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Introduction

It has been slave labor on the Hill for years for Blacks who have had no upward mobility, no chance for better working conditions. Congress might be exempt from those laws, but we must make sure that our employees are treated equally and fairly.

—REPRESENTATIVE HAROLD FORD SR., 1989¹

This is a rich White man's place.

—JOSEPH, BLACK CONGRESSIONAL STAFFER

THE UNITED STATES Congress is known as the “Last Plantation.” You will not find this inglorious moniker in any of the many introductory texts that survey America’s history, nor does it appear in any advanced readings about legislative studies. You will not hear this nickname parlayed among political scientists. But it is a name used widely and often by the people who know Congress most intimately—lawmakers of both parties and their sizable and powerful staffs. In designating Congress as the last plantation, these congressmen, staff, and even reporters were, perhaps unknowingly and unwittingly,

identifying what I argue is a central dynamic in preserving America's racial hierarchy.

Drawing on my own experience as a congressional staffer, along with more than seventy-five interviews, I make a three-part argument in this book. First, that racism and race have formed and maintained a racial hierarchy in the heart of our nation's most important lawmaking body. Second, that congressional staffers substantively shape legislation and policy outcomes that are largely underplayed, unappreciated, and overall absent in the literature. Third and relatedly, that the racial hierarchy within the congressional workplace, combined with the outsized power of Congressional staffers, plays a significant role in instantiating White supremacy in federal law and throughout American politics.

While the existence of this congressional "plantation" is in some ways glaringly obvious—members of Congress are overwhelmingly White; their aides equally homogenous; and low-paid service workers are mostly Black and Latino—this hierarchy is in other ways quite invisible to the American public.² The structure and ethos of Congress make it convenient for congressional workers to be invisible, obscuring their identity, labor, and existence. These staffers work behind the scenes writing legislation, organizing hearings, and maintaining the Capitol. They are the machinery, mechanisms, and glue that make Congress work! While there is certainly much that they do that is influential, and invisible, I show throughout this book how racism is an even more powerful—and even less visible—force that effectively governs Congress. Racism shapes the work of congressional staffers, impacting who works there, what they do, how they do it, and what kinds of careers and lives they will go on to lead. Most vitally, I argue that by governing the lives and careers of congressional staffers, racism shapes Congress and the entire American

political system. The result is that racial inequality is an inherent part of the daily work of Congress, and it meaningfully shapes the work Congress does—the laws they pass; the deals they broker; and the lived realities of the American people.

The roots of the last plantation nickname are deep and knotted but also quite simple: the thousands of people who are employed by Congress—from the senators' aides to the janitors and cooks who make their lives possible—were not covered by the legal workplace protections that cover every other American worker. Congress has written and passed numerous laws that improve the lives and the careers of the American worker, though inequalities in our culture remain abundant, and though there are certain realms of life—like income and wealth distribution—where things are getting worse rather than better.³ The last century of American law contains a clear direction when it comes to the rights of workers. The first and most noticeable of these was New Deal legislation in the 1930s that established a minimum wage, standardized work hours, and emboldened unions to counter unbridled capitalism. Then in 1964 came the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination and removed barriers from the workplace for people of color, extending these protections to White women as well as immigrant and religious minorities. As a result of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, American workplaces grew more diverse. White women and people of color, who were previously excluded from professional workplaces or assigned to the most junior roles, gained entry into new professions and ascended into senior roles.⁴ While progress from this legislation has been uneven, private and nonprofit workplaces undoubtedly became more egalitarian as a result.⁵ After the Civil Rights Act, Congress moved to assure safe and healthy working conditions for men and women by setting and enforcing tough standards.

Across the twentieth century Congress passed numerous laws that applied to other employers but not to itself.⁶ Lawmakers argued that they had to preserve the separation of powers between two branches of the federal government to ensure they remained equal. Lawmakers worried that the executive branch, which enforces federal workplace regulations, would not only oversee the congressional workplace, but, more dangerously, would begin to regulate congressional power. Their answer to this imagined constitutional conundrum was for Congress to exempt itself from federal workplace laws. As a consequence, congressional workers were denied, again and again and again, the increasingly expanded set of rights that federal law guaranteed to every other American worker. This is until lawmakers passed the Congressional Accountability Act in 1995, which applied eleven federal workplace laws to the legislative branch.

