



# The Color of Congress: **Racial Representation Among Interns in the U.S. House of Representatives**

By  
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# Executive Summary

- Congressional internships matter. These work opportunities are an expression of democratic citizenship that support the day-to-day operations of the federal legislature, train and socialize political novices to lawmaking, and provide a pipeline to paid employment and elective office.
- In 2018, Congress passed H.R.6157, which, for the first time, provided specific funding for lawmakers to pay their legislative interns. The law allocated \$20,000 to each House office to be used towards stipends for DC interns. Prior to this legislation, there was no formal policy nor resources designated to fund internships.
- Despite the importance of congressional internships, we know surprisingly little about the administration of these programs. There is no institution-wide recordkeeping about who interns on Capitol Hill or in congressional districts. There is no information about whether these opportunities are allocated equitably to women, racial minorities, or students from less privileged backgrounds.
- Findings for this report are based on an in-person survey conducted with randomly selected House offices in July, 2019. Of the 106 offices from which we collected data, we received the following responses: 52 percent full response, 12 percent partial response, and 36 percent no response (declined survey or redacted).
  - Over a third of the congressional offices we contacted refused to participate in our survey. Staff members routinely said it was office policy not to participate in surveys.
- We found evidence that Latino students are underrepresented as interns in House offices and that Whites are overrepresented in similar positions. Moreover, although House interns appear more racially diverse than House members, we found convincing evidence that congressional offices are racially segregated as determined by the interns hired in Summer 2019.
  - Latinos make up 20 percent of undergraduate students nationally, 9 percent of House members, and approximately 5 percent of interns in our study.
  - Whites make up 52 percent of undergraduate students nationally, 73 percent of House members, and approximately 68 percent of interns in our study.
- We found strong evidence that the congressional workplace is racially segregated. A lawmaker's race, political party, and the demographic composition of their congressional district all have a strong effect on whom they hire as interns. We found that interns of color are primarily concentrated in the offices of Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander lawmakers whereas White lawmakers, of both political parties, overwhelmingly have White interns.
  - The percentage of White interns was 24 percent higher in the House offices of Republicans than in the offices of Democrats. White students represented 85 percent of interns in the individual offices of House Republicans compared to 62 percent of interns in the offices of House Democrats.
  - However, this difference between political parties is largely due to the interns in the offices of Black, Latino, and Asian lawmakers in the Democratic party. There was no statistically significant difference in the racial makeup of interns between

White Democratic and White Republican House members. In the House offices of White Democrats, approximately 78 percent of interns were White compared to 85 percent in the offices of White Republicans.

- In the offices of White Democrats, interns were 78 percent White, 8 percent Black, and 5 percent Latino. In comparison, in the Democratic Party, members are 57 percent White, 22 percent Black, and 13 percent Latino.
- Uneven access to congressional internships, especially those that are paid, in effect, hands White students an important employment credential. This sets them on a career path to become political elites who hold considerable influence in the creation of public policy, and to perhaps become elected officials themselves.
  - In the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 18.5 percent of all House members had intern or staffer experience in Congress prior to holding elected office.
- We recommend that Congress democratize the administration of congressional internships with expanded funding for stipends, increased engagement with and recruitment from communities of color, prioritization of need-based applicants, and more transparent hiring practices.

# Introduction: Representation, Equity, and Citizenship in Legislative Work

In 2018, Congress passed H.R.6157 which, for the first time, provided funding for lawmakers to pay their legislative interns. The law provided each House office with a fund of \$20,000 a year to compensate their Washington DC interns.<sup>1</sup> These funds were first made available in March 2019.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this legislation, there was no formal policy across congressional offices that provided funding for interns. If a lawmaker chose to pay their interns, it was withdrawn from the member's personnel and expense account. Stipends for interns were either non-existent, idiosyncratic, or externally supported.

The administration of congressional internships is worthy of significant public attention for many reasons. Most importantly, these experiences matter directly and indirectly for democratic governance. Congressional interns support the administration of congressional offices. Interns answer phones, respond to constituent inquiries, provide tours, and assist legislative staff with research. While congressional interns are the most junior workers in any office, they are fundamentally important because they are often the first, and sometimes the only, members of the legislature that constituents can access. These positions on the congressional front lines provide excellent training for congressional interns to become full-time political staffers.

Congressional staffs are known as the invisible force in American policymaking.<sup>3</sup> Legislative staffers provide critical advice, guidance, and analysis to members of Congress, and ultimately influence the voting behavior of their lawmaker. Recent studies have shown that congressional staffers are overwhelmingly White.<sup>4</sup> A White-dominated congressional workplace challenges the legitimacy of Congress as a representative governing institution, stifles innovation, and weakens the quality of legislative debate. While there are many factors that contribute to the racial organization of the congressional workplace, the role of internships as a feeder to paid legislative work stands out as a significant barrier for racial minorities and low-income individuals to gain employment on Capitol Hill.

