

Reflective Democracy Research Findings Summary Report, October, 2017

Introduction

Following the 2016 election of a president who ran on overt antipathy towards women and people of color, the Reflective Democracy Campaign went back to the data, to measure exactly how these two demographics – comprising 70% of the American population – are faring when it comes to political representation.

Our findings reveal a deeply broken democracy. The American people are more diverse than ever. Today, nearly 40% of us are people of color, yet our politicians are 90% white – and mostly male. Across party lines, a majority of voters want to end the “old boys club,” where a single narrow slice of the population makes decisions for all of us. But voters are powerless to make change when both major parties resist running women and people of color as candidates. Is it because white men are more likely to win? Only in their minds. Recent studies show that candidates who are female and/or of color win at the same rates as their white male counterparts.

Our 2016 data, derived from a dataset of candidates and elected officials at the federal, state, and county levels, confirm our research from 2014, which exposed a deep imbalance in the demographics of power¹. At 30% of the population, white men hold 4 times more political power than the other 70%². And our updated opinion polls show consistent voter support for politicians who reflect the full diversity of the American people. To mobilize the movement for a reflective democracy, we’ve launched a [site full of user-friendly tools](#) for understanding and sharing our data, including our interactive National Representation Index, where users can find out how their state ranks in reflective representation.

Demographic Change? Yes. Political Change? No.

The United States is seeing major changes in its population. As recently as 1960, Americans were 85% white. Many assume that “demographics are destiny;” that power is naturally being reallocated as the US approaches majority-minority status (expected by 2044). Our data finds the opposite: nationwide, from the federal to the county level, people of color and women are grossly underrepresented among elected officials. Even in states like California and Texas, where people of color are the majority, policy-makers are over 75% white. And our first-time research into the local demographics of power reveal that ten key cities including Miami, FL, Buffalo, NY, and Fargo, ND have virtually no women in elected office.

The implications are staggering. A full 70% of Americans are being relegated to the status of special interest groups, forced to lobby mostly white male legislators to look out for their concerns. The demographics of power are why an all-male Senate Committee was in charge of women’s health. They’re why a nearly all-white commission is making critical decisions about the ever-more fragile voting rights of African Americans and other Americans of color.

¹ In addition to updating federal, state and county data, our new release includes a first-ever snapshot of local demographics of power in 200 cities, we then integrated that city data with the relevant federal, state and county data to provide an analysis of 38 major metropolitan areas.

² The National Representation Index measures political power by race and gender, comparing the demographics of a state’s population to its elected officials, and adjusting for level of office.

What is the source of this demographic inertia? The data are clear: both of our major parties run white men for office with disheartening regularity. At 51% of the population, women are only 28% of candidates for office, and at 39% of America, people of color are just 12% of candidates. So even though voters want to change the *status quo*, they can't. You can't vote someone into office if they're not on the ballot.

	All		White			People of Color		
	Women	Men	All	Women	Men	All	Women	Men
Population	51%	49%	61%	31%	30%	39%	20%	19%
Candidates	28%	72%	89%	24%	65%	11%	4%	7%
Elected officials	29%	71%	90%	26%	64%	10%	4%	6%

Even Playing Field, or Empty Playing Field?

Digging further into the data, an astonishing trend appears. In more than 50% of elections, politicians already in office run against... no one. Unopposed elections take political gridlock to a whole new level, offering voters absolutely no choice in who represents them. The race and gender *status quo* can't change in races where incumbent white men run unopposed, and 60% of unopposed incumbents are just that: white and male.

County-level seats, where decisions directly affecting daily life are often made, are particularly impacted by unopposed incumbency. A full 62% of county races have only one candidate, giving voters no say in who leads them. Contrary to the myth of a robust, competitive field of play, county elections more often illustrate the near-paralysis of our political system. These seats, after all, feed the candidate pipeline for higher office, and in theory are easier to run for than statewide or national positions. Yet instead of offering a proving ground for new, unfamiliar faces, county elections help maintain the unbalanced *status quo* of our unreflective democracy.