Beginning in the 1970s, Black congressional employees and a handful of courageous lawmakers drew attention to widespread racial and gender discrimination in the congressional workplace. They pointed to an unequal distribution of staff positions along racial lines, unfair salary practices, and inequity in safety standards among workers in the Capitol. These workers and lawmakers argued that since congressional workers were exempt from the protections of federal workplace laws, Congress was one of the last places where you could still discriminate and exploit workers without legal ramifications. In a new racial epoch committed to equal opportunity and antidiscrimination, Congress was an outlier—it was the only institution to survive our racist past unchanged. Black employees began referring to their place of work as “the last plantation.”⁷ In 1978, Ohio Senator John Glenn became the first lawmaker to use the term on the record. During a Senate hearing about the handling of discrimination complaints, he said, “No

longer can the Congress of the United States be viewed as the 'last plantation' where anything goes."⁸ The name stuck. And almost fifty years later, it still applies. The Capitol is an overwhelmingly White space.

Black Capital

In White spaces such as Congress, Black people carve out spaces for themselves. In *The Last Plantation*, I show how Black workers hold and create agency to shape their own destinies and confront White domination. Throughout this book I will explore the many ways Black people in the Capitol use Congress to fight racism rather than entrench it. Though Black lawmakers are a part of these contestations, their contributions and accomplishments are well recorded.⁹ There is a much larger story of Black capital that needs to be told. It is the story of Black workers' invisible labor in the Capitol. Black workers are not elected; they cast no legislative votes. However, they are important actors both in showing how Congress is a racialized institution and also how that institution can be altered from within.¹⁰ While I will focus on the careers and experiences of Black staffers specifically, Black workers employed in service and auxiliary roles also labor to keep the capital running. The story of Black people in the Capitol would be incomplete without them. Black service workers challenge racism in the Capitol too. In fact, they did it first, because, for over a century, these were the only positions on the Hill available to Black men and women. What's more, the fates of Black staffers and service workers are intertwined and key to understanding how Congress has transformed as a racialized institution over the last century.

I offer Black capital as a conceptual framework to identify and explain the power and agency of Black congressional

workers. Black workers' efforts to recruit other Black men and women to the congressional workplace and adaptive strategies that nurture and affirm group membership and belonging is Black capital. Black capital, as a form of labor and practice of value creation as well as a quality of social and cultural capital, encompasses Black workers' expertise and ingenuity, particularly that which they use to advance legislative work as well as their own collective efforts to make the congressional workplace more inclusive, fair, and just.¹¹ At the same time, Black capital, like all capital, is context dependent and expresses the relational *and* spatial dimensions of Black political power.¹² It is based upon a Black epistemology that recognizes the extraordinary contributions of everyday Black folks and that captures the multitude of ways they understand and use power.¹³ Black capital is a form of social capital amplified by the processes and conditions of Black labor in government. It is seminal to claims for Black freedom and racial justice on the Hill and across the nation. Consequently, this framework offers a more expansive view of American racial formations, particularly who has power and how it is used in American politics.¹⁴

The presence of Black workers predates the election of the first Black members of Congress by almost sixty years.¹⁵ Lawmakers employed Black workers first as attendants and messengers in the early nineteenth century, and after the Civil War, they began to hire them in greater numbers to celebrate and cement their new status as citizens just as the first African Americans were elected to Congress.¹⁶ Black employment continued in the Capitol throughout the nadir of Black politics, between 1901 and 1928, when no African Americans served in Congress. In the 1930s, lawmakers hired Black professionals to work in their personal and committee offices.¹⁷ Black workers are witnesses, in other words, to two centuries of racism. They have been the loudest and longest critics of inequity on

the Hill as it has a direct impact on their livelihoods. Their careers and experiences make it clear that institutional analyses of Congress that do not account for the constitutive role of racism in legislative history are incomplete. Just as important, their careers prove that change is possible.

