

Facing institutional barriers to sponsoring bills in Congress, newly elected minority representatives cosponsor far more than their non-minority counterparts

*In the US Congress, a key signal of a legislator's effectiveness is their sponsorship of bills, but minority representatives, particularly women of color, often face institutional and informal barriers to sponsoring legislation. In new research, **José J. Alcocer** explores how minority representatives work around these constraints by cosponsoring bills. He finds that newly elected minority members are likely to have a 20 percent higher cosponsorship rate compared to their white predecessors, and that this rate is even greater for legislators who are women of color.*

Within a single two-year congressional session, newly elected racial minority members introduce about nine fewer bills than the white incumbents they replace, but sign on as supporters (cosponsors) to roughly 74 more. Those stark numbers come from [my new research](#) which pinpoints what shifts when a member of the US House's race changes and everything else stays the same.

Why bill sponsorship and cosponsorship strategy matters

Bills are the currency of the congressional realm, but not all carry equal value. Sponsoring one – when a House member introduces a bill for consideration - is costly. It requires drafting language, negotiating edits, and navigating committee hurdles. Even with modern congressional support tools like stock language, messaging bills, and institutional support like the [House Legislative Council](#), sponsorship remains a resource-intensive and politically demanding task. That's why prime sponsorship continues to signal serious [legislative leadership and policy ownership](#) for the House member.

Cosponsorship, where members signal their support for a bill which has been introduced, by contrast, offers a more flexible and lower-cost alternative. Members can join a bill early to build momentum or late to avoid risk, allowing them to signal commitment, test the political climate, or respond to interest group pressure. This timing flexibility makes cosponsorship a powerful tool for [coalition-building](#). By broadening a bill's base of support, it can enhance the bill's perceived viability, particularly when media coverage and legislative trackers highlight large numbers of cosponsors as a sign of traction.

Over time, the [strategic value](#) of cosponsorship has grown. Media coverage and scorecards increasingly treat cosponsors as key players, further blurring the line between authorship and support. For lawmakers who often face [higher barriers](#) to sponsoring legislation, cosponsorship provides a way to demonstrate responsiveness, signal priorities, and build political capital. While it may lack the symbolic heft of formal sponsorship, cosponsorship plays a growing role in shaping perceptions of legislative engagement and productivity.

The hurdles minority lawmakers face

Formal rules may appear neutral, but power inside Congress is not. Minority lawmakers remain underrepresented in the gatekeeping roles that control legislative

flow. Their bills are [more likely to die](#) in the House Rules Committee or stall without hearings or markups, especially when they address racial equity. Beyond formal bottlenecks, the day-to-day culture of Congress imposes its own barriers. Minority representatives, particularly women of color, [face more interruptions](#) during hearings and [receive fewer invitations](#) to bipartisan working groups. Informal caucus networks, where cosponsorship and favors are traded, still revolve around longstanding, often white and male, friendship circles. Against this backdrop, the strategic logic is clear. Sponsoring a bill means navigating [uphill battles](#) for time and attention. Cosponsorship, by contrast, offers an alternative way for marginalized legislators to claim credit, build coalitions, and leave a legislative mark.

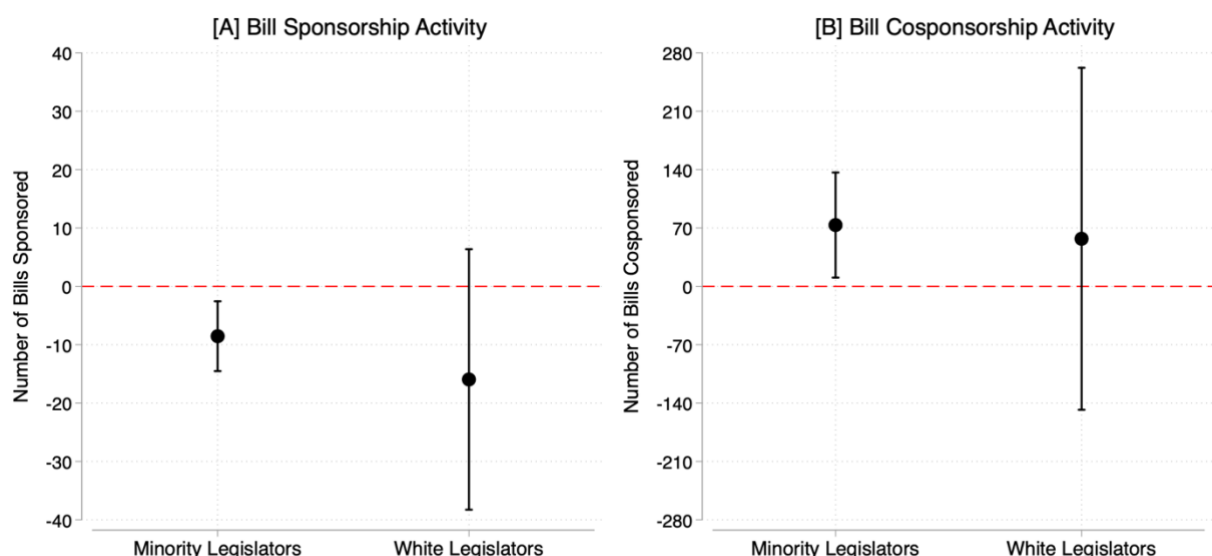
Testing the effects of racial minority members replacing white incumbents

To test this idea, I followed every congressional House district from 2013 through 2020 and flag those where a minority candidate replaced a white incumbent in the 2016 or 2018 elections. For each, I used a data-driven method to construct an imaginary congressional district representative that never left office and who has the sponsorship and cosponsorship patterns of the outgoing white legislators from before they were voted out of office. This [method](#) allows me to measure the effect of racial turnover on bill sponsorship and cosponsorship by mapping what a counterfactual legislator would have done had the House seat not changed hands.

