once they are elected to office. Few studies have focused on how the legislative institution has responded to these new entrants. The ability of these legislators to make a difference for their constituents is connected to their abilities to establish themselves as effective, influential legislators.

Questions regarding influence among members of legislative bodies have long been a central point of inquiry in the study of legislative institutions. These studies have indicated that legislators who hold leadership positions are typically more influential in the institution (Best, 1971; Bell and Price, 1975; Hamm, et. al., 1983 and Meyer, 1980). Likewise, those legislators who have an established track record of getting legislation passed have also been denoted as the most influential (Frantzich, 1979; Matthews, 1960). These studies laid important groundwork for understanding how influence operates in legislative institutions, but the findings of these studies are based on legislatures that were largely homogeneous institutions. As Moncrief, Thompson and Kurtz (1996) conclude, the state legislature of today is quite different from its early days and its increased diversity has significantly changed the operations of the institution.

Revisiting questions regarding legislative influence in light of the increased diversity of these institutions has contributed new understandings about influence and has produced new knowledge concerning the experiences of women and people of color once they are elected to the legislature. For example, Haynie (2001, 2002) finds that race plays a significant role in determining legislative influence, finding that legislators, lobbyists and journalists consistently ranked African American legislators as less effective than their white peers regardless of their membership on prestigious committees, seniority, profession outside of the legislature, or leadership position, which are all attributes traditionally associated with effectiveness in the legislature. In addition, Blair and Stanley (1991) examine perceptions of power among legislators determining that gender makes a difference in determining legislative influence.

While these studies have added to our understandings of influence in light of increased diversity in the legislature, we have no knowledge of how the intersection of race *and* gender impact perceptions of influence. In that these studies focused on influence across the institution, we have little knowledge as to whether these legislators exert influence in specific policy arenas,

particularly those in which they have placed the bulk of their legislative energies. Previous studies of legislative influence conclude that there are different types of influence legislators can wield in the institution (Best, 1971; Francis, 1962). Legislators can essentially be either influential in a specific policy area or they can wield influence across the institution. Francis concludes that area influence precedes general influence (Francis, 1962). Yet, Best comes to an opposing conclusion, finding that those influential in specific policy areas were much less likely to be perceived also as generally influential. Instead, those who were generally influential were much more likely to be regarded as influential in specific policy areas. Hence, Best concludes that legislators' influence goes in one direction from impacting the policy agenda across issue areas to impacting policy in specific areas (Best, 1971). His conclusions support the argument that general influence is a more favorable commodity because it can be transferred to specific policy areas, but influence in a specific policy area does not necessarily translate into influence across issue areas.

Having influence in a specific policy area is the equivalent of providing technical competence which is quite different from being generally influential across policy areas, which is more likely to result in genuine institutional power. The literature suggests that women legislators are less likely to garner the type of power that would make them revered throughout the institution. A woman legislator interviewed by Blair and Stanley (1991) begins to point to the differences between being generally influential and having influence in specific policy areas. In terms of her own legislative effectiveness, she asserts *"It's a philosophy of issue versus process; being effective in the process as opposed to being effective on an issue. Now I consider myself effective on the issues, on my issues, but I don't consider myself totally effective in the process."* The authors assert that women legislators had not yet become influential to the extent that they are capable of influencing the process of legislating. I expect that the same will be true for African American women in this study (Blair and Stanley, 1991). Given the findings of previous studies, African American women are more likely to be regarded as capable of providing technical expertise in policy areas in which they have had some prior experience. I expect that their technical competence will not translate into their being regarded as influential across policy areas, which is also more likely to translate into genuine institutional power.

### **Data and Methodology**

The data and findings presented in this paper are drawn from a larger project in which I seek to determine the impact of gender and race on legislative influence. I pursued this analysis using data from a national survey of African American women state legislators and case studies in three state legislatures-- Georgia, Maryland and Mississippi. The analysis discussed in this paper is based upon the case study data.

The case studies were used to uncover subtleties concerning the effects of gender and race that could not be easily understood or revealed using survey methodology. In the case studies, I approached African American women's influence from the perspective of their colleagues. While the focus of my analysis is African American women's influence, the data is inclusive of all the members' perceived influence.