There is much we can learn by placing Black workers at the center of legislative analysis. By highlighting Black capital, I aim to broaden how we study Congress. Feminist scholar of Congress Cindy Rosenthal said, “Our understanding of institutions is inextricably bound to the dominant individuals who populate them.”¹⁸ I want to change that. In the following chapters, I will focus primarily on the career experiences and activism of Black staffers as well as Black service workers. Both groups point to ways that legislative processes work and that are generally unaccounted for in race-neutral congressional analyses.¹⁹ Existing profiles on congressional staff assume that they are exclusively young or middle-aged White men, and they do not fully account for how race and gender shape professional identities or career trajectories.²⁰ I aim, through focusing on Black capital, to broaden the conceptual and methodological approaches used in studying Congress by taking a Black epistemological standpoint that recognizes the significance of Black workers as valuable sources of knowledge.

By Black epistemologies, I refer both to the broad corpus of literary and analytical work by Black and Black Studies scholars as well as the lived, everyday ways of knowing and making do that Black people across the country use to get by and to thrive.²¹ Black epistemological approaches can reveal theories of knowledge that emanate from the lived experiences of Black men and women. On Capitol Hill, by attending to Black staffers’ knowledge and practices through a Black epistemological approach, I demonstrate how congressional employment is a White racial project and how Black workers’ knowledge

and actions reorient this project to facilitate racial justice and more inclusive policymaking.

In *The Last Plantation*, I use the plantation metaphor to investigate how Congress operates as an inequality regime.²² The term coined by sociologist Joan Acker describes how race, gender, and class all act as intersecting and overlapping forces that shape how organizations operate. As she describes, these forces dictate who has power and who does not; workplace decisions that explain how work should be completed; hiring and promotions; salary, rewards, and punishment; respect and authority; and feelings of belongings and nonbelonging.²³ To this end, Joseph, who I quoted in the epigraph, told me Congress was a “plantation.” He explained that Whites have the visible face of Congress, but “all the work done behind the scenes is done by Blacks,” including most of the cooks and custodians in congressional restaurants.

The congressional workplace is unlike most inequality regimes that sociologists typically study. Congress is Congress! It is an immensely powerful institution, where inequality that is anchored locally has national and global implications. While it is important for us to understand the intersectional nature of legislative inequality, I will focus our attention on its racial underpinning, owing to the extant literature on gender and class in Congress.²⁴ I build on the work of sociologists of racism like Wendy Leo Moore, Victor Ray, Adia Wingfield, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes, all of whom draw attention to how race is at the center of organizational life.²⁵ They demonstrate how racism shapes how organizations develop and change; determines positions and salary and consequently rewards and punishments; and influences individuals’ behaviors and interactions. Of course, racism does not explain everything that happens in an organization. However, as these scholars point out, it does explain a lot, and for much of our country’s

history we have been unwilling to acknowledge how much racism does matter. The study of racialized organizations commands our attention to focus on structure and the permanence of racism. I agree with much of this scholarship, but I also want to show how racialized organizations are malleable.²⁶

I see Congress in *Black and White*.²⁷ It is a space built by enslaved Black laborers and where there have been ten times as many White enslavers to serve in the legislature than Black men and women.²⁸ A workplace where the namesakes of the office buildings honor White men who have served in Congress and where one building in particular, the Russell Senate Office Building, commemorates an avowed White supremacist.²⁹ And where insular hiring and promotion processes yield a super majority of Whites in congressional staff positions. At the same time, I see Congress as a space where Black men and women have fought for their right to be included. And once inside, where they continued to fight, standing up to racists and demanding justice. From them, we can see the shortcomings of Congress but also its potential to execute democratic principles.

I develop my argument in two parts by analyzing the career experiences of Black congressional staffers. First, I show how the congressional workplace produces inequality. Lawmakers' decisions to exempt themselves from the regulations they impose on other employers have led to insular hiring and management decisions that perpetuate racial inequality. They have created and managed an unequal workplace where positions are racially stratified, space is segregated, and identities and interactions are racialized. This hierarchy constrains the agency of non-White staffers and reinforces the credentialing of a White power elite. Second, I demonstrate how Black workers—from legislative staffers to cafeteria servers—have fought back against these unequal work processes and injustices on Capitol

Hill. I show how Black workers have reimagined Congress as a *Black capitol*, a site of minority empowerment where they use their institutional positions, however marginal they might be, to promote racial justice.

