

# Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Representation: The Changing Landscape of Legislative Diversity

By Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold

*Using data from 17 state legislatures, we provide an overview of some of the changes in the representation of women, Latinos and African-Americans over the past 30 years. We find that there is variation in the pace at which diversity in state legislatures manifests. We also find that racial and ethnic diversity is more evident among women than among men, and that gender diversity is more evident among African-American and Latino legislators.*

## Introduction

Turn the clock of gender equity back to the turn of the century, when legislatures were largely bastions of white men. On the second day of the new year of 1895, in the Colorado House of Representatives, the first women ever elected to a state legislature took their oaths of office. Carrie Clyde Holly, Frances Klock and Clara Cressingham went on to use their positions to press for new policies that promoted the welfare of children and the rights of mothers. And, they were soon joined by other women in Colorado and other states, many coming from the suffrage and prohibition movements, and many focusing on health, welfare and family policy.

Throughout the 20th century, the number of African-American men serving in state legislatures has similarly grown at a slow but steady pace. Like women legislators, these officeholders tended to bring new views to the legislative policy agenda, proposing policies that would address racial discrimination and poverty.

Until the second half of the 20th century, women of color remained largely unrepresented in state legislative office, but by the 1960s and 1970s, this too began to change. African-American women began to take their place in state legislative office: Cora Brown in Michigan, Gwen Cherry in Florida and Bessie Buchanan in New York all brought a new viewpoint to the legislative institution.

Fast forward to 2008.

More than 1,700 women and 600 African-Americans serve in state legislative office, and the two most successful candidates for the Democratic party's presidential nomination are a female U.S. senator and former first lady and an African-American U.S. senator and former state senator. This year, California's Karen Bass became the first African-American woman to lead a state house as speaker.

The landscape of political representation has undergone profound changes, and the changes have

been particularly marked in the last three decades, especially with respect to the election of women of color. And state legislatures in particular have been at the forefront of these changes in diversity—and the concomitant changes in the set of issues that are brought to public policy agendas.

This essay provides an overview of changes in the representation of women, Latinos and African-Americans in state legislatures. It will look at how the landscape of political representation changed and whether changes are more marked in some states than in others. This essay will explore how gender diversity has changed within racial and ethnic groups and how racial and ethnic diversity among women—and among men—have changed over time. Finally, it will look at whether changes in racial, ethnic and gender diversity reflect changes in background and experience.

Much of the discussion will focus on changes in the representation of Latinos, African-Americans and women in 17 state legislatures.<sup>1</sup> Included is information on the sex, race and ethnicity of legislators at four-year intervals from 1981 to 2005. Information is also included on the partisanship and length of service in the legislatures, and the legislators' occupational and political experience. The changes in diversity over the last two and a half decades within these 17 state legislatures are representative of the changes that have taken place nationwide, so these legislatures serve as a useful basis for an overview of the increasing diversity of representation.

## Changes in State Legislatures: 1981–2005

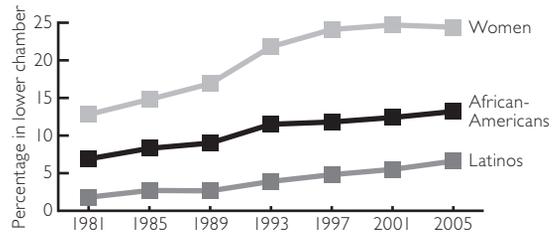
Figure A demonstrates changes in the percentage of African-Americans, Latinos and women in the 17 state legislatures under consideration. Legislatures have become substantially more diverse in all three dimensions. Not surprisingly, state legislatures in 1981 were more gender diverse than racially or eth-

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nically diverse, and this is even more true by 2005. The most substantial absolute change in representation since 1981 occurred among women. Proportionally, the number of women and the number of African-American representatives roughly doubled from 1981 to 2005. The number of Latino representatives more than tripled.