During the 2000 legislative session, I conducted 94 semi-structured interviews with members of the three state legislatures, including interviews with most of the African American

women serving.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the African American women legislators, I also interviewed a purposive sample of their colleagues based on gender, race, and seniority rankings similar to the African American women in the legislature

A portion of the semi-structured interviews followed the format of Francis (1962) and Best's (1971) studies of legislative influence in which they asked respondents to identify the most influential legislators in the institution. Further following their approach, I also instructed legislators to identify the most influential legislators in particular policy areas. Legislators were asked to identify those who were influential in the policy areas in which African American women consider themselves experts-- education, healthcare and healthcare reform, economic development and employment, children's issues, and women's issues.<sup>2</sup> Legislators defined for themselves the legislation included in these policy areas. I did not instruct them to focus on specific pieces of legislation, but instead directed them to more generally consider their most influential colleagues in these policy areas, more broadly defined. This process prompted legislators to look beyond the success or failures of one piece of legislation and encouraged them instead to consider a range of legislative initiatives that encompassed more than actual introduction and passage of legislation. Most importantly, this research design enabled me to explore not only whether African American women are influential or not, but it also allowed me to explore whether they are influential in areas that they have defined as significant to their legislative agendas.

### **Findings: General Influence**

Just as Best concluded in the decades ago, general influence continues to be concentrated in the hands of only a few members of the legislature (Best, 1971). It is also the case that those considered generally influential were also perceived as influential in specific policy areas, but not vice versa. Those legislators, who were perceived as influential in specific policy areas were less likely to be considered generally influential, which also mirrors Best's conclusions.

The few legislators regarded as generally influential, with influence across policy areas, *held formal leadership positions* for the most part. A Maryland legislator offers a summation of those who are considered generally influence that is applicable to all three states' legislatures. He conveys,

Of the 141 members in House of Delegates less than 10 percent are truly influential. Those 10 percent consist primarily of leadership, standing committee chairs, the Speaker, the majority leader, the Speaker pro-tem, and some committee chairs. Those are the only ones who have the real influence over the macro agenda.

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1 I conducted the largest number of interviews in Maryland (n=37) followed by Mississippi (n=29) and Georgia (n=28). In Maryland, I conducted interviews with 85% of the African American women (n=13) and 90% of the African American women in Mississippi (n=10).  
2 In Edith Barrett's work on African American women's policy priorities, she finds that African American women's priority issues include education, health care and health care reform, and economic and employment issues. In this larger project, I also find these issues to be among their top priority issues as well as children and women's issues.

Whether legislators agreed or disagreed with the policy positions of certain members, they nevertheless acknowledged their influence in the institution. One legislator finds that the leadership's desires are fulfilled no matter what. He contends, "*If leadership decides that something is going to be done, one way or another it happens. That's the way it normally works.*" What makes this highly problematic is that this concentration of power and influence is not reflective of the legislatures' diversity. Though some African American men have gained entry into these circles of influence, the absence of women from these power circles is keenly visible.

Table One shows the distribution of leadership positions in the three state legislatures during the 2000 legislative session. In each of these legislatures, white men held the majority of the party leadership positions while African American women held few party leadership positions in each legislature. For example, only one African American woman held a party leadership position in the Maryland House of Delegates while there were none holding party leadership positions in the Maryland State Senate. In addition to holding few party leadership positions, the few positions African American women held were in the lower tier of the leadership structure. In the Georgia House of Representatives, for example, an African American woman was the secretary of the majority caucus, and in the Georgia Senate the one party position held by an African American woman was that of assistant to the administrative floor leader. The positions held by African American women in the party structure of these legislatures are not traditionally regarded as highly influential positions.

#### The Upper Tier of Influence: Formal Institutional Leaders

Holding formal leadership positions are the key to being regarded as generally influential in all three legislatures, though the positions conferring influence differ in each state legislature. In Maryland, all the members considered the Speaker of the House, President of the Senate and the majority leaders to be influential across policy areas. Maryland legislators did not regard other party leaders as generally influential. According to one Maryland legislator,

Influence is not being a subcommittee chair or it's not being a whip, a deputy whip, or a deputy, deputy, whip, which we do a lot of down here. The reason I say that is not influence is because frequently, in getting an assignment like that, legislators make a commitment that --at least on important calls-- they will go along with the Speaker and the President.