*Legislative Work and the
Reproduction of Racism*

Previous research has examined the duties and responsibilities of legislative staff and investigated whether this group is made up of mere passive agents who support their political bosses, or if this unelected class exercises independent effects on the policymaking process.³⁰ However, rather than looking at the power that legislative staff hold individually, it is important to consider how power is distributed within this large work system and how it affects democratic governance and political representation more broadly. Put simply, it matters (substantively and symbolically) how work opportunities are allocated in a national lawmaking institution.

Most Americans, myself included, are unaware of the sophisticated ecosystem that exists under the iconic neoclassical dome and how it functions day to day. I was so overwhelmed when I first stepped inside the Capitol as a summer intern in 2006. The Capitol was much, much bigger than I expected. I had thought a lot about what it would be like to step onto the House floor for the first time or visit a hearing room in the Senate, but I did not really consider how Capitol Hill was a world unto itself, similar in size to my university campus only three miles away. There are the personal offices of 535 elected officials and six nonvoting members; dozens of committees; support and administrative offices; flex spaces that host staff meetings, professional development seminars, and receptions; a sprawling visitors center; several restaurants,

delis, and convenience stores; office supply stores; dry cleaners; cell phone providers; a childcare center; barbershops and hair salons; post offices; congressional credit unions; and two members-only gyms. There is even an underground subway system that connects the office buildings to the Capitol and an independent power plant that provides chilled and steamed water to cool and heat offices. Walking from one end of the Capitol to the other, which requires traversing different elevations, is tiresome, and I quickly learned if you are working or visiting the Hill, you better wear comfortable shoes.

The cognitive dissonance I experienced was jarring, but looking back, it was quite understandable. We look at Congress from a front-stage perspective, as it has been grandly depicted on postcards, the fifty dollar bill, and the news. We observe lawmakers in highly dramatized moments like voting, hearings, and speeches against the backdrop of stately ceremonial rooms. However, we do not see all the preparation that goes on backstage across a vast setting and from an array of workers who produce the moments we watch on cable news or social media. This prominent but simplified view not only obscures the size of Congress but hides all the people who work on the Hill.

After my first week on the Hill, I was not sure if I would ever learn how to navigate this place. The Capitol complex includes six office buildings, three each for the House and Senate. To the south sit the Rayburn, Longworth, and Cannon House office buildings. The Senate side is north of the Capitol building. It includes the Russell, Dirksen, and Hart office buildings. Lawmakers have their personal offices in multiroom suites, which vary in size. The personal offices of freshmen representatives can be cramped. Reception areas sometimes double as conference rooms, and aides work side by side in cramped rooms of policy and communications staff. By contrast, senior

representatives have more spacious and private office accommodations that can be twice as large. Senators have the largest offices of all, some of which span multiple floors. From the outside, all the neoclassical buildings look distinguished and orderly. However, inside is a different story—it is chaotic. In the summer months, the hallways swell with new intern cohorts and tourists who collide with the usual mix of lawmakers, workers, and K Street lobbyists. It is hard to orient yourself in this sea of dark-hued suits, and it is made more difficult by the unique layout of each building. Navigating the long hallways feels like a maze, and the cacophony of clacking heels, fast-paced conversations, and the deafening buzzers that alert lawmakers to their voting schedule only add to this confusion. Learning the physical layout of the Capitol takes time. However, what truly defines Congress is not its buildings or the rooms inside, but the people who work there.

The congressional workforce is divided between two groups: staffers who work directly for lawmakers in their personal, committee, and leadership offices, and an army of auxiliary workers who handle the administrative and physical operations of the Capitol. This last group includes police officers, groundskeepers, custodians, food workers, and non-partisan professionals. Many of these workers are employed by the Architect of the Capitol, the federal agency responsible for the maintenance, operation, and preservation of the Capitol Complex. In addition, the clerk of the House and secretary of the Senate employ a range of nonpartisan professionals like stenographers, curators, HR professionals, and historians to handle legislative, financial, and administrative functions. Ultimately, Congress might look like a singular institution from the outside looking in, but in reality, it is a highly fragmented work organization with over thirty thousand workers employed across hundreds of offices.

