

Congressional Black and Hispanic Caucuses

Introduction

In the United States Congress, some of the most visible organizations are the three caucuses that represent the interests of African-Americans and Hispanics. The Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Hispanic Caucus are Democrat affiliated organizations that represent blacks and Hispanics, respectively. They seek to influence the course of events pertinent to their communities through government intervention and oversight. The Congressional Hispanic Conference is the equivalent organization in the Republican side of the United States Congress, with similar goals of advancing Hispanic interests in the lower house and government. This paper will explore these three organizations and the ideals and mission guiding them. While looking at the circumstances and rationale surrounding their founding and continuing existence in the United States Congress, I will argue that while the Congressional Hispanic Caucus has had more challenges, namely the diversity in the Hispanic community at large and the representatives in congress, it has been weaker than the Congressional Black Caucus in gaining influence in either the Democratic Party or the United States Congress as a whole, and this affects the execution of its stated goals of achieving more substantive representation for their community in the government.

History and Mission of the Congressional Black and Hispanic Caucuses

Tracing its roots to the Democrat Select Committee, which was formed in 1969, the Congressional Black Caucus was formally inaugurated and changed its name in 1971 with the founding of 13 black House of Representative members (Fields, 2010). With stated goals of addressing issues and legislative concerns of African-Americans, the founding members of the caucus believed “that speaking with a single voice through a Congressional

caucus will increase their political influence and visibility” (Focus, 2010). Yet, as acknowledged by the one of the founding members; Michigan Representative John Conyes, the caucus is not as cohesive today as it was with the original 13 founding members. Nonetheless, the current 44-member organization has grown to become a “powerful force with a domestic legislative agenda that includes voting rights, education, healthcare, and employment” (Keyes, 2011).

Seeking to increase their influence in Washington and following in the footsteps of the black lawmakers who formed the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus was formed in 1976 by six Hispanic House of Representative members (Roybal, 1979). The organization has grown over the years to currently include 21 members of the House of Representatives who are all members of the Democratic Party. This number is lower than the actual number of Hispanic lawmakers in Congress mostly because the original Congressional Hispanic Caucus was split into two in 2003 when the then four Hispanic Republican representatives banded together to form their own group, which was subsequently named the Congressional Hispanic Conference (Lopez, 2003). The splitting of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus along party lines underscores the diversity or differences within Hispanic Legislatures and the Hispanic community at large.

Importance of the Caucuses to Legislative Institutions

These three organizations: The Congressional Black Caucus, The Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Conference play an important role in the legislative process and public policy of the United States. In accordance with the mandate they gave themselves at their formation, they have proven to be invaluable to a more adequate representation of African-Americans and Hispanics in the legislature. Hammond

(1998) states, these bodies “allow for the sharing of resources across legislative offices, enhance communication and information sharing, and provide for the coordination of agendas and messages.” These organizations involvement in the democratic process has proven to be very vital to the two historically disenfranchised minorities, whose descriptive representation in Congress is not a fair representation of their population in the United States.

This underrepresentation can be argued to have had a big influence in the “[limited] influence of minority legislators in the public policy making process” (Guiner, 1995). This is precisely why Minta and Sinclair-Chapman (2012) argue that diversity is the reason why the United States House of Representatives has been much more responsive to minority interests over time and “has dramatically increased its attention to civil rights issues and has moved ahead of the Senate in responding to class-based issues.” They conclude that it is the diversity structure, namely the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which exists in the House but does not exist in the Senate that explains the differences between the two legislative bodies (Minta and Sinclair-Chapman, 2012). The two congressional caucuses provide valuable resources that allow minority legislators to keep important issues on the congressional and government agenda; something that could not have been easily achieved without these two organizations. This explains the ways in which the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (and Conference) are important units in the legislative body of the United States government and how for minorities, proper addressing of the issues that are important to them is greatly enhanced by the membership of their representatives in these organizations.

Influence in the Congress: Black Caucus vs. Hispanic Caucus

While it is important to note that the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (and Conference) have largely been meeting their mandate of making sure that issues that are important to blacks and Hispanics are addressed properly or at least receives proper attention in the legislature, it can be argued that for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, this effort has been weaker or has been less effective than that of the Congressional Black Caucus.

The effort to address issues affecting minority populations is maximized when the individuals leading these causes are of influence and/or in significant leadership roles. The membership of the Congressional Black Caucus is composed largely of legislators who hold significant clout in their respective parties and in the House of Representatives at large. This is considerably higher than the influence and leadership roles that members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus command in their respective parties and in the legislative body.

Amongst the top leadership of the Democratic Party after the 2008 elections, are significant populations of the 43 members of the Congressional Black Caucus (Focus 2010). This includes the number three ranking member of the Democratic Party in the House of Representatives and a host of leadership positions in more than 20 committees and subcommittees, including the chairs of such coveted committees as the Judiciary, Ways and Means, Homeland Security and Oversight Committees (Focus 2010).

Comparing the amount of political clout commanded in the Democratic Party and in the legislature as a whole by members of the Congressional Black Caucus to that of the members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus shows that the two bodies differ in how

much influence each has, with the Black Caucus holding much more power and influence than the Hispanic Caucus. Fox News notes that “While there are more than a dozen House Democrats of Hispanic heritage [after the 2012 general election], the only Hispanic member of the leadership team... is slated to take the No. 4 spot in the House” (Stirewalt 2012). The concentration of power more in the hands of black congressmen and women have helped to shape a “[Democratic Party that] has a party leadership that reflects the ethnic coalition of big city blacks and whites that has dominated the party since the New Deal” (Stirewalt 2012). The Congressional Black Caucus wields more power and influence than the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in the lower house of the United States legislative body because more of their members are integrated in the higher Democratic party structure, while members of the Hispanic Caucus are not nearly as integrated in the upper hierarchy of the party.