During his sixth term in office, Maryland Speaker of the House, Casper Taylor expanded the party leadership structure to include more members in the organized leadership and added subcommittees to the committee structure, which created even more coveted positions in the leadership hierarchy. Members perceived that Taylor's reason for including more members in the leadership structure was to decrease the likelihood that they would go against his leadership. According to Delegate Mike Busch, chairman of the Economic Matters Committee in the House, "More people are invested in the system, and as a result they respond" (Waldron, T. and Dresser, D. January 16, 2000). Though Speaker Taylor expanded the leadership structure to include more members, it appears that very little institutional prestige or influence is afforded to the members in these expanded leadership positions. While Maryland's leadership structure offers the

appearance of a more expanded distribution of power the opposite appears to be true according to the legislators. Maryland legislators contend that the extensive leadership structure serves to only solidify the influence of the Speaker. As one legislator concludes, “*When they [the leadership] want something, they normally get what they want because they have created all these layers of leadership, so they can get the votes.*” As discussed previously, African American women hold positions at this lower level of legislative leadership in Maryland.

In Georgia, legislators included all the party leadership as influential across the institution. In fact, most legislators were content to divulge *only* the names of those in the party leadership position as the most influential. Again, according to one legislator in Georgia, “*I guess we are just disciplined to follow the leadership,*” she remarked after realizing that she only considered those in top leadership as influential in the statehouse. Mississippi’s absence of a strong party system or party competition allowed legislators to be more varied in terms of who they considered to be the most generally influential members of the legislature. While Mississippi legislators were consistent in their feelings about the influence of the Speaker and the Lieutenant Governor, there was more variation in the other members they also considered to be influential members.

#### The Second Tier of General Influence: Committee Chairs

Those legislators in the top party leadership positions are without question considered to be the most influential in the process across policy areas. Legislators were also likely to consider committee chairs as generally influential; however, the power of the committee chairs varied from one institution to the next. In Maryland, the small number of committees extends more power to all committee chairs, and as a result most legislators considered *all* committee chairs generally influential. As a result, committee chairs in Maryland are afforded more institutional prestige and are regarded as more influential than legislators holding party leadership positions. However, in Georgia and Mississippi, influence works quite differently, with so many committees and committee chairs, not all committee chairs are considered influential.

In all three legislatures, legislators considered the chairs of the money committees influential across issue areas. Those chairing the money committees carry extraordinary amounts of general influence, and as one Mississippi legislator concludes,

If you’re the Appropriations Chairman you control how much bond indebtedness the state incurs and for what projects. So, the money makes you the most powerful. Who controls the gold makes the rule. That’s the golden rule down here.

As is the case with party leadership positions, white men held the majority of committee leadership positions. As shown in Table Two, for example, in Maryland, there were no African American women serving as a committee chair. In Georgia and Mississippi, African American women served as committee chairs; however they did not chair committees typically regarded as the most influential committees. In Mississippi, it is of note that for the first time in the state’s history, an African American woman is chairing one of the Senate’s major committees--the Senate Education Committee, which is the first for an African American legislator in the Mississippi Senate.



### The Secret Powerhouse: The Informal Leadership Team

Aside from influence being bestowed upon legislators as a result of their formal leadership positions, informal leadership structures exist that have become institutionalized norms. These informal leadership structures are more pronounced norms in Georgia and Mississippi than in Maryland. In Mississippi, the group of legislators who was considered influential across policy areas was also assumed to be members of the top leaders' leadership team. In Georgia, a similar situation emerges; however, the size of the formal leadership appeared to have an impact and prompted legislators to mostly consider members of the formal leadership as influential. Nevertheless, in Georgia, it was also evident that two tiers of leadership exist. Legislators included members in formal leadership positions as well as a smaller group consisting of the top leaders' *selected* leadership team as the most influential members across policy areas.