Previous congressional internship experience is a steppingstone to securing fulltime paid employment as a political staffer on Capitol Hill. Senior staffers hire former interns for their working knowledge of congressional operations and internal office dynamics. Former interns can hit the ground running as trusted members of the team and often are already adept at responding to the idiosyncratic needs of lawmakers. Not only is there a strong preference for hiring previous Hill interns, but intern experience on the Hill is often required for entry-level positions. This process thereby shuts out those who cannot afford to intern without pay from future congressional employment. Congressional interns fade into the background of lawmaking even more than the political staffers who are supposed to be invisible. For this reason, there is little consideration about the administration of congressional internships, and, more broadly, the important role internships play in shaping racial diversity in the congressional workplace.

Congressional employment provides an important credential that allows former staffers to access more elite workplaces, and even run for office at local, state, and national levels. In the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 18.5 percent of all House members had intern or staffer experience in Congress prior to holding elected office. However, congressional internships matter even if an intern decides not to work full-time as a congressional staffer or run for office in the future. Members of Congress reward their constituents with internships as an important demonstration of citizenship. Congressional internships have long-lasting impacts that shape

the civic and political identities of interns in ways that are not immediately knowable or easily measured. Interns are given a front seat to history. They can observe House and Senate proceedings and access some of the most powerful political leaders in the nation. Their tenure in Congress is a lesson in democracy that surpasses classroom learning. These first-hand experiences shape interns' perceptions of their own political efficacy and may have spillover effects as well, impacting those with whom they share their experiences. Given this, all students should know about the opportunity to work in Congress and there should be equal access for them to do so, no matter their identity or social background.

Despite the importance of congressional internships, we know surprisingly little about the administration of these programs. There is no institution-wide recordkeeping about who interns on Capitol Hill or in congressional districts. In addition, the intern hiring process and, more broadly, congressional staff hiring processes are notoriously opaque. There is no information about whether these opportunities are allocated equitably to women, racial minorities, or students from less privileged backgrounds. Lawmakers' decision to pay their interns is commendable. However, without any transparency about who interns in Congress, there can be no accountability to ensure that these resources are distributed fairly. The aim of this report is to provide data to lawmakers and democratic stakeholders about congressional interns, and to offer recommendations about how to increase access to, and representation of, underrepresented groups in these positions.

## Methodology

Findings for this report were based upon an in-person survey conducted with House staffers between July 22 and July 25, 2019. We generated a randomized study sample from the population of 441 lawmakers of the House of Representatives using a randomizer software. Of the 106 offices from which we collected data, we received the following responses: 52 percent full response, 12 percent partial response, and 36 percent no response (declined survey or redacted).

There were important, statistically significant differences among the participation rates of House members. We found that freshman House members were approximately three times more likely to give a partial or full response than incumbent members. In addition, the offices of female members were three times more likely to give a partial/full response than offices of male members. Finally, the offices of former interns/staffers were almost six times more likely to give a partial or full response than offices of House members with no intern or staffer experience. We did not find a statistically significant difference between the participation rates of Democrats and Republicans or members of different racial backgrounds.

We surveyed offices about the interns they hired in 2018 and 2019. We asked offices about the social background of each intern they hired and if they were compensated, whether by the office itself or an external organization. Most surveys were completed by intern coordinators. We received limited data about interns hired in summer 2018 because few offices kept records about the interns they previously hired. In addition, many intern coordinators were newly hired themselves and could not answer these questions. In summer 2019, there was an average of 4.47 interns in each House office.

Our data on the racial identity of each intern is based upon the perception of the survey respondent. In other work organizations, employees are asked to identify their racial identity as part of new hire onboarding. Congress does not collect this data or any information pertaining to gender or social economic status, which would provide insight on other underrepresented groups. We propose ending this exemption as a policy recommendation to improve transparency and racial equity. Although we did collect salary records for interns, we were unable to analyze these data because of the varied ways House members paid their interns.

First, we compared the racial makeup of interns, in our sample population, to the House member population. Next, we compared the total intern population, in our study, to the national undergraduate student population using data from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Finally, we analyzed the survey results to understand differences in racial representation among interns in House offices.