Senators and representatives oversee all the different agencies and offices that handle day-to-day operations and personnel management as well as their own personal staffs. As such, lawmakers are responsible for the management and well-being of all Capitol workers. Ultimately, they have final say about what happens on Capitol Hill. Managing a work organization this size is no easy job, especially when the task of overseeing legislative branch workers often comes a distant second to legislating itself. The rules that govern this entire system have evolved haphazardly, and as I will show in the next chapter, produce inequality among workers.

In this book, I focus on the careers and experiences of congressional staffers. Lawmakers employ on average fourteen staffers in the House and forty-nine staffers in the Senate in their personal offices to assist them with representation, oversight, and policymaking work. Congressional staff are split between DC and state offices. Staffers in state offices primarily handle constituent services, whereas DC staff juggle policy and political work. Although congressional office structure varies, a typical office is organized by senior, mid-level, and junior roles.

At the top of any congressional office chain of command—aside from the lawmaker—is the chief of staff. They hire, promote, and terminate staff; establish office protocols; and provide political and policy guidance. Other senior staffers include legislative directors and communications directors who manage policy and press operations, respectively. Legislative directors oversee lawmakers' policy portfolios and closely monitor what happens on the floor. They provide vote recommendations and consequently must have a working knowledge of a vast swath of policy issues and institutional procedures. They work closely with communications directors who shape their boss's voice externally through strategic messaging and

with the goal of helping them stand out in a crowded chamber. To this end, communication directors help lawmakers create, refine, and amplify their positions on a national stage. Top staffers have a lot of power and influence. They are often the last individuals lawmakers speak to right before they cast any vote. What's more, it is these individuals who fill in for lawmakers when they are busy, and for these reasons, political scientist Michael Malbin describes them as *unelected representatives* because they have the power to make executive decisions when their bosses are unavailable.³¹ In American politics, access is everything and something elites try to buy.³² Which is why top staffers, who have deep relationships with our nation's elected leaders, are often recruited by corporations to further their agendas.

Next, mid-level staff hold positions like legislative assistants, legislative counsels, and policy advisors. These staffers are heavily involved in legislative work. They are lawmakers' eyes and ears. They meet with different stakeholders, research and write legislation, and monitor legislative action, all of which allow them to provide recommendations for how a lawmaker should act.

Finally, junior staffers include staff assistants, legislative correspondents, and schedulers. They handle the administrative business of congressional offices and have limited policy roles. In addition, fellows and interns assist with this work. Interns and fellows can have either paid or unpaid roles. If you have ever called, written, or visited your member of Congress, it was probably one of these junior staffers with whom you interacted. It is tempting to view junior staffers as people without power, but everyone on the Hill has power. What's more, as I will discuss in chapter 2, the pathway from a junior staffer to a more senior role is very short. In the span of a couple years, a staff assistant can become a legislative director.

This is why obtaining one of these entry-level roles can be highly competitive.

In addition to personal office staffers, there are committee staffers. Committees, led by staff directors, are where most legislation originates these days.³³ Committee staffers generally have advanced degrees and expertise in the committee's jurisdiction. These roles are highly sought after because of the substantive opportunities to shape policy. Lastly, there are the staffers who work directly for congressional leaders like the Speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader. Leadership staffers provide strategy and guidance for party leaders and help them manage their caucus. They also help organize the House and Senate Floor schedules, message party goals, and liaise with the executive branch.

This book grapples with fundamental questions about the role that Congress plays in shaping the US racial order, the overarching system that puts Whites on top and everyone else, including Black and Brown people, on the bottom. The dominant explanation of the Capitol's role in American racial formations is that lawmakers structure the racial order, for better or worse, through public policy.³⁴ For example, social scientists have focused on how lawmakers constructed a social welfare system that primarily benefited Whites and a mass incarceration apparatus that disproportionately punished non-Whites.³⁵ The impact of public policy cannot be overstated. But what is far less acknowledged is the vast, although far more subtle, impact of the people our lawmakers chose to hire.