The degree to which the numbers of women, Latino and African-American legislators grew in the last two and a half decades varies substantially across groups and over time. For women, 1992 is often labeled “the year of the woman” in conventional wisdom and in academic scholarship, reflecting a sharp increase in the number of women in state legislative office from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. For Latinos, in most states with a significant Latino population, the number of Latino legislators increased from 1981 to 2005, reflecting similar changes in the

**Figure A: Representation of Women, African-Americans and Latinos in Selected State Houses, 1981–2005**



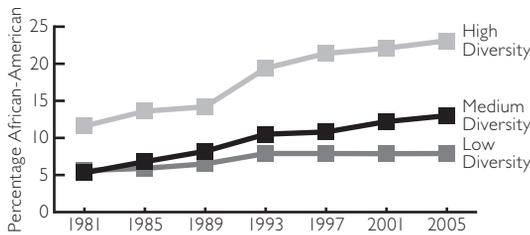
Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.

Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Idaho, Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., Ohio, S.C., Tenn., Texas, Wash. and Wis.

Americans in the legislature is substantially below the proportion of African-Americans in the overall population. And, in a handful of states, the proportion of African-Americans has actually dropped in the last decade; the state in which this is most clearly significant is California, where the proportion of African-Americans in both the legislature and the state’s population has dropped.

We can see, too, that the greatest growth in diversity exists within groups or within states where, at the beginning of the time period under consideration, there is substantial diversity within the mass public (Figure B). This is likely because under-representation of a particular group is most marked when the mass public is relatively diverse. So, for example, since women make up approximately half of the population, women are the most under-represented group in state legislatures—and though that remains true in 2005, the percentage of

**Figure B: Increase in Percentage African-American, Lower House, Selected States, 1981–2005**

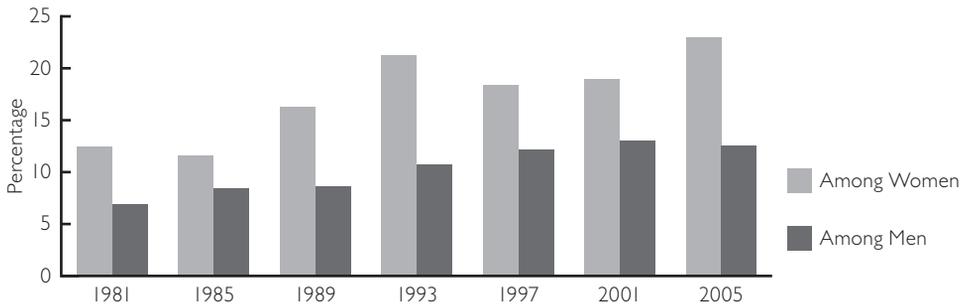


Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.

Note: Low diversity states: Calif., Conn., Ohio and Wis.; Medium diversity states: Ark., Fla., Ill. and Texas; High diversity states: La., Md., Miss. and S.C.

overall population. For African-Americans, changes in the percentage of African-Americans elected to office were most likely to occur during the 1980s, and the biggest shift occurred after the redistricting based on the 1990 census. In several states across the country, the proportion of African-Americans in the legislature did not change significantly after 1993. Indeed, by 2005, in some states—Nevada, Ohio, Colorado and Illinois—the percentage of African-Americans in the state legislature was greater than the percentage of African-Americans within the state population. In other states, such as Delaware, Massachusetts and Oklahoma, the proportion of African-

women in these chambers grew sharply across the 24-year period. Figure B shows that the percentage of African-Americans in state legislatures grew most noticeably in states where African-Americans were most under-represented relative to their presence in the mass public—Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Some of these states are Southern states, and certainly even as late as the 1980s, changes in the legal and political environment (e.g. court-mandated redistricting) brought about sharp increases in representation. Similar growth is seen in non-Southern states, such as Illinois, where about 10–15% of the population is African-American across

**Figure C: African-Americans in State Legislatures, by Gender, 1981–2005**

Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.

Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Idaho, Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., Ohio, S.C., Tenn., Texas, Wash. and Wis.

the time period, and where at the beginning of the time period, there was noticeable under-representation of African-Americans in the legislature.