We recorded the responses we received from the 106 offices and rated each interaction with staff members. Over a third of the congressional offices we contacted refused to participate in our survey. Staff members routinely said it was office policy not to participate in surveys. In addition, as news of our research study became more widely known, we observed coordinated attempts to decline and retract survey participation. Several offices asked to have their data omitted from this project even after staff members initially participated in the survey. We did not use these data in our analysis.

In addition, when the surveyors were asked to use a set criteria from 1 to 5 to rate their experiences with each of the intern coordinators or office staff of the 106 offices surveyed (including those who declined the survey), 51 percent leaned positive, 25 percent were neutral,

and 24 percent leaned negative. We highlight these data to shed light on a culture of secrecy within the congressional workplace, and the difficulty we had collecting these demographic data.

**Table 1: Survey Rating of Overall Office Experience (n = 106 offices)**

		Percent of Responses
1	<b>Extremely Negative</b> (e.g. no eye contact, condescending, rude, extreme skepticism)	3%
2	<b>Negative</b> (e.g. immediate rejection, “our office does not participate in surveys”)	22%
3	<b>Neutral</b> (e.g. unremarkable, neither negative nor positive)	26%
4	<b>Positive</b> (e.g. friendly and answers questions)	25%
5	<b>Extremely Positive</b> (e.g. goes above and beyond in answering questions; fully transparent)	24%
	Total Ratings	100%



## Findings: Racially Diverse or Segregated?

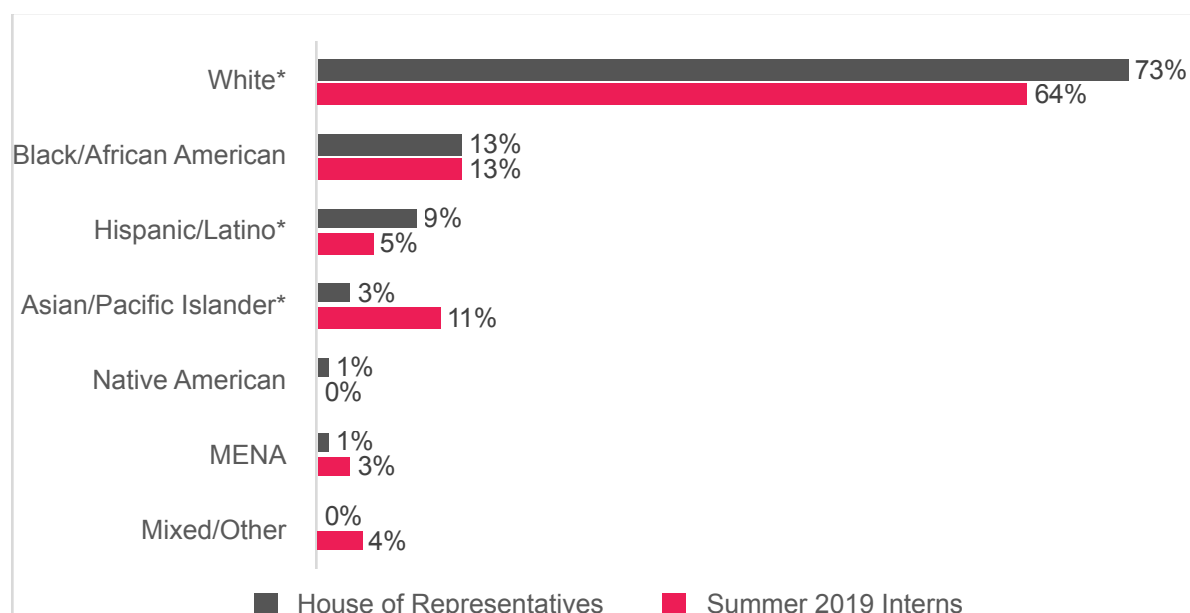
We investigated the racial make-up of congressional interns in the House of Representatives and asked whether paid work opportunities were distributed equitably. When compared to the national undergraduate population, we found evidence that Latino students were underrepresented as interns in House offices, and that Whites were overrepresented in similar positions. Moreover, although House interns appear more racially diverse than House members, we found convincing evidence that in the case of interns hired in Summer 2019, congressional offices are racially segregated. We found that a House member's racial background was a strong predictor of whom they would hire.

### Are House Interns as Racially Diverse as House Members?

#### *Yes, but only slightly*

We found that a lower percentage of interns were White *and* Latino than House members, due in part to a higher percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander interns (see Figure 1). For example, interns were half as likely to be Hispanic/Latino compared to House members. In addition, we found that interns were more likely to be Asian/Pacific Islander or Mixed/Other than House members. Finally, we found that there was no statistical difference in the percentage of Black interns compared to Black members and the percentage of Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) interns compared to MENA members. We found no Native American interns in our study.