The people who lawmakers hire are then the people who help them construct the laws they write and negotiate the bills that they try to pass. They are the people who lawmakers trust and empower. They are also overwhelmingly White. Recent policy reports show that people of color are significantly underrepresented in top staff positions like chiefs of staff,

communication directors, and legislative directors. For example, although people of color make up over 40 percent of the national population, they only account for 18 percent of top staff, like chiefs of staff, communications directors, and legislative directors in the House and 11 percent of top staff in the Senate.³⁶ The underrepresentation of communities of color is shameful. It is also highly problematic for an institution whose core responsibility is to represent Americans' diverse interests.

Congressional employment, as it exists, represents an unofficial policy statement about who gets to participate in government. As it is written now, it is primarily for Whites only. The underrepresentation of people of color is a unique form of marginalization through which they are excluded from making racial policy that is then imposed on the nation. Congress thus shapes the US racial order in two ways: through the creation of public policy and the cultivation of political professionals. In both respects, lawmakers have tremendous power to structure social inequality. While they can use their lawmaking powers to diminish preexisting inequalities, they have too often used their legislative perch to exacerbate and create new forms of inequality. Analyzing Congress as a workplace and legislative work as a labor practice reveals the hidden and more enduring forms of what I term *legislative inequality*. I define legislative inequality as the intricate interplay of both explicit and implicit mechanisms that govern the distribution of roles, positions, and responsibilities within Congress, wherein race, gender, and social class collectively and individually shape the composition and dynamics of the workforce, as well as the manner in which legislative tasks are undertaken. This encompasses insular hiring practices and nontransparent management decisions that mold the contours of the congressional workplace as well as pervasive patterns of spatial segregation and day-to-day interactions inside the

Capitol, which convey symbolic messages of inclusion and exclusion.

On Capitol Hill, the unequal distribution of resources and rewards among workers produces legislative inequality.³⁷ This process happens across multiple stages. Lawmakers have wide discretion in who they can hire, and as we will learn in the next chapter, they have not always abided by the same rules that private employers must follow to promote equal opportunity and antidiscrimination. Most of the people they hire are White and a few are people of color. But then those people of color have a harder time getting in and rising in the ranks. Thus, inequality surfaces twice, first in hiring decisions and again in how the people who are hired are rewarded and promoted. As a result, the congressional workplace is a White-dominated organization marked by barriers and insular hiring practices that promote and legitimate racial stratification among political professionals.

Racial equity in these jobs is essential because they are the embodiment of political power. First, lawmakers could not fulfill their vast responsibilities without congressional staffers. Lawmakers have very busy schedules. When they are in DC, their days are jam-packed with meetings from sunrise to sunset. On any given day they are meeting with their staff, interest groups, lobbyists, and government officials; speaking to groups visiting from their home state and at special events; attending committee hearings; and voting on legislation. The topics of all these meetings, hearings, and votes are different, which requires one to two staffers following behind the member briefing them about what is coming next. Additionally, a substantial amount of their time is spent fundraising for their next election. Fundraising is a job itself.³⁸ These busy days barely leave lawmakers with enough time to eat, let alone think, and consequently leaves staffers to do the substantive legislative

work that lawmakers cannot. This gives congressional staff a tremendous amount of responsibility. Staff must develop and enact their boss's agenda, which includes researching policy issues; reviewing and developing legislative proposals; and collaborating and coordinating with other congressional offices. These are all important components of the legislative process that staffers complete and piece together. However, unequal racial representation among staffers means that it is mostly Whites who conduct the nation's legislative business.

Second, congressional staff's vast responsibilities give them a lot of influence. Senior and mid-level staffers, in particular, have a lot of sway. As staffers gain seniority and acquire more expertise and institutional knowledge, their roles shift from just doing what their bosses tell them to helping lawmakers think about what they should do overall. In a deeply polarized and highly competitive environment, lawmakers rely on their most senior aides to help them decide what to do and how to stand out. Staffers, especially those on committees, guide lawmakers based upon their deep knowledge of complicated policy issues and their understanding of existing federal law. Additionally, top staffers provide advice from surveying the latest developments, locally and nationally, and identify opportunities to advance a lawmaker's reputation and agenda. As I will show in chapter 4, senior and mid-level staffers guide lawmakers in developing their uncrystallized agendas. Of course, the extent to which members of Congress rely on their staff exists on a continuum. Some lawmakers have brilliant political minds and provide their staff with clear directions to enact a well-thought-out and defined agenda. By contrast, some members rely on their staff a great deal. Freshmen members rely on veteran staffers to teach them the ropes when they first enter Congress.³⁹ Additionally, some long-serving members require more hands-on support from their staff as well as lawmakers

who become temporarily incapacitated due to health issues while serving.⁴⁰ But overall, the overrepresentation of Whites in senior and mid-level staff positions means that is mainly Whites who are setting and negotiating political agendas, which is problematic for our multiracial democracy.

