Scholars studying the causes and consequences of political representation, particularly in terms of gender and race, often turn to a concept called descriptive representation. Descriptive representation tells us the degree to which elected officials resemble their constituents, and the concept has implications on the way people legislate. In other words, do people vote for candidates of their same racial/ethnic background or gender? If they do, does this affect the type of policies an elected official pursues? Further, if citizens see people who look like them in office, does it have an effect on their political attitudes and participation?

In this book, Christopher J. Clark argues that descriptive representation is a more multi-faceted phenomenon than previously shown, particularly when observed at the state level. He contends that black political involvement, political attitudes, and public opinion are contingent on more than being represented by a single black elected official. Rather, they hinge on the proportion of African Americans making up a state legislature—what Clark terms “black seat share”—as well as the degree to which that proportion reflects the demographic makeup of the state. As well, Clark pinpoints the critical mass of African American legislators necessary to initiate the creation of black caucuses, an important institution for minority representation. Clark bases his study on an examination of black representation in state legislatures between 1966 and 2010, looking particularly at black political opinion and involvement, as well as the development of welfare and education policy.

- Provides evidence that the relationship between black state population and the black representation ratio is nonlinear
- Offers the first systematic analysis of the conditions under which multiple legislative black caucuses form
- Shows that an increased black presence has both positive and negative consequences