**Figure 1: Summer 2019 Interns Compared to the House of Representatives by Race**



\* = a statistically significant difference between the percentage of summer 2019 interns of a particular race and the percentage of the corresponding House of Representatives members within that racial group ( $p < .05$ )

MENA = Middle Eastern/North African

## White representation

While interns were less likely to be White compared to House members, White interns were not underrepresented when compared to the national population. This discrepancy is mainly due to the overrepresentation of Whites as House members. For example, Whites make up 72 percent of House members and 60 percent of the national population.

## Black representation

We found that there was no statistical difference in the percentage of Black interns compared to Black House members.

## Latino representation

We found that Latinos were underrepresented as interns *and* House members when compared to the national population. Latinos make up 18 percent of the national population, 9 percent of House members, and approximately 5 percent of interns in our study.<sup>5</sup>

## Asian representation

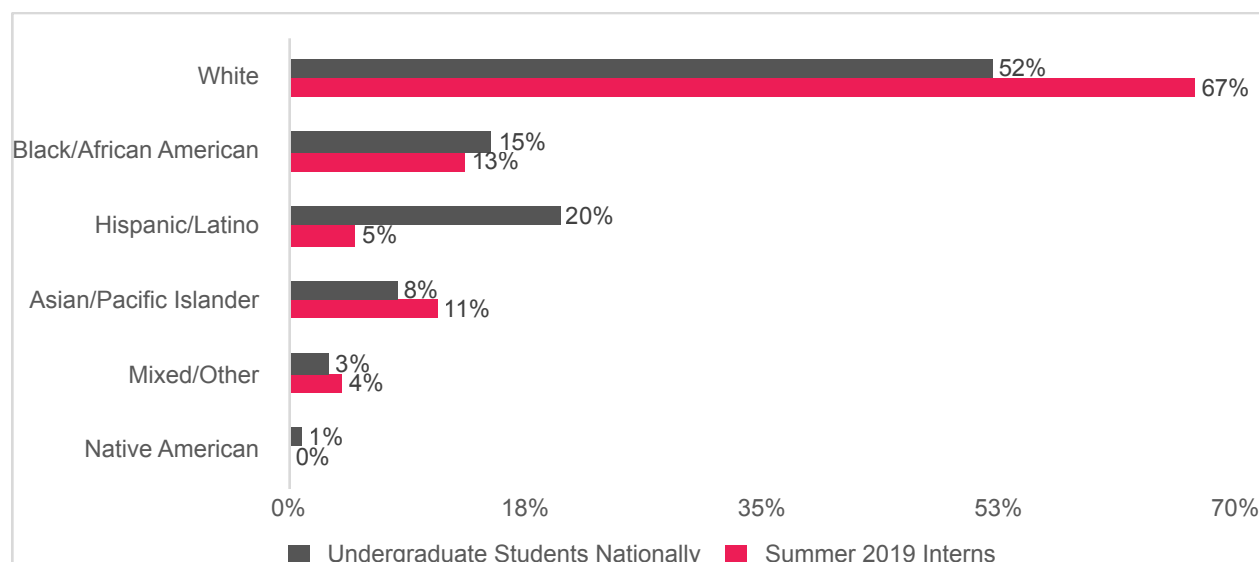
Finally, we unexpectedly found that Asian/Pacific Islanders are better represented as interns than as House members. Interns were three times more likely than the House members to be Asian/Pacific Islander. However, Asian/Pacific Islanders are underrepresented as House members when compared to the national population. Asian/Pacific Islanders make up 6 percent of the national population but only 3 percent of House members.

## Are House Interns as Racially Diverse as College Students Nationwide?

### *Partially*

To better understand racial representation among House interns, we compared our survey sample to the national undergraduate student population. People of color comprise a significantly higher proportion of those who attend undergraduate institutions than exist in the general population. In addition, younger generations of Americans are overall more racially diverse.<sup>6</sup> Congressional offices mostly hire undergraduates from across the nation as summer interns. Therefore, comparing the racial makeup of House interns to the national undergraduate student population provides a better measure to evaluate racial representation, since this is the pool from which congressional offices hire. We used student undergraduate population data from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which contains detailed demographic data about undergraduate students. This analysis confirms that Latinos are underrepresented as House interns.

**Figure 2: Summer 2019 Interns Compared to the National Undergraduate Student Population by Race**



Interns were more likely to be White and less likely to be Latino than undergraduate students nationally (see Figure 2).