Third, congressional employment provides staffers entry into an elite institution and unrestricted access to the nation's leaders. These jobs, even the most junior positions, provide workers with the opportunity to meet, interact, and develop relationships with decision-makers. What's more, staffers acquire social capital from their relationships with each other. Time and time again, I observed that if you want to get something done on the Hill it depends on who you know.

Congressional employment trains, socializes, and credentials political talent. On Capitol Hill, congressional staffers acquire issue expertise, develop social relationships with other political elites, and learn the intimate dimensions of policymaking and politicking. Imbued with these resources, congressional staff leave Capitol Hill for more influential political positions. In this way, the congressional workplace is a training ground and subsequent feeder institution to other elite political workplaces. These future career paths include journeys to elected office as well as senior roles in the executive and judicial branches, political campaigns, lobbying and consulting, and the nonprofit and advocacy sectors.⁴¹ Inequality that begins within the walls of the Capitol expands outward throughout Washington, DC, and across the nation through the dissemination of a White power elite.⁴²

The unequal racial makeup of congressional staff is one of the most important problems subverting our multiracial democracy. The effects are multiple. It enshrines a racial hierarchy within Congress itself when it is supposed to be the federal branch of government most representative of the nation. It

undermines the entire legislative process from start to finish, amplifying the experiences and preferences of Whites in policy discussions, and ultimately in federal law, while marginalizing communities of color. Finally, it empowers and credentials an unrepresentative group to participate in American politics at an even more influential level in their future jobs. Congressional employment has been a mechanism to instantiate White supremacy at deep levels for decades.

Methods

For this book, I interviewed seventy-eight current and former congressional staffers between 2010 and 2015. The majority of these individuals were Black (53 percent). Women made up 47 percent of this sample. Collectively, these staffers had a rich set of experiences. They worked directly for lawmakers in their personal offices (in Washington and back home); in committees; and in leadership and other supporting offices. Through their careers they occupied multiple roles within and across offices. Accordingly, among this group, 49 percent were top senior staffers like chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors; 39 percent were mid-level staff like legislative assistants; and 12 percent held junior roles like staff assistants and interns. In addition, 47 percent had experiences working for a Black lawmaker and 49 percent had worked for a White lawmaker.

I conducted the majority of interviews on Capitol Hill. I would meet staff wherever and whenever they were able to meet, mindful of their busy and unpredictable schedules. Sometimes this meant coming to them and meeting in their boss's private office during a recess period. These were special moments where they could reflect quietly, surrounded by ceremonial furnishings and political memorabilia, about their

presence in a powerful institution. Many times, their offices were crowded, so we would go downstairs to a cafeteria in the basement. We would always try to find a quiet space, but that was not always possible. Those moments brought to mind how Congress is a busy workplace, and staffers sought to explain how they fit into this complex system. Lastly, to speak with former staffers, I ventured to their new offices, often along the K Street business corridor in Washington. These corporate offices did not have the grandeur of a state building, but as lobbyists and consultants these former staffers now had their own private space and the luxury of not worrying about time as they reflected on their old jobs. Wherever I met a staffer I was eager to learn about their career and political perspectives.