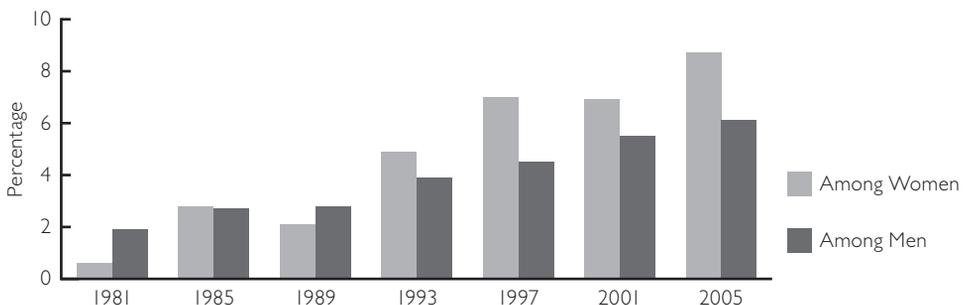
### The Intersection of Race, Gender and Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic diversity has occurred at a slower pace for men than for women in state legislatures. Figures C and D show, respectively, important differences in racial and ethnic diversity in women and men state legislators. It is clear from Figure C that women are more racially diverse than are men. The figure also shows that African-Americans make up a higher proportion of women than of men in state legislatures, and that difference remains fairly consistent from 1981 through 2005. And, as Figure D demonstrates, Latina representatives were once relatively under-

represented among women, but by the 1990s, female legislators were more ethnically diverse than men.

Both non-academic political observers and academic scholars have observed that there are clear gender, racial and ethnic differences in policy interests among legislators, and that the race, gender or ethnicity of a legislator influences behavior independently of the effects of partisan and electoral factors. For example, women are more likely than men to focus on policymaking involving education, health, welfare and children (e.g. Bratton and Haynie 1999; Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold 2006; Reingold 2000; Swers 2002).

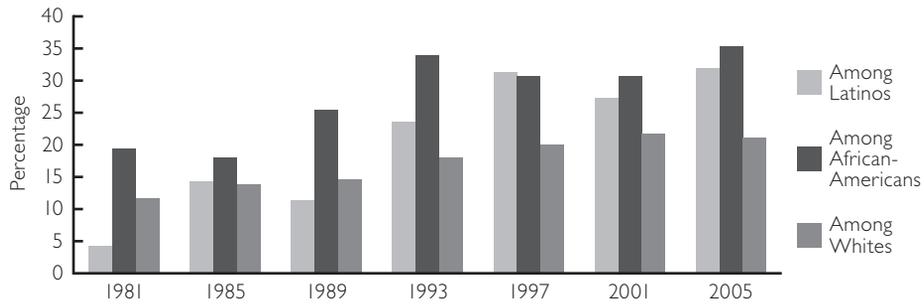
Although the differences in policy interests between white men and white women are clear, at least some of what is often attributed to the gender gap in state legislative preferences and behavior is due to

**Figure D: Latinos in State Legislatures, by Gender, 1981–2005**

Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.

Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Idaho, Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., Ohio, S.C., Tenn., Texas, Wash. and Wis.

**Figure E: Women in State Legislatures, by Ethnicity and Race, 1981–2005**



Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.  
 Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Idaho, Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., Ohio, S.C., Tenn., Texas, Wash. and Wis.

the relatively high degree of racial diversity among women. White female legislators are more diverse in terms of partisanship than either African-American female representatives or Latina representatives, the vast majority of whom are Democratic. This suggests that the gender gap in interests and priorities that exists among all representatives is due in part to overlapping differences in race, ethnicity, and partisan orientations.

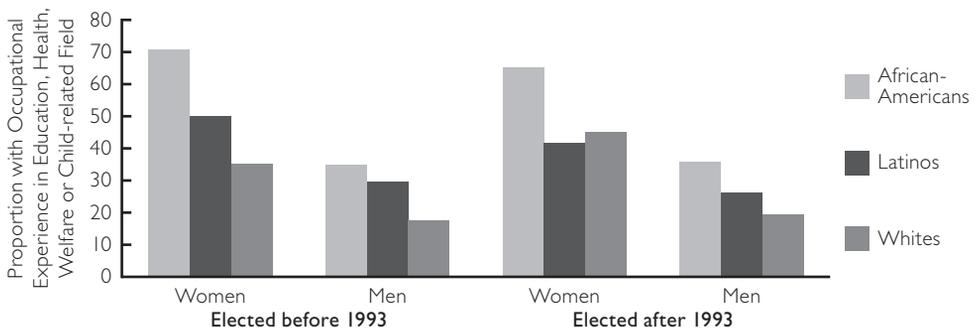
A similar story can be found in Figure E. While the differences are not enormous, fewer women are found among white legislators, and the proportion of women is generally greatest among African-Americans. This is likely because gender differences have traditionally been less marked among African-Americans in employment outside the home, and gender differences among African-Americans in the overall

population in terms of political participation, have been more muted than gender differences within other groups. Indeed, research finds that in African-American families, women are more likely than their white counterparts to be employed, and gender roles are relatively egalitarian (James, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1996). Another likely explanation for why women make up larger proportions of African-American and Latino legislators is the creation of new majority-minority districts and the opportunities they offer for women of color to compete for open seats in their state legislatures (Smooth 2006; Tate 2003).