**White students make up only 52 percent of the national undergraduate student population but accounted for 68 percent of House interns. Alternatively, Latino students make up 20 percent of undergraduate students nationally but accounted for less than 5 percent of House interns.**

We found the overrepresentation of White students and underrepresentation of Latino students as House interns to be statistically significant. We did not find any statistically significant difference between the representation of Blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans in the House as compared to the national undergraduate student population.

## Who Hires Whom?

Our investigation of the racial make-up of House interns also provided insight into House members' hiring patterns and the uneven rates at which they hire interns of different racial backgrounds. We found strong evidence that the congressional workplace is racially segregated. A lawmaker's race, gender, political party, and congressional district all have a strong effect on who they hire as interns. We found that interns of color are primarily concentrated in the offices of Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander lawmakers, whereas White lawmakers, of both political parties, overwhelmingly have White interns.

## Do House members hire interns of all racial backgrounds at the same rate?

**No**

We found evidence that the racial identity of a House member affects the racial makeup of the interns they hire. House members of all racial backgrounds showed a preference for interns of the same race, except Asian/Pacific Islander members, all of which was statistically

significant.<sup>7</sup> Offices of White members were three times more likely to have White interns than offices of non-White members. Offices of Black members were 13 times more likely to have Black interns than offices of non-Black members. Offices of Latino members were six times more likely to have Latino interns than offices of non-Latino members. Asian/Pacific Islander members were the only racial group that was not statistically more likely to have Asian interns than non-Asian members.

**Table 2: Average Percent of White Interns in Each House Office**

Race of House Member	Mean Percentage White
White	81%
Black/African American	37%
Hispanic/Latino	60%
Asian/Pacific Islander	50%
Middle Eastern/North African	46%

**Does the political party of a House member affect the racial makeup of interns they staff?**

**Yes**

The percentage of White interns was 24 percent higher in the offices of Republicans than in the offices of Democrats. We found that this difference in the racial makeup of interns between Republican and Democratic House members was statistically significant. White students represented 85 percent of interns in the individual offices of House Republicans compared to 62 percent of interns in the offices of House Democrats. In comparison, 88 percent of Republican voters are White, and 57 percent of Democratic voters are White.<sup>8</sup>

The difference in the racial makeup of interns between House Republicans and Democrats was nearly 25 percent. However, this difference between political parties is largely due to the greater number of Black, Latino, and Asian lawmakers in the Democratic party. There was no statistically significant difference in the racial makeup of interns between White Republican and White Democratic House members. In the offices of White Democrats, approximately 78 percent of interns were White compared to 85 percent of interns in the offices of White Republicans.

In the offices of White Democrats, interns were 78 percent White, 8 percent Black, and 5 percent Latino. In comparison, in the Democratic Party, members are 57 percent White, 22 percent Black, and 13 percent Latino. In this context, the underrepresentation of Black and Latino interns is particularly glaring.<sup>9</sup>

**Does the racial makeup of a congressional district affect the racial makeup of interns they hire?**

**Yes**

The racial makeup of congressional districts is the strongest factor influencing the racial makeup of legislative interns in House offices. We found that the percentage of White voters in a House Member's district has a statistically significant linear relationship with the percentage of White interns in their Capitol office. Data show that for every 10 percent increase in the percentage of White voters in a congressional district, there is an associated 9.75 percent increase in the percentage of White interns.

### **Does the gender or seniority of a House member affect the racial makeup of interns they staff?**

#### **No**

We also examined other dimensions of lawmakers' social background, including their gender and their seniority within Congress, to identify if that affected the racial makeup of their interns. Whereas the race of House members affected the racial makeup of their interns, we found no evidence that their gender had the same effect. There is no significant difference in the gender makeup of interns between Congressmen and Congresswomen in the House. We then examined how each lawmaker's experience within Congress affects whom they hire as interns. We also analyzed the effects of seniority and previous congressional work experience. We found that the seniority of lawmakers did not affect the racial makeup of their interns.

### **Does the race of a House member affect whom they hire as an intern coordinator?**

#### **Yes**

We also collected data on the racial backgrounds of intern coordinators for the House members who participated in our survey. We found additional evidence that the race of the House member affects the race of the intern coordinator they employ. For example, offices of White members were 3 times more likely to hire White intern coordinators than offices of non-White members. Offices of Black members were 11 times more likely to hire a Black intern coordinator than offices of non-Black members. Offices of Latino members were seven times more likely to hire a Latino intern coordinator than offices of non-Latino members. All offices preferentially hired intern coordinators of their same race except for Asian/Pacific Islander members. We did not, however, find any strong relationship between internship coordinators and the demographic makeup of the interns they hired.