In addition to the official leadership of the Georgia and Mississippi legislatures, these additional groups operating within the legislature serve as a final decision making group within the legislature. The leadership teams surrounding the top legislative leaders are another legislative power structure, and in Georgia and Mississippi these members have immense power. In Georgia, this group is referred to as the "Green Door" alluding to the fact that this group has the power to determine what legislation continues on the path to becoming law. Similarly, in Mississippi, the group holding this same function is referred to as the "Go Team" and holds the confidence of the House and Senate leadership. The formal leadership heads these groups and members are beholden unto those top party leaders. Most often, members are comprised of committee chairs; however, not every committee chair is included, only a select group of committee chairs. In Mississippi for example, legislators identified members of the "Go Team" as the chairs of the money committees and several additional of the most senior members. These "Go Team" members also are known to have been supporters and backers of the Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the House's election bids.

The "Green Door" and the "Go Team" are not official groups in these legislatures in that they are not acknowledged according to any of the official documents of the institution, but are nevertheless a key factor in the legislative process. What is most interesting about these groups is the extent to which they operate as not only elite, but also clandestine groups. In Georgia, the group has been described as "an elite and secretive cadre of about a dozen leading Democrats who do the real work of finalizing state budgets and setting the agenda" (Nurse, February 18, 1999). Their anonymity precludes them from being held accountable by other legislators. In 1999, in response to the Georgia House passing an open records and open meetings bill that applied only to local governments, Representative James Mills launched a campaign retaliating against this institutional norm, by proposing that the Green Door's meetings be open to all members wanting to attend (Nurse, February 18, 1999).

Much like the infamous "Board of Education," operating in Congress prior to the reforms of the 1970s, the "Green Door" and the "Go Team" are institutional entities that are afforded power through the traditional norms governing the institution as opposed to the institution's official rules. They operate to manage the flow of legislation in these legislatures. According to an article appearing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, the Green Door Committee is "probably one of

the most powerful collection of politicians in the state” and “decides what millions go into the state budget and what millions get cut” (Powell, March 28, 2000). Legislators are included in these groups by invitation only, and those who are not members speculate as to who actually constitutes the group’s membership. While it is speculative as to which legislators hold membership in these circles, it is unquestionable that they are an influential group that holds the fate of much legislation, and legislators are quite cognizant of their influence. As one Mississippi legislator describes,

The way the process works, if you are one of the big boys--on the Go Team is what we call it-- you are going to have influence on just about anything. Basically, four legislators run this place because they have a lot of say.

When asked how these legislators acquired that type of influence, the legislator went on to say that they supported the Lieutenant Governor’s campaign and that they fit a “psychological and political profile” that was appealing to the legislature’s formal leaders, even though their actual political party affiliations varied. The legislator felt that their status as “white southern gentlemen” aided them in securing such influence in the institution.

Some legislators in official leadership roles are members of the “Go Team” and the “Green Door”; however, legislators are not afforded membership in these groups by virtue of their leadership positions alone. Not every legislative leader and committee chair is included in these groups. Membership is not based on formal institutional position, but instead other characteristics afford them membership, which makes inclusion subjective in its mildest description.

In the case of Georgia and Mississippi, influence is further complicated by the nature of committee chair selection. Legislators are able to become institutions unto themselves as a result of the committee chair selection process. In Georgia, once a committee chair is appointed to chair a committee, it is customary that they serve as the chair of that committee as long as they are continuously elected to the legislature (Fleischmann & Pierannunzi, 1997, 147). This allows legislators to cultivate one specialty area of expertise on the issues their committee typically addresses. It also has the effect of closing the field of legislators who can garner influence in these areas.

Committee chairs in Mississippi are appointed to serve only one four- year term as chair of a particular committee, and are not appointed for consecutive terms, though they often chair the same committees multiple non -consecutive terms. For example, three senators appointed to chair major committees in the Senate during the 2000, session had chaired those same committees in prior legislative sessions (Elliott, January 13, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Further, the same legislators rotate through the major committee assignments allowing them to surmount legislative expertise on a number of issues because they have chaired multiple major committees dealing with various

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<sup>3</sup> These include: Jack Gordon, Chair of Appropriations who chaired that committee from 1988-1992 and Bill Minor, Finance Chair who chaired that committee from 1992-1996, and Robert “Bunky” Huggins chair of Public Health and Welfare who chaired the committee from 1988-1992.

policy areas. These two factors surrounding committee chair appointments greatly impacts which members are considered generally influential and maintains a small, select group as those with the greatest influence in the institution.