After turnovers, sponsorship drops and cosponsorship surges—but only for racial-minority lawmakers

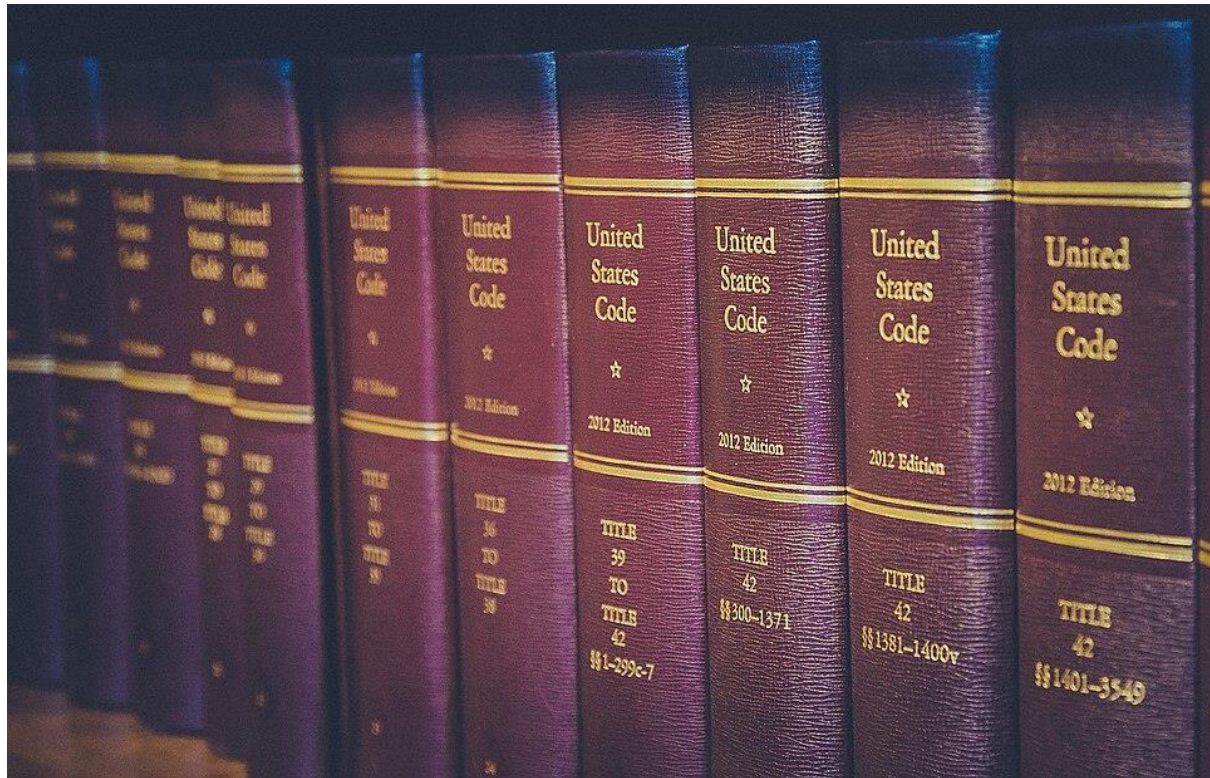
I find that minority freshmen House members introduce about nine fewer bills per congressional session—roughly 40 percent below what their white predecessors were on track to file. At the same time, those new members sign on to roughly 74 additional bills, a jump of about 20 percent in cosponsorship activity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Change in bill sponsorship and cosponsorship activity after House seat turnovers, by incoming legislators' race



Note: Point estimates denote the weighted average treatment effects on the treated derived from staggered SDID models for congressional districts where a racial minority legislator replaced a white incumbent and a white legislator replaced a white incumbent, respectively. Vertical lines reflect 95 percent confidence intervals, computed using bootstrapped delta-method standard errors based on 1,000 replications.

The obvious follow-up question is whether this is simply what happens any time a seat changes. To check, I ran the identical exercise on “placebo” congressional districts that replaced one white member with another during the same elections. In that comparison group the estimated activities sit almost bang on the red zero line and there was no statistically detectable change in either sponsoring or cosponsoring.