To clarify, our findings addressed the hiring practices of lawmakers for intern and intern coordinator positions only. We have no evidence to support whether the patterns that we observed are representative of broader hiring patterns within House offices. Nonetheless, these data illuminate how certain low-status positions are racialized.<sup>10</sup> Much more research is needed to understand how race and other social factors shape hiring decisions and promotions within the congressional workplace.

## **Internship Stipends**

Overall, 78 percent of the interns in our sample received some level of paid compensation for

their work on Capitol Hill. We cannot say whether the 22 percent of interns who were unpaid for their work was due to a shortage of funds allocated to each office, or the demand for congressional internships from students who were also willing to work for free. We did not find any statistical differences in terms of race and gender between the interns who received a stipend and those who did not. We cannot say, however, how widely available paid internships are and whether they are equitably distributed. Nor can we say whether the level of paid compensation is sufficient for many students who work and live in Washington D.C. For example, interns relocating to the Washington area are financially responsible for housing, food, professional attire, and general living expenses. Thus, even if Congress provides students with stipends, it still might not be enough to cover the high cost of living in the capital.

First, our findings are based upon the cooperation and transparency of congressional offices, and our survey responses suggest a possible overestimation of the number of paid internships available. To this end, congressional offices who did not offer paid internships in 2019 may have been less likely to cooperate with a study that might bring negative attention to their office. Second, although we collected data on the stipend amount each intern received, these data were not reliable and were difficult to compare. Many intern coordinators did not know the exact amount of each stipend. Additionally, many interns had different work schedules and duration of internships, which affected how much they were compensated. To this end, offices had to decide between how many interns to hire and what compensation to provide. This decision could mean hiring a few interns that they could compensate with a generous stipend compared to a larger group of interns who would be paid less. Moreover, some interns received stipends from external organizations and did not receive compensation from Congress. Overall, acquiring individual stipend information proved extremely difficult and can only be remedied if Congressional offices agree to disclose this information.

## Recommendations

Access to congressional internships is important for representation, citizenship, and equity in legislative work. Aside from strategies that prioritize hiring underrepresented racial minorities in paid internship positions, members of Congress must provide greater transparency in the administration of congressional internships. This lack of accountability is connected to a larger issue of transparency in the management of the congressional workplace.

### Report Demographic Workforce Data to Ensure Equal Opportunity

Lawmakers have exempted the congressional workplace from federal workplace laws requiring all employers to collect and publicly report demographic data about their employees. Researchers have used these data to investigate the presence and origins of inequality in a myriad of work organizations.<sup>11</sup> Congress' exemption from these regulations creates an unfortunate double standard where lawmakers deliberately ignore anti-discrimination principles that they require all other employers to follow. Congress should not only follow the rules it has passed, but as a democratic institution, it should be a model employer for racial equity and inclusion. This would mean complete transparency in the hiring and promotion of legislative employees, as well as equitably distributing these work opportunities. Congress should collect demographic information about their employees and report these data with personnel records that are already publicly available, to ensure these goals. This could very well be done by the newly created Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

During data collection, we encountered staff members who protected hiring and employment records from the public and limited information that should have been made widely available to ensure equity and fairness in legislative employment. This culture of secrecy in the management of the congressional workplace diminishes the legitimacy of the legislature and is a key mechanism that reproduces inequality within the halls of Congress. In addition, many offices stated that their official policy was not to participate in external surveys. Such policies implicitly communicate that Congress is beyond reproach and serve to protect the interests of lawmakers, rather than democratic principles.

As a democratic institution, Congress must be transparent about whom they employ. Congressional staffers represent an important group of political actors who have considerable influence over the creation of public policy. Moreover, the power of staffers grows as they continue their careers on and off Capitol Hill. The hiring decisions they make have long lasting impacts for the future of our governing body. Notably, congressional internships represent an important entry point into lifelong political careers. Thus, equal access to these internships is essential for ensuring fair representation from the bottom to the top of governing institutions. To this end, congressional internships are not only important jobs but representations of power within the American political system.

### Promote Paid Internships

Two years after Congress first appropriated funds for interns, a 2019 review conducted by Pay Our Interns showed that the majority of House offices still listed their internships as unpaid on their websites.<sup>12</sup>

In the Pay Our Interns review, they broke internships down into three categories:

1. Offices that mention paid internships.
2. Offices that state all their internships are unpaid
3. Offices that make no mention of compensation.

The results, according to POI, were:

- 9 percent of House offices advertise that they offer paid internships.
- 61 percent of House offices advertise that they do not offer paid internships.
- 30 percent of House offices omit information about salaries on their website.