### **General Influence and African American Women Legislators: A Question of Access**

Though some African American women have moved into select leadership roles and are chairing a few committees, they still have not secured membership among the elite group of legislators who engage in the final legislative decision-making. When asked about their relationship with those in the top leadership positions, African American women in Georgia and Mississippi cast their remarks in terms of their exclusion from the leaderships' inner circles, which they also considered to be synonymous with these groups.

While nearly all of the African American women interviewed considered themselves to have a good relationship with those in the top leadership posts of their respective chambers, all acknowledged that despite good working relationships, they were not a part of these inner most groups where many significant decisions are made. As one African American woman legislator remarked,

I am included on some things, but I know that I'm not included on a lot. I'm not involved in the power meetings, not on every level. Though I chair a committee, I am not a member of the team that makes the final decisions on budget items.

Even in moving into the formal leadership, African American women describe that there are times in which they are excluded from some circles of decision making. As one African American woman details, there are often leadership meetings that are just a function of formality and it is evident that the meeting in which she is participating is not being held to make real decisions. She relates,

I'm one of the individuals that the Speaker meets with weekly on the basis of my committee leadership. But, sometimes I really think that some meetings are held before the meeting. Some meetings are held the night before or the week before. We can tell that the meeting has already occurred because some decisions have already been made. So, it does make a difference when you're on that committee, you at least have an opportunity to voice your opinion about certain things, even if the decision seems final.

In Maryland, the leadership team under Senate President, Mike Miller is a much larger, less select group than exists in either chamber of the other two states. Miller's reputation is that of consensus builder, and he is known to employ a large legislative leadership team and on many decisions, he is known to bring in additional members as a way of solidifying consensus (Rosenthal, 1998, 273). Likewise in the Maryland House, the leadership team is larger than those in the other two states are, which again avoids the cloud of secrecy associated with the leadership teams in Georgia and Mississippi.

It is evident that the concentration of power in the hands of only a very few legislators is a result of these institutional norms perpetuated by the top leaders in Georgia and Mississippi. The legislators interviewed did not mention an African American woman as a member of one of the highly selective circles surrounding the top legislative leaders in Georgia or in Mississippi, nor did they consider themselves among this group. While it is very difficult to definitively conclude that their exclusion is a direct result of gender and race bias, it is however, unquestionable that their influence has been compromised as a result of not gaining this level of access to power.

### **Issue Specific Influence**

During the interviews, legislators were also asked to identify their peers whom they consider influential in specific policy areas-- education, healthcare and healthcare reform, economic development and employment, women's issues, and children's issues-- all of which correspond with African American women's areas of expertise.<sup>4</sup> As expected, African American women have some influence in the policy areas in which they have developed expertise. However, the advantage associated with being a formal leader in these policy areas in question cannot be minimized. African American women who chaired committees dealing with the policy area were far more likely to be considered influential than those outside of leadership.

The distribution of issue specific influence is different in each state and reflects the legislatures' institutional values and norms. A number of different factors impact legislators' influence and they vary not only according to the legislature, but also according to the policy area under consideration. A factor that is valued in one legislature and as a result affords a legislator influence is not highly regarded in another. Holding a position as the committee chair with jurisdiction over the issue affords influence in all three state's legislatures.

Aside from being a committee chair, having knowledge and expertise of an issue and holding membership in an institutionalized group that addresses the issue area are additional factors contributing to legislators' influence in specific policy areas. The impact of these two factors varies from state to state. In Maryland, knowledge and expertise is preferred, and in Georgia and Maryland having a women's caucus and/or a Black caucus provides important sources of institutional influence. African American women are much more likely to be regarded as influential on specific policies by other African Americans, which suggest that race is also an institutional norm that is preferred as well.

### **The Power and Influence of the Chair**

The fact that most legislators are only willing to consider committee chairs influential does not bode well for African American women given the small numbers holding committee chairs. I expected that because African American women are legislatively active in these policy areas, they would be mentioned as influential by virtue of their work and attention to these policy issues. In Georgia and Mississippi, however, influence by and large only comes as a result of holding an institutional position of power. Making note of her own tendency to only denote committee chairs as having any influence on the policy areas in question one legislator remarked,

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<sup>4</sup> These policy areas were derived from Barrett's (1995) findings and the national survey conducted in conjunction with this study.