Tony Webster, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

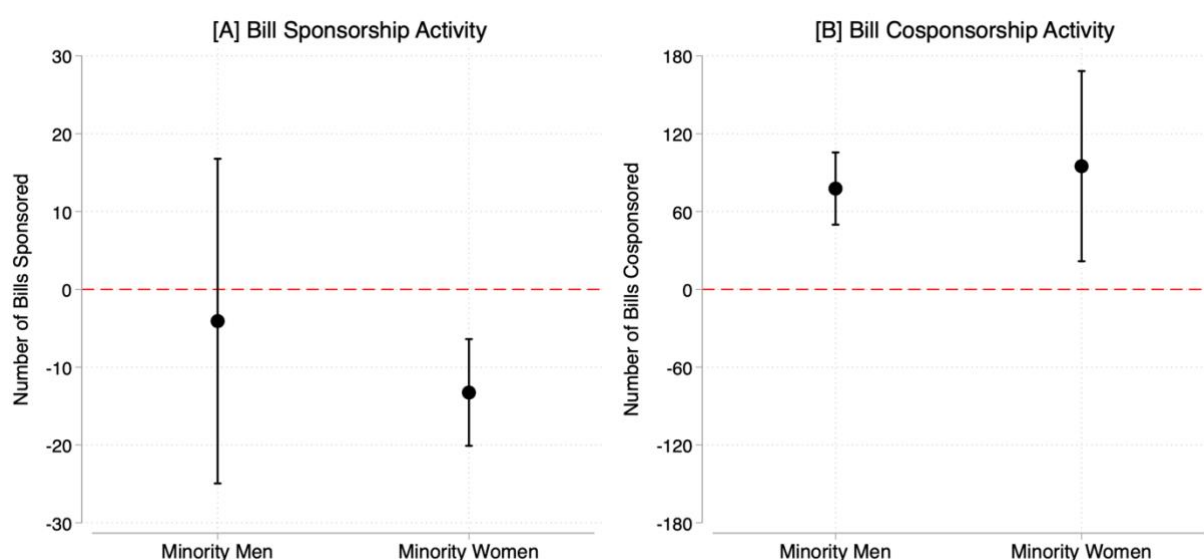
The move away from prime sponsorship toward coalition-building is unique to racial-minority freshmen and is not something that all freshmen legislators do. Faced with higher gate-keeping hurdles for getting their own bills heard, minority lawmakers appear to invest their scarce resources where it pays off—forging alliances by adding their names to colleagues’ bills and helping to push those measures forward.

Women of color drive the sponsorship dip and the cosponsorship surge

Across the 2016 and 2018 turnover districts, race and gender intersect in two clear ways. First, women of color shoulder the steepest drop in bill sponsorship. As shown in Figure 2, they introduce about 13 fewer bills per session than the white members they replaced, a 60 percent decline relative to the benchmark. This estimate is precise, highlighting how the compounded race–gender hierarchy inside Congress narrows their room to lead legislation.

Second, while both minority men and women pivot hard toward coalition-building, women go furthest. While minority men cosponsor about 78 extra bills per session, minority women add roughly 95 more, a slightly higher jump that hints that the very lawmakers most squeezed out of agenda-setting compensate by leaning even harder into coalition politics.

Figure 2 - Change in bill sponsorship and cosponsorship activity after House seat turnovers, by incoming minority legislators' gender



Note: Point estimates denote the weighted average treatment effects on the treated derived from staggered SDID models for congressional districts where a racial minority man replaced a white incumbent and a racially minority woman replaced a white incumbent, respectively. Vertical lines reflect 95 percent confidence intervals, computed using bootstrapped delta-method standard errors based on 1,000 replications.

Rethinking productivity and representation, even beyond the halls of Congress

These data upend the idea that fewer sponsored bills mean weaker legislators. For minority members, cosponsorship is not window dressing, it is an adaptive workaround that still shapes policy. If observers tally only prime sponsorship, they systematically underrate lawmakers who already face structural headwinds.

Institutional barriers like those in the House exist in state legislatures, city councils, and even courts. Formal neutrality overlaying informal gatekeeping. The adaptive behaviors observed here are not quirks, but rather structural signals. They show how institutional rules and informal norms driven by the majority can constrain the behavior of the minority. As a result, these marginalized actors are forced to rely on alternative pathways to stay influential and signal democratic responsiveness to their peers and constituents. Counting the bills a member starts tells only half the story. To gauge democratic health, we must also count the ones they help finish.

*This article is based on the paper, "[Minority Legislators Sponsor and Cosponsor Differently from White Legislators: Causal Evidence from U.S. Congress](#)" in the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*.*

Subscribe to [LSE USAPP's email newsletter](#) to receive a weekly article roundup.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

About the author

[Jose J. Alcocer](#), Ph.D., M.P.P., is an Applied Research Statistician at Harvard Law School specializing in legislative institutions, political methodology, and computational social science. His work integrates political science and data science, using statistical modeling, machine learning, and causal inference to investigate issues of race and ethnicity. He is a researcher on the [Everyday Respect](#) project, a multi-institutional initiative developing multimodal AI models to decode officer-driver interactions during Los Angeles traffic stops, aimed at advancing police transparency and accountability. Separately, as a solo project, he is currently building a 25-year network of congressional bill sponsorship and cosponsorship to examine how race and gender influence cross-racial collaboration and agenda setting in the U.S. Congress.