Congressional offices that do not actively promote their paid internships erect an unnecessary barrier to congressional employment. It signals to many low income and need-based students, for whom pay is the determining factor over whether they will apply for an internship, that they are not welcome to work in the Capitol. Offices must broadly advertise these paid work opportunities as an invitation for students from all backgrounds to work in and learn about Congress. In addition, given that student expenses and cost of living can fluctuate from semester to semester, offices should— as a minimum step— announce when compensation is available.

## **Increase and Expand Funding**

When H.R.6157 was passed in 2018, it only provided funds for member offices. In 2019, House appropriators included \$365,000 for interns who serve in House leadership offices. The remaining group that does not have dedicated funding is made of those who intern in the 20+ House committees. While there are some committees that offer paid internships and fellowships, such as the Committees on Labor and Education, on Finance Science, and on Technology, there are several who do not. When Pay Our Interns tried to conduct a review and surveyed staff in each committee, they directed us to the personnel office of the Chairmember, and when we went to the member's office, they would direct us back to the committee.

According to the 2019 House Employment Survey, Latinos made up an estimated 12.2 percent of all House employees, which is an increase from 5.6 percent in the 2009 House employment survey. The same cannot be said about committee staff. Only 6.6 percent of professional staff in House committees are Latinos, and when looking at staff directors and deputy staff directors, Latinos made up only 4 percent according to a 2018 Joint Center report. Of the 40 staff director positions, six are held by people of color (15 percent)—all of whom are African-American. In fact, all of the staff directors except for the staff director for the Appropriations Committee, work for Black Chair members. The House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, helmed by Rep. Tim Ryan, must explore the feasibility of dedicated funding, so each committee has a budget to compensate interns.

## **Intentional Engagement and Outreach to Community Colleges, Tribal Colleges, State Schools and Hispanic Serving Institutions in their District.**

- A recent study from LegBranch found that a substantial percentage of staffers in Congress come from only a select few Ivy League and DC-based private post-secondary institutions.<sup>13</sup> Congressional offices should have a responsibility to be in contact with career centers throughout their district. This will require more work, but even implementing simple solutions like sending out a mass email featuring application information, could make the difference of one more Latino or Black or Asian/Pacific Islander or even Native American intern.



## System to Identify Need-Based Applicants

- Several offices have expressed concern over how to identify need among interns and do it in a way that abides with all applicable rules and laws. This demonstrates a need for a standard metric that Congressional offices can use to identify which of their applicants meet the need-based threshold, and guide offices in implementing need-based support for their interns.

## Conclusion

This report investigates racial representation among congressional interns in the House of Representatives. We found that White students are overrepresented in intern positions and Latino students are underrepresented in those same positions. Moreover, we found that Black, Latino, and Asian interns mostly work for Black, Latino, and Asian members. These data indicate that the appearance of racial diversity among House interns merely conceals a workplace that is racially segregated. In this report, we use the term racial segregation in a limited and specific way to demonstrate the concentration of interns of color in the offices of Black, Latino, and Asian lawmakers, and the absence of those same interns from the offices of White lawmakers. The larger implications of a racially segregated congressional workplace are beyond the scope of this report.

The underrepresentation of racial minorities among interns is not a partisan issue. It does, however, represent an institutional failure. Lawmakers' decision to pay their interns is commendable. Now they need to take the next step and ensure that the institutional framework is in place to guarantee that these paid work opportunities are distributed equitably. Equity in the administration of paid internships not only means ensuring that students from all racial backgrounds are equally paid for their work. It also means prioritizing the hiring of students from less privileged backgrounds who otherwise would not have the opportunity to work in Congress. We should conceptualize congressional internships not only as short-term employment that may lead to paid, full-time work, but as opportunities to practice democratic principles.

Congressional internships provide students with an unmatched lesson in democratic lawmaking. These experiences are often a prerequisite for fulltime paid employment in Congress. However, uneven access to congressional internships, especially those that are paid, credentials a primarily White and privileged group as political elites, many of whom will go on to exert considerable influence in the creation of public policy, and some of whom will go on to become elected officials themselves. Notwithstanding the broader implications of unequal access to congressional internships for the racial composition of political staffers, internships are especially important opportunities to increase civic engagement, especially among communities of color. Internships may only last for a few weeks or months, but the lessons students learn and the experiences they acquire while working at the highest level of representative government, will stay with them for a lifetime.

For these reasons, Congress must democratize the administration of congressional internships with expanded funding for stipends, increased engagement with and outreach to communities of color, prioritization of need-based applicants, and more transparent hiring practices.