Red, Blue, and White: It's a 50 State Problem

When it comes to the demographics of power, there's no seeking comfort in partisanship or geography. A red state like Georgia fares poorly; with a population that's 47% people of color, only 21% of its politicians are of color. But in blue state New York, whose population is 44% of color, a mere 7% of politicians are people of color. Notably, New York ranks below Georgia in female representation as well. While 29% of Georgia's elected officials are women, just 21% of New York's politicians are.

Across the nation, the whiteness of the GOP can be accurately described as blinding: 97% of its politicians are white. Since 96% of its candidates are white as well, racial diversity is nowhere on its horizon. Yet the movement for reflective democracy can't simply cross the aisle for solutions. Democrats in office are 73% white, and the party's candidate pipeline trails in diversity: only 21% of Democrats seeking office are of color.

For women seeking representation, the Democratic Party's elected officials are 35% female, still a long way from the 50/50 split of a truly reflective democracy. Democrats can claim some measure of progress, comparatively speaking; Republican politicians are over 3/4ths male – 76%, to be exact. But with both major parties heavily favoring men over women when they choose candidates, neither party can claim to be an engine of change.

Do Independent candidates live up to their name when it comes to diverging from race and gender political norms? Taken as a whole, they're more male than either major party (79%), and fall between Democrats and Republicans on racial diversity: 86% of elected Independents are white.

	All		White			People of Color		
	Women	Men	All	All	All	All	All	All
Population	51%	49%	61%	31%	30%	39%	20%	19%
All candidates	28%	72%	89%	24%	65%	11%	4%	7%
GOP	23%	77%	96%	22%	74%	4%	1%	3%
Democrat	35%	65%	79%	28%	51%	21%	7%	14%
Independent	18%	82%	91%	15%	76%	9%	2%	7%

America's Cities: A Brand New View

Cities: Representation by Race

Our new survey of cities and analysis of metro areas offers unprecedented insights into the demographics of power at the local level. Analyzing 200 major cities and 38 surrounding areas, we found that while voters in a diverse city like Atlanta are represented by racially-diverse elected leadership, those living in the greater Atlanta area see a drastic drop-off in reflective representation. While the metro region population is evenly split between white people and people of color, its elected leadership is over 70% white. This pattern holds true in metro regions across the country, casting light on the conditions enabling police abuse and other forms of racial injustice to fester unaddressed by local lawmakers, who themselves are largely immune to the harms of institutional racism.

Even in major cities, leadership can fail to reflect the population. Elected leaders in Dallas, for example, are 60% white, while its population is only 29% white. Indeed, in many cities where whites are the minority, a white majority still governs.

A detailed look at our city data offers an effective lesson in the hollow promise of demographic destiny. Instead of tracking the rise in populations of color, the distribution of power trends disproportionately white, yielding to fair representation by race only when super-majorities arise. Where people of color are 40-50% of a city's population, their average level of representation is 24%. Even as whites become a minority, they maintain majority power until people of color reach 70-80% of population. Yet even then, people of color are underrepresented. *Only cities that are 90% or more nonwhite are run by politicians who match the local demographics.*

% Non-White Population range	% Non-white Avg Elected in range	% Non-White Avg Population within Range	Under-representation
90%+	89.3%	93.4%	-4.2%
80%-89%	67.2%	84.6%	-17.5%
70%-79%	50.3%	74.0%	-23.7%
60%-69%	41.9%	64.4%	-22.4%
50%-59%	31.9%	55.0%	-23.1%
40%-49%	24.2%	44.2%	-19.9%
30%-39%	19.6%	35.7%	-16.1%
20%-29%	7.5%	26.7%	-19.2%

Representation by race in cities tells a story that is bitter-sweet. Holding 36% of city offices, people of color are better represented locally than at the county, state, or federal level. Yet the intractable over-representation of white city politicians across the country shows how far we have to go before our democracy represents Americans of all races with an even hand.