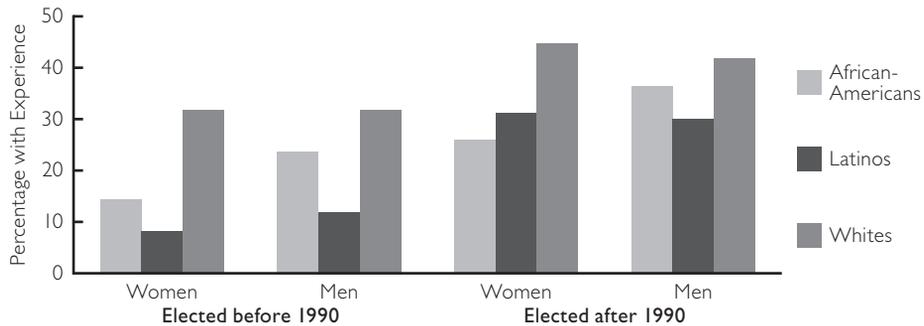
**Background: Occupation and Prior Political Experience**

As noted above, much has been made of the gender gap in policy priorities and interests among legisla-

**Figure F: Occupational Differences by Race, Ethnicity and Gender**



Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, unpublished dataset. Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.  
 Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., Ohio, S.C. and Texas.

**Figure G: Prior Political Experience, by Race, Ethnicity and Gender**

Source: Kathleen A. Bratton, unpublished dataset. Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset.  
 Note: States include Ark., Ariz., Calif., Conn., Fla., Ill., La., Md., Miss., Nev., S.C. and Texas.

tors. Scholars have found few consistent substantial differences between women and men in roll call voting on legislative proposals, but have found substantial differences in the types of proposals men and women introduce to the legislative agenda. Women are more likely than their male colleagues to focus on issues that are particularly relevant to women, as well as policies generally involving health, welfare and education (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold 2006; Reingold 2000; Swers 2002). Researchers continue to debate the cause of these differences—and whether they reflect biological differences or are rooted in fundamental differences in socializations, or whether they reflect educational and occupational paths. All three factors likely play a role; indeed, a legislator’s occupational background likely has a substantial influence over policy interests expressed at the state legislative level, where legislators are likely to combine political service with some additional occupational pursuit in the private or public sector.

Much has been made of the increase in the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated fields such as law, business and medicine. And, while there has been less of an increase in the number of men entering into female-dominated occupations such as nursing and teaching, occupational segregation is less evident even in those professions. Figure F presents information regarding the percentage of legislators who have some occupational background as an educator or health-care/social services provider, or in a field that focuses on children. It also shows the degree to which legislators’ occupational backgrounds differ based on sex, race, and ethnicity, and the degree to which gender, racial, and ethnic

differences in occupational experience have changed in the last two and a half decades.

Several observations are in order. First, gender differences in occupation are more apparent for those elected before 1993, at least among Latino representatives and among African-American representatives. This makes sense; in the overall population, occupations were more sex segregated in the 1970s and 1980s than they are now. Nonetheless, gender differences in occupational background remain, and they are conspicuous. For that reason, it is unlikely that gender differences in legislative policy interests will disappear. Indeed, among white legislators, both men and women are somewhat more likely today to have experience in health, education, welfare or children-related occupations than in the past. Gender differences in occupational background have stayed roughly consistent over time. Among Latinos and African-Americans, occupational differences have narrowed, in large part because Latino men are more likely to have some background in these types of professions and because African-American women are less likely to come to office from that type of occupational background.

There are also distinct gender, racial and ethnic differences in the likelihood that a state legislator will have prior political experience. Figure G demonstrates that men are—not surprisingly—relatively more likely to have such experience, although these gender differences are particularly noticeable among legislators of color during the early decades of our study. Interestingly, the type of experience varies among men and women, and among African-American, Latino and white legislators, particularly during the 1980s. Among legislators elected before 1990, virtually all women of color who had some level of

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prior experience had served on a school board, as did about one-third of white women. Such experience, while common, was not as omnipresent among men, although Latino legislators were more likely than both white men and African-American men to have served on school boards.