## About the Author



Dr. James R. Jones is an Assistant Professor at Rutgers University-Newark and visiting research scholar at Princeton University. He received his PhD in Sociology from Columbia University in 2017. His research investigates racial representation and social inequality in American democratic institutions. In 2015, he wrote a [policy report](#) that documented the underrepresentation of racial minorities in top staff positions in the Senate, for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Dr. Jones is currently completing his first book, which represents the first major study of racial inequality in the congressional workplace. He is a former congressional intern.

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## Pay Our Interns

Pay Our Interns (POI) was founded in 2016 by two Latinos (Carlos Mark Vera and Guillermo Creamer Jr.) who worked as unpaid interns on Capitol Hill. POI is focused on ensuring that all people, regardless of their background or location, have equitable access to professional career paths through the implementation of paid internships. They released a report in June 2017 titled, "Experience Doesn't Pay the Bills," providing a policy roadmap for Congress to address this issue. In 2018, POI convinced a group of bipartisan legislators to convene and pass \$14 million for a Congressional fund. The following year, they successfully convinced Congress to increase the fund to \$17.3 million. Since then, they have created a guideline on how to operationalize equitable internship programs targeting Congressional offices and launched a public engagement campaign called "Reflect Us." The goal of Reflect Us is to inform communities of color about this new funding and provide instructions on how to take advantage of it. POI's work has led to the creation of over 5,000 paid internships. POI is headquartered in Washington, D.C. For more information visit [www.payourinterns.org](http://www.payourinterns.org) or contact us at [congress@payourinterns.org](mailto:congress@payourinterns.org).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Senate appropriated \$5 million in 2018 for FY 2019. They disbursed that money based on state population. Each office can pay interns without any restriction. Funds were made available in October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> There were significant complications in the rollout of the paid internship programs in the House. Although the Senate offices had their funds available to them in October 2018, House offices did not have access to these funds until the House Administration Committee finalized its disbursement guidelines.

See Paul Kane, "Paid internships are a reality again in Congress after public shaming," *The Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), March 12 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/paid-internships-are-a-reality-again-in-congress-after-public-shaming/2019/03/12/ff371f54-44e9-11e9-94ab-d2dda3c0df52\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/paid-internships-are-a-reality-again-in-congress-after-public-shaming/2019/03/12/ff371f54-44e9-11e9-94ab-d2dda3c0df52_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Harrison W. Fox and Susan Webb Hammond, *Congressional Staffs: The invisible force in American lawmaking* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> For research on racial representation among House staff see Elsie L. Scott et al., *Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff*, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (Washington D.C., 2018), <https://jointcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Racial-Diversity-Among-Top-US-House-Staff-9-11-18-245pm-1.pdf>

For research on racial representation among Senate staff see James R. Jones, *Racial Diversity Among Top Senate Staff*, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (2015), <https://jointcenter.org/research/racial-diversity-among-top-senate-staff>.

<sup>5</sup> According to the 2019 House Employment Survey, Latinos made up an estimated 12 percent of all House staff. Compared to the percent of Latinos as House members and staff, the low percentage of Latino interns is particularly glaring.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Frey, *The Millennial Generation: A demographic bridge to America's diverse future*, Brookings Institution (Washington D.C., January 2018), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan\\_brookings-metro\\_millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan_brookings-metro_millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> More information about our methodology and statistical analysis is available online at [payourinterns.org](http://payourinterns.org).

<sup>8</sup> "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," Pew Research Center, 2016, <https://www.people-press.org/2016/09/13/the-parties-on-the-eve-of-the-2016-election-two-coalitions-moving-further-apart/>

<sup>9</sup> "Democrats Racially Diverse; Republicans Mostly White," Gallup, Inc., 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/160373/democrats-racially-diverse-republicans-mostly-white.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Previous research examining gender representation among staff has shown that while women achieved parity overall in the congressional workplace, many staff positions are, in fact, gendered. For instance, women are overrepresented as schedulers and office managers and underrepresented as chiefs of staff. See Casey Burgat, "Among House staff, women are well represented. Just not in the senior positions.," *The Washington Post*, January 20 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/20/among-house-staff-women-are-well-represented-just-not-in-the-senior-positions/>.

<sup>11</sup> See Kevin Stainback and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, *Documenting desegregation: Racial and gender segregation in private sector employment since the Civil Rights Act* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> This report is available online at <https://payourinterns.org/congressional-report>

<sup>13</sup> Casey Burgat and Trey Billing, *Everything you've ever wanted to know about educational pipelines to Capitol Hill*, LegBranch (November 4 2019), <https://www.legbranch.org/everything-youve-ever-wanted-to-know-about-educational-pipelines-to-capitol-hill/>.