Cities: Representation by Gender

Viewed through the lens of gender, the power imbalance in city government is equally dramatic. From Fort Lauderdale, FL to Montgomery, AL, we found ten cities with populations in excess of 100,000 with virtually no women in office. Nationwide, 80% of America's mayors are men, a striking statistic at a time when the majority of voters believes the number of women in elected office is increasing, and will continue to grow in the coming years.

Voters underestimate the structural barriers that keep women from achieving parity in politics. At 51% of the population, they hold less than one-third of elected offices nationwide, and just 20% of seats in Congress. To those putting their faith in demographic destiny, women can be viewed as a cautionary tale. Nearly 100 years after obtaining the vote, they are far from achieving equal representation.

Though women are, of course, as racially diverse as the country itself, our data suggest an intriguing pattern of tension between race and gender. In Los Angeles, CA, where people of color hold more political power, women of all races hold less. And in Arlington, TX, where women are more fairly represented, they and their male colleagues are overwhelmingly white, though the populace they serve is majority of color. With women and people of color scrambling to share just 35% of seats at the table, equitable distribution of power is a distant goal, and distortions in representation are bound to arise.

Opinion Research

In 2014, our survey of voters across the country revealed bipartisan, majority impatience with the "old boys' club" commonly seen in office, and strong support for new faces on the ballot. In 2017, a majority still views our politicians as an old boys' club or the entitled 1%, and a 90% super-majority wants – but doesn't see in office – elected leaders who reflect America at its best. Over 70% favor proactive efforts to bring more women and people of color to the table as elected officials.

While they're aware that white men hold disproportionate political power, voters imagine white male politicians as a slim majority, not as 65% of all elected officials with an entrenched grip on more influential state-wide and federal seats.

Voters believe that in recent years the numbers of women and people of color elected has increased, and that the numbers will continue to rise—even as political gate-keepers in both major parties maintain the demographic status quo at the polls. Yet voter enthusiasm for action to shift the demographics of power forecasts rapid growth ahead for the movement for reflective democracy.

Research Methodology

Working on behalf of the Reflective Democracy Campaign, researchers at the Center for Technology and Civic Life compiled race and gender data on federal, state, and local elected officials and candidates using a dataset of more than 30,000 candidates on the November 8, 2016 ballot, and a June 2016 snapshot of more than 50,000 elected officials. Both datasets have nationwide coverage, include offices down to the county level, and information for the top 200+ cities by population.

Race and gender was then added via a number of methods including independent surveying, aggregating publicly available information, matching to a commercial voter file, and race/gender modeling based on a proprietary mix of geographic, demographic, and other factors. While race and gender matching may not match 100% of individual officials and candidates studied, the unmatched population is not statistically significant and does not affect the aggregate accuracy of our findings.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of male senators making decisions about women's health, and mostly white politicians shaping the future of voting rights, it is hard not to wonder what our policy landscape would look like if Congress reflected the American people. If our lawmakers were 50% female and 40% of color, would issues like police brutality, degraded public schools, and a poverty-level minimum wage consistently take the back-burner to tax reform favoring the wealthy?

Our latest data on the demographics of power are rich with implications for scholars and activists alike, offering concrete evidence that our democracy is more democratic for some than for others. Tepid nods toward diversity & inclusion in politics are not enough. Absent significant intervention, our country's demographics are on a collision course with a calcified political system that resists change, and grants highly disproportionate power to a white male elite at the expense of the interests and needs of the American majority.



The Reflective Democracy Campaign analyzes and disrupts the demographics of power in the United States. We conduct groundbreaking research that shines a light on the exclusion of women and people of color from political leadership, and catalyze activism and scholarship aimed at achieving a democracy where everyone has a seat at the table.



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