Why Influence and Leadership Matters

While it can be argued that caucus members do not need to have leadership roles and political clout in the effort to effectively advocate for minorities and that the resources and structures of the minority caucuses are sufficient for minority legislators to fully represent their constituents and race and also push for issues that are important to minorities, it should be explained that much of the daily process of the House legislature works according to rules the body has set up. Before a bill, resolution or other things that will bring light to minority issues can be introduced to the floor of the House and be debated, it has to go through numerous committees and subcommittees, all headed by lawmakers who are leaders of their parties. The same can be said of any “pork barrel” or appropriations that are beneficial to minority communities; these also have to pass through

party leadership before arriving for vote. Therefore, to effectively advocate for minorities and push for issues that they care about, as stated by the mandate governing the two caucuses, it is imperative that members of these organizations be part of the party leadership and hold significant power beyond those of regular Congress members.

Being more integrated in the party structure and leadership is imperative in effectively fulfilling the stated goals of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. It is the party leaders that largely set the agenda for each party periodically. By having more of their members in this role, the Congressional Black Caucus is able to influence politics much more than the Congressional Hispanic Caucus because their members are not just waiting and urging their peers to consider their views and ideas; they are the ones setting the agenda and including issues that are important to them. They are thus able to direct the conversation to issues that are important to them. This all shows how the efforts of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to fulfill their mandate have been weaker or less effective than that of the Congressional Black Caucus because the latter has much more influence and power in the party structure and are more able to guide the politics.

Growing Hispanic Political Influence

Looking at the changing demographics of the United States population and its effects on the electorate, it is easy to conclude that the Hispanic community is growing as a political force. In the 2012 presidential election, Hispanic's vote share reached an all time high of 10%, with the conclusion being that the community "[was] decisive in deciding the popular vote" (Lapan, 2012). While taking note of this, both political parties courted the community aggressively in the last election cycle, with President Obama even going as far

as offering a controversial immigration policy that resonated well with the community (Lapan, 2012). These things might be referenced in support of the counter argument that leaders of the Hispanic community, such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, are in fact very powerful and are fully using their position to bring about favorable change to their community. However, these political gains by the community have in fact come in spite of the push or efforts of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in Congress. The growing influence is largely a result of the changing electoral demographics of the country in favor of Hispanics. Politicians and parties are naturally seeking to maximize their votes and the vote of the community goes a long way in achieving this, therefore they are going to the Latino population directly to earn their votes.

Why Has the Congressional Hispanic Cause Been Weak?

Many factors have lead to the less political power and influence that the members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus have wielded over the years compared to their black counter parts. First, as of last 112th Congress, there were only 26 Congressmen of Hispanic heritage serving in the lower house. This is compared to the number of 44 seats held by African-Americans at the same time (Manning 2011). It is easy to understand how the numerical strength of African-American legislators gives them an advantage over Hispanics. Being part of a much larger minority who are part of a defined congressional organization allows for the members of the Congressional Black Caucus to wield more power in Congress than Hispanics who make up a smaller share of the party and the legislative body. This is enhanced by the fact that the members of the Congressional Black Caucus are viewed as historically and currently, as a cohesive force in the House of Representative. A study by Pinney (1999) revealed that African-American representatives

were much more cohesive with other members of the CBC in roll call votes and other legislative activity than with other legislators from their state or region. The study also concludes that “high vote cohesion is meaningful for the CBC and the representation of black interests in Congress” (Pinney, 1999).

The level of cohesiveness found in members of the Congressional Black Caucus is not the same for the Hispanic Caucus. As referenced earlier, in the House of Representatives, there are two organizations in each party that share the goal of representing the interests of Hispanics on the Democratic side. The Congressional Hispanic Conference on the Republican side split from the original Congressional Hispanic Caucus in large part because of rifts that materialized over the refusal of Hispanic Democrats to support a conservative Hispanic judge that was nominated by President Bush for the District of Columbia Court of Appeals and also because of differences that Hispanic Republicans had with the leadership of the Caucus who visited Cuba and refused to call for democratic elections in the communist state (Lopez 2003). This division and split underscores the diversity that exists in the Hispanic community in the United States and subsequently the representatives that they elect into Congress. While originally founded by some of the most liberal representatives in Congress, and having remained so in terms of its membership for much its history, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus has evolved to include “a more diverse range of ideas than ever before,” even with the lack of Republican membership (Radelat, 2001). The disadvantage of being a very small minority is compounded with the effects of diversity in the Hispanic Caucus. As an organization with diverse ideologies, it easy to understand how this will prevent members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to speak in a cohesive voice in many issues. This can be

argued to affect the stated efforts to advocate for issues that are important to the community.

Conclusion

The Congressional Hispanic and Black Caucuses in the United States House of Representatives have proved to be very vital in the effort to more adequately represent the interests of the African-American and Hispanic communities. These two bodies have allowed the representatives of these two groups to achieve much more than they would have otherwise. In spite of all of this, it can be argued that the members of the Congressional Black Caucus have been much more successful in doing this than the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. The situation whereby members of the CBC are more ingrained in the party leadership and structure, compounded with their larger, more cohesive culture, allows for a more powerful organization than the members of the CHC, who do not share this same characteristics. This is also compounded by the fact that for Hispanics, there are two caucuses that represent them, which goes to underscore how the diversity and non-cohesiveness of the Hispanic Representatives affects their efforts to adequately advocate for their community.

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