You notice that I stay with the chairmen. The chairmen are so powerful that a lot of times if any other person is doing some thing on the issue they have to come through a chairman. Unless the person has a burning issue that they push, its very, very hard to know that they are working on the issue.

The majority of legislators consider only the committee chairs whose committee has jurisdiction in that policy area as influential. This is most consistently the case on policy issues in which the committee handling the topic is easily identified, such as education, health care and health care reform and children's issues.<sup>5</sup> Influence on policy issues that fall under the jurisdiction of multiple committees, such as women's issues and economic development and employment, is more widely distributed among legislators, and includes rank and file members.

Because committee chairs in Mississippi have a history of serving as chairs of several major committees over their legislative careers, it comes as no surprise that legislators, often chairing other committees, retain influence in a policy area over which they once had jurisdiction. This has the effect of confining influence to an even smaller group of legislators than in other states.

Legislators shared different opinions about the influence committee chairs hold. Some legislators respect and have confidence in the committee chairs, acknowledging the chairs as the most qualified members to lead the committee and by virtue of their qualifications they are influential. Others understand the influence of the committee chairs as simply a function of holding the institutional position, and the chair may or may not have knowledge and competence in the policy area. A Maryland legislator differentiated between a chair having influence because of the formal position, and a chair having influence because they know the issue and their committee members respect them and are willing to follow their leadership as a result of that respect. According to this legislator,

It's one thing to be a chairman of a committee and use that to try and swing votes. It's another thing to be a chairman of a major committee and also have the respect of the members so that they will take what you say seriously and they will look to you as an expert in the field or any other.

Despite whatever doubts legislators may have regarding the chairs of various committees, they nevertheless understand these members to be influential in accordance with the norms of the legislature.

#### The Power of Prior Knowledge and Expertise

In keeping with previous studies, as legislators become experts on specific policy issues, their influence in area also increases (Francis, 1962; Best, 1971; Keefe and Ogul, 1989; Weissert,

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<sup>5</sup> This applies to only to Georgia in Georgia is the only state of the three with a committee designated to handle only children's issues.

1991). But, this also appears to be dependent upon the values held by the legislative institution. Knowledge and prior expertise were much more valued in Maryland than in the other two states, and as a result, influence in specific policy areas is more widely distributed among rank and file members in Maryland. Because state legislatures are handling more and more complex issues, legislators are finding it increasingly more important to seek fellow members with strong knowledge bases in particular issue areas. Education and healthcare are two issue areas in which several African American women legislators in Maryland have prior expertise and their colleagues frequently look to these members to weigh the merits of proposed legislation in these areas. The inclusiveness in Maryland and emphasis on knowledge and expertise is exemplified by one African American woman's experience with the leadership,

There was an education issue on the floor, and I was not on the education committee at that time, but I asked questions on that bill and was able to stop that bill on the floor. The Speaker told the chairman of the committee handling education 'Don't bring any other education issues before the floor unless you talk to Delegate X.' I was not in the leadership, but here was someone saying, 'She has some knowledge.' If she can stop what we're trying to do in the leadership, then we need to communicate with her.

Though rank and file members were acknowledged as having prior expertise and exerting some influence based on their knowledge of particular issues, even in Maryland, the stigma of not being an official member of the leadership is still a factor impeding their influence. A Maryland legislator described the dilemma of being very knowledgeable on an issue, yet not being a member of the leadership. She describes the situation of one African American woman, who is in such a situation,

Delegate X is very knowledgeable, but I don't see her as influential. She's very knowledgeable, but she is not in a leadership role, so she cannot always get her agenda accepted. You know they say that, "A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, a lot of knowledge can get you a long way." So, whatever committee X is on, they always look to her because she has worked for health on the national level.

Though this legislator acknowledges the in-depth knowledge of this delegate on health issues and her work on the national level, her influence is mitigated because she does not hold a formal leadership position, and her agenda is stifled as a result.