I started these conversations asking them how they got their start—probing about what drew them to the Hill, how they found their initial position, whether they did this alone or with assistance, their initial impressions of the legislature, and the journey from one role to the next. Next, I had them explain their jobs. Here, I was interested in learning about the influence of congressional staff in lawmaking. That is, how their own ideas and racial and gender identity affected their work, and, ultimately, their boss's legislative agenda. For junior staffers, their responsibilities were straightforward; they did mostly administrative work. However, mid-level and senior staffers had an active role guiding policymaking. Additionally, with chiefs of staff I inquired about how they recruited and hired staff, especially as it related to the racial and gender composition of their office. Finally, I asked what it was like to work day to day in Congress. I inquired about their relationships and social interactions with peers and lawmakers. It was during the latter half of these approximately hour-long conversations that we would discuss the role of race, and also gender and class. As I will show, race shaped how they saw their position within

Congress and how they approached their roles and relationships with other Hill workers and lawmakers. Overall, this approach allows me to offer a sociological explanation to how Congress works, which, in many ways, builds on the earlier work of political scientists studying the legislature.⁴³

Staffers of color were very candid about their racial experiences and highlighted the structural elements of racism on the Hill.⁴⁴ This, in turn, shaped how I wrote this book. Congressional staffers are not supposed to make news or speak out about what is wrong in their offices. When staffers spoke to me, they were breaking norms and taking a risk to make the institution better. Exposing these truths could have serious repercussions on their careers, even though I spoke to them years ago. In far too many instances, there are Black men and women who are instantly identifiable by just listing their title. That is how White Washington politics is. For this reason, I do not use staffers' real names in this book. What's more, what I have learned consistently throughout this project is that racism is a persistent problem on Capitol Hill. Calling out an individual lawmaker or political party obscures how racism is built into the foundations of Congress, figuratively and literally. When I interviewed Black staffers who worked on the Hill, some as early as the 1970s, I was struck by how little had changed—from hiring processes to the racial composition of the congressional workforce. To show how this problem manifests from one session of Congress to next, I only occasionally reference individual lawmakers. When mentioning an individual by both their first and last name, I am using their actual name. On the other hand, when I use only a first name, it is a pseudonym I've assigned to someone to maintain their privacy.

Throughout this book, I also draw upon ethnographic observations and archival research. During the summers of 2010–13, I worked as a legislative intern in my old congressional office.

This position allowed me to observe congressional culture up close and embed myself in staff networks. I attended meetings of various Black staff associations, which are equivalent to affinity groups in the corporate sector. These meetings illustrated the realities and concerns of Black staffers, and, more importantly, demonstrated this group as a community.

As I mentioned in the prologue, the genesis of this project is shaped by my own racial experiences as a young Black man when I interned on the Hill in college. My racial identity and Hill experience helped me penetrate staff networks, which are traditionally closed to outsiders. One of my last interviews was with a Black Republican who worked as a staffer in the 1980s. He confided to me that he only agreed to speak with me because of a referral from another staffer and because I was a “brotha” doing a PhD at Columbia (which he knew was difficult and so he wanted to be a resource). Without those two things, he would have blown me off. Herbert Gans, the esteemed sociologist and ethnographer, encouraged me to be in people’s faces while doing fieldwork because it would be harder for them to tell me “no” when I was standing in front of them. He was right. I still received many rejections doing this project. But it was through the support and generosity of Black staff that I was able to complete this project.

Overview

In the forthcoming chapters, I use the careers of Black workers to show how the congressional workplace is an inequality regime. In chapter 1, I detail the origins of this unequal system. I argue that the main reason why inequality persists in the congressional workplace, even from one session of Congress to the next, is that lawmakers are exempt from federal workplace

law and accountable to almost no one in how they manage a vast army of workers. As lawmakers have tried to comply with federal law, I highlight how in practice they still do not follow the same rules they have mandated all other work employers follow. In chapter 2, I focus on how the inequality regime operates in the individual offices through staff recruitment and hiring. Here I give attention to the insular hiring practices that yield a White-dominated workplace and that shut many Black professionals out.

After describing the racialized structure of Congress and how difficult it is for job seekers to penetrate, I explore in chapter 3 what it feels like day-to-day to be inside. I analyze a common cultural practice within the Black community, nodding, as a way of seeing the racial landscape on the Hill. Indeed, for Black Americans in Congress, the nod is a way of seeing one another. Next, I focus on how Black staffers challenge legislative inequality. In chapter 4, I show how they counter Whiteness in legislative work by engaging in inclusive policymaking (that is how they represent diverse and marginalized interests). In chapter 5, I highlight Black staffers' work to diversify the congressional workplace and draw public attention to this problem. Finally, I conclude with policy recommendations to address legislative inequality.

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