In the 1990s, prior political experience became more common across all groups of state legislators. As a result, gender and racial differences in prior political experience were reduced, but not eliminated altogether. However, in the 1990s, Latina legislators remain the most likely to have served on school boards. This likely reflects the specific interests that Latino legislators and their constituents may have in education policy. This is due to the fact that Latinos are more likely than non-Latinos to face challenges in education (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Mills 2004). Some studies have found that Latino students are more segregated than any other group (Martinez-Ebers et al. 2000), and this is particularly true for students with limited proficiency in English. Such students face substantial deficits in educational resources and achievement, and it is therefore not surprising that political activity for many Latina legislators begins with education-related policymaking.

### Seniority and Exit

When it comes to female and minority representatives, political scientists have focused more attention on how they enter public office and less on how they leave office. Yet, in some ways, the decision to leave elective office is as important as the decision to pursue elective office in the first place. Moreover, some prior research (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2005; Lawless and Theriault 2005) indicates that women may be less politically ambitious than men, and more likely to leave office relatively early.

Table A provides information on tenure in office for legislators who are no longer in the legislature. Clearly, on average, legislators elected more recently remain in office for a shorter period of time. It should be noted that this is not merely due to the shorter period of time available to retire after 1990 until the present. In addition, among white legislators, there are few gender differences in legislative tenure; there are few gender differences in legislative tenure among African-Americans and Latinos who were elected after 1989. The most obvious difference in legislative tenure is seen in the unusually long service of the few women of color elected during the 1980s, who were serving in relatively homogeneous legislative institutions. This raises the intriguing question of whether legislators from very under-represented groups are more likely to stay in office for a relatively long period of time, in order to provide that representation. As the proportion of a group within the legislature becomes more similar to the proportion of that group within the state population, female and/or minority legislators may be less likely to see a need to remain in office.

### Conclusion

Our examination of the 17 state legislatures indicates that though the number of women and minorities in legislatures has grown substantially, there are important differences in the pace at which diversity in state legislatures manifests. When groups are markedly under-represented, there is more opportunity for numbers to grow. Moreover, changes in the number of legislators of color tend to reflect changes in the overall population. Racial and ethnic diversity is more evident among women than among men, and that gender diversity is more evident among African-American and Latino legislators. And, despite the

**Table A: Seniority by Race, Ethnicity and Gender of Legislator**  
(Number of legislators in parentheses)

<i>Legislators</i>	<i>Average tenure, elected before 1990</i>	<i>Average tenure, elected after 1989</i>
African-American female legislators	19.4 (97)	10.7 (128)
Latina (female) legislators	18.7 (9)	8.2 (48)
White female legislators	14.3 (444)	9.1 (450)
African-American male legislators	16.8 (343)	10.5 (279)
Latino (male) legislators	11.7 (76)	8.3 (98)
White male legislators	14.5 (2,686)	9.6 (1,496)

*Source:* Kathleen A. Bratton, unpublished dataset. Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie and Beth Reingold, unpublished state legislative dataset. *States included:* Conn., Ill., La., Md., Miss., S.C. and Texas, 1981–2005 (Term-Limited States Not Included).

profound changes in the number of women and the number of minorities within state legislative chambers, important gender, racial and ethnic differences in occupational background and political experience exist, and have remained somewhat consistent over recent decades. Indeed, these differences are reflected in historical accounts of the political interests of the very first women, African-American and Latino legislators to seek state legislative office. These differences likely play a significant role in the differences that continue in policy interests and agenda-setting behavior among legislators, and this pattern suggests that as numbers grow—but also as differences remain—the increased presence of women, African-Americans and Latinos may translate into changes in policy outcomes that affect the day-to-day lives of constituents across the country.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because of the low numbers of Native American and Asian American legislators across the states under consideration, this discussion focuses only on African-American, Latino and white legislators.

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**Kathleen A. Bratton** is associate professor of Political Science at Louisiana State University. She studies judicial politics, state legislative behavior and the effects of descriptive representation on policy outcomes. Her research has appeared in a wide variety of journals including, *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Politics Research*, *Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Women Politics & Policy*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Judicature* and *Social Science Quarterly*.

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