Prior expertise and experience is not preferenced as highly as other factors in these states. As an African American woman in Mississippi's explains,

The issues do not matter. What matters is that you are a part of the leadership. The leadership makes the decisions. While there are many legislators who have spent their entire lives working on an issue, like education, they come to the legislature and that expertise

is seldom taken under consideration. We have members who were teachers, principals, school superintendents-- and many of them are African American, African American women, and because they are not in the leadership [in the House] they are not influential. The issue doesn't matter-- leadership is the key!

Preferencing knowledge and expertise has a positive impact on African American women's influence. While selection as a committee chair is not within a legislator's control, cultivating expertise and in-depth knowledge of a subject matter are indeed factors that legislators can control. Therefore, when knowledge and prior expertise are valued in the legislature and is a part of the institutional norms, African American women stand to benefit in that it is a more objective evaluation as demonstrated in Maryland's case. Preferences for knowledge and expertise are associated with more professional legislatures. While Maryland is not considered among the more professionalized legislatures, as compared to Georgia and Mississippi, it is the most professional of the three (Squire, 1992).

### **Beyond Access Denied: Controlling Access**

The evidence here suggests that the major barrier to influence for African American women when it comes to specific policy areas is acquiring positions as committee chairs of committees dealing with the issues that they would most like to impact. From this analysis, it follows that once African American women move into institutional positions of power-- in this case as committee chairs-- their colleagues will regard them as influential. Legislators' descriptions of who is influential in the legislature suggest that all legislators are afforded the same respect and high regard that comes with the positions they hold. For African American women situation of "access denied" is simply a question of access to positions of power.

Failing to further analyze African American women's influence would be to paint an inaccurate picture of influence in state legislatures. African American women who have leadership positions describe that they are not members of the top leaders' inner circles, precluding them from participating at all levels of decision making. This certainly impacts the extent to which they hold general influence, but are there institutional factors impacting their influence in specific policy areas once they have gained access to leadership positions?

Merely accessing positions typically associated with influence may not be the key to accessing influence for African American women. While anecdotal, one example from the Mississippi legislature suggests that those in power are willing to use even the most Machiavellian tactics to retain their long standing power in the institution.

During the 2000 legislative session there was a break in committee leadership norms that coincided with an African American woman's appointment as Chair of the Education Committee in the Senate. While this change displaced a traditional norm regarding committee leadership, it preserved the white, male control over legislative outputs, the customary structure of power in Mississippi. The African American woman's power as the chair of the Education committee was curtailed by a maneuver on the part of the Appropriations Chair who broke with the traditional norm of appointing standing committee chairs as chairs of the subcommittee in Appropriations dealing with the same policy area. Under the old system, committee chairs held control over

both the policy agenda and appropriating funds. However, with the Appropriation Chair's change, this African American woman now co-chairs the Appropriation's Subcommittee on Education with her Vice-Chair of the Education Committee. Some legislators indicated that the leadership orchestrated the change in normal legislative procedures as a result of their resistance to placing that much power in her hands alone. As one Mississippi legislator explains, her influence is curtailed under this new system,

For the first time, I think it is basically because of Senator X, the Appropriations Committee Chairman decided he was going to go with a system of co-chairs of the subcommittees. Now, a white male shares co-chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Education in the Appropriations Committee with X. Her power has been diluted because she can't make a move without her co-chairman.

This legislator and others who mentioned the new system instituted by the chair of the Appropriations Committee concerning subcommittee chairs indicated that this new system was deliberately executed to weaken the senator's power. He suggests that members of the leadership team were fearful of an African American woman controlling such a major area of public policy. Another Mississippi legislator went further in analyzing the influence of the Education Chair in light of the change in the Appropriation committee's subcommittee structure,

When you talk about influence, there are some people that head the policy committee as well as the subcommittee on that particular area of appropriations-- that is what makes them influential.... If you head the policy committee and the money committee, then you could just about get what you want through the legislature. If you head the policy committee and you need the money to implement what your policy is, then you don't have real influence over the issue.

Increasing the number African American women committee chairs is an important means of garnering institutional positions that confer power and influence. However, this example suggests that selection, as a committee chair may not result in the same institutional powers that are afforded to others holding the same position. In this case, the unwritten rules or norms were changed to maintain the existing power structure. It cannot be definitively concluded that the Appropriations Chair instituted this rule as a means of specifically countering the power of the first African American woman to chair a major committee in the Senate, but it has had the effect of weakening this major committee chair's power.

### **Conclusion**

This study reiterates the complexity of influence in legislative institutions. Though scholars have always pointed out this reality, few have attributed this complexity to these institutions' inability to adapt to their increased diversity. This research contributes to our understandings of how legislative institutions are responding to difference. While much of the traditional knowledge about the nature of legislative influence remain constant, this study and others are showing that gender and race problematize even the most stable categories such as



party leader or committee chair. The effects of gender and race on legislative influence are substantial. Gender and race mediate avenues that would otherwise lead to influence for African American women. These findings indicate that an African American woman party leader or committee chair conveys a different meaning in the minds of her colleagues. Unfortunately, when African American women move into such positions that *traditionally* convey power, it may not result in actually holding the power conveyed by the position. For these women, acquiring influence is more than a simple case of denied access to positions of power, but is more rich and complex.

In examining African American women's influence, it is clear that they have not yet become the power brokers in the big leagues able to influence the legislative process across policy areas. However, as expected, influence in specific policy areas is slightly more open and they are indeed more likely to provide the equivalent of technical competence in the policy areas in which they have cultivated their expertise. Further, African American women are more likely to find themselves afforded some influence in legislatures like the Maryland General Assembly where knowledge or prior expertise in a policy area is preferred. Such norms are far less subjective. African American women and others seeking to influence their colleagues can acquire knowledge on a particular policy area more easily than they can appeal to and appease their colleagues' various notions of "quality character traits."

In this paper, I have argued that state legislatures preference attributes predominantly held by white male legislators. These preferences have become a part of the institution's norms and are instrumental in determining institutional power. The preservation of these institutional norms is critical to maintaining the current power structure and in the end determining policy outcomes. The Mississippi State Senate's sudden change in its normal operating procedures once an African American woman was appointed to chair one of its major committees is a compelling illustration of the extent to which those in power will go to protect and preserve these norms and the existing power structure. More in-depth case study level research in additional states is likely to uncover similar tactics. Future analysis is also needed to discern the extent to which their colleagues' perceptions of their influence impact their legislative outputs and African American women's abilities to build successful coalitions.

In spite of these findings, African American women are delivering for their constituents. They are finding creative means of ensuring their viability in the legislative process. In both Georgia and Maryland, these women are successfully using their affiliations with both the women's caucus and the black caucus to leverage their influence. For the most part, African American women have positioned themselves as a bridge on issues that both caucuses consider important. Therefore, these legislators are able to play important roles on the policy issues that impact the communities they serve.

Table 1. Distribution of Leadership Positions in the House and Senate

	Percentage of Leadership Positions in the House	Percentage of Leadership Positions in the Senate
<b>Georgia</b>		
African American Women	7% (1)	8% (1)
African American Men	7% (1)	8% (1)
White Women	7% (1)	- (0)
White Men	79% (11)	85% (11)
Total	100% (14)	100% (13)
<b>Maryland</b>		
African American Women	4% (1)	- (0)
African American Men	7% (2)	18% (2)
White Women	44% (12)	27% (3)
White Men	44% (12)	55% (6)
Total	100% (27)	100% (11)
<b>Mississippi</b>		
African American Women	- (0)	- (0)
African American Men	- (0)	- (0)
White Women	- (0)	- (0)
White Men	100% (2)	100% (2)
Total	100% (2)	100% (2)

Table 2. Distribution of Committee Chairs in the House and Senate

	Percentage of House Committee Chairs	Percentage of Senate Committee Chairs
<b>Georgia</b>		
African American Women	3% (1)	9% (2)
African American Men	12% (4)	9% (2)
White Women	6% (2)	4% (1)
White Men	76% (26)	78% (18)
Total	100% (33)	100% (23)
<b>Maryland</b>		
African American Women	- (0)	- (0)
African American Men	17% (1)	33% (2)
White Women	17% (1)	17% (1)
White Men	67% (4)	50% (3)
Total	100% (6)	100% (6)
<b>Mississippi</b>		
African American Women	3% (1)	6% (2)
African American Men	17% (6)	15% (5)
White Women	8% (3)	3% (1)
White Men	72% (26)	76% (26)
Total	100% (36)	100% (34)

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