

## Women of Color in American Politics

The American population has changed dramatically over the past several decades. The growth of the Latino and Asian populations, largely driven by immigration, has fundamentally altered the composition of the country. Today, more than one-third of the U.S. population is nonwhite, Hispanic, or both; on the 2010 Census, 28% of U.S. residents identified as nonwhite racially and 16% identified as Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> Elected officials are also changing. To a large extent, recent gains in women's officeholding have been fueled by the achievements of women of color candidates. Nearly one of every three Democratic women state legislators today is a woman of color, as are two of the nation's three Republican women governors.<sup>2</sup> Increasing the number of elected women of color is vital to achieving gender parity in politics. Many challenges remain, however, in order for women candidates of color to reach office in proportion to their presence in the population. Research about women of color is expanding and identifying important differences in how women reach office and how they legislate.

### OFFICEHOLDING BY WOMEN OF COLOR

In recent years, women of color have been holding office at historically high levels.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, 33 women of color serve in Congress, 9 in statewide elective executive office, and 390 in state legislatures. African American women constitute the majority of women of color in public office; their representation has risen dramatically since the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act and the creation of majority-minority districts.<sup>4</sup> In the past three decades, the proportion of state legislators who are African American has nearly doubled: while they made up only 7% of women state legislators in 1981, today they are 14.1%.<sup>5</sup>

Women of color are more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans. African Americans—both

voters and elected officials—tend to be overwhelmingly Democratic, dating back to the Democratic party's embrace of civil rights in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> All five of the Asian American women in Congress are Democrats.<sup>7</sup> However, the greater tendency to support the Democratic party is less strong beyond African Americans; the Asian American and Latino communities are more likely than are African Americans to include Republican party

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adherents.<sup>8</sup> While all but one of the 18 African American women serving in Congress are Democrats, seven of the nine Latinas serving in Congress are Democrats and two are Republicans.<sup>9</sup> And the two women of color who grabbed national headlines in 2010 were Republicans: Susana Martinez of New Mexico and Nikki Haley of South Carolina became the first women of color to win gubernatorial office in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Having won their reelection campaigns, both women continue to serve in 2015. According to the Gender and Multicultural Leadership Project (GMCL), the most comprehensive study of officeholding by people of color, women of color are less likely to hold office than are men of color.<sup>11</sup> Yet, looking over time at officeholding patterns, scholars have found that much of the growth in officeholding by people of color in recent years has been driven by women of color.<sup>12</sup> At local, state and national levels, African American women hold office in the largest numbers, followed by Latinas and then Asian Americans, with the smallest group being women of Alaskan Indian or Native American descent.<sup>13</sup>

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## THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE

The pathways that women of color take to public office and the challenges they face as candidates are somewhat different from those of non-Hispanic white women.<sup>14</sup> For example, women of color legislators are more likely to be elected from majority-minority districts.<sup>15</sup> Such districts were drawn in response to racially polarized voting patterns and the desire to allow minority voters to select their candidates of choice. The creation of these districts was critical to the progress that women of color have made in winning office to date.<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely, however, that majority-minority districts alone can increase officeholding by women of color in the future—in part because of limited opportunities to draw additional districts. In addition, the future of these districts is uncertain in light of *Shelby County v. Holder*<sup>17</sup>, which overturned a key provision of the Voting Rights Act.

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While majority-minority districts have provided critical electoral opportunities for candidates of color, winning statewide office has proven more challenging. Women of color are only 2.8% of all statewide elective executives.<sup>18</sup> In the history of the United States, only two women of color have served in the Senate: Carol Moseley Braun, who is African American and served between 1993 and 1999, and Mazie Hirono, an Asian American who won election in 2012 and continues to serve.<sup>19</sup> The stereotypes and barriers that women of color face in electoral politics are not identical to those faced by non-Hispanic white women or by men of color; instead, race and gender intersect, creating unique opportunities and barriers for minority women.<sup>20</sup>

For example, negative stereotypes about African American women's personality traits and sexuality—many of which date back to slavery—are unlike those stereotypes that confront white women.<sup>21</sup> Challenging these stereotypes is made more difficult because of the dearth of women of color in visible public positions. As Melissa Harris-Perry has observed, African American women face damaging stereotypes but have lacked the resources and public presence to challenge them.<sup>22</sup> It is for these reasons that First Lady Michelle Obama has played a particularly important role on the national stage, counteracting longstanding stereotypes about African American women.

Studies show that the factors that help elect people of color to office work differently by gender.<sup>23</sup> Although minorities are more likely to win election in smaller, single-member district systems than in at-large systems that span a larger geographic area, this relationship turns out to explain the officeholding of men of color but not women of color.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the factors that facilitate the election of women of color—such as majority-minority districts—differ from those that affect the election of non-Hispanic white women, making for further complexity.<sup>25</sup>

As a consequence, studies have focused specifically on the experiences of women of color and, when possible, compared women of color across race/ethnic groups.<sup>26</sup> This research has often taken the form of case studies because of the relatively small number of women of color candidates competing for and holding state and federal office.<sup>27</sup>

Because of race-related and gender-related stereotypes, women of color can be considered to be doubly disadvantaged when they run for office.<sup>28</sup> The typical politician is a non-Hispanic white male, meaning that women of color are likely to have a higher credibility threshold to surmount with voters. Candidate recruit-

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ment can also be an obstacle. Party leaders may seek to replicate formulas that have worked in the past in a given district, making assumptions about voter unwillingness to support candidates other than white male candidates.<sup>29</sup> These assumptions about viability can make marshaling sufficient campaign resources more challenging for women of color. Indeed, the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study—a national study of state legislators—finds that women of color are even more likely than their non-Hispanic white female colleagues to believe it is harder for women to raise money than men.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that Black women congressional candidates are disadvantaged in contributions.<sup>31</sup>

Because women of color are more likely than non-Hispanic white women to win election from majority-minority districts—and therefore districts safe for their party—they are more likely to face primary competition and less likely to reach office as a result of recruitment.<sup>32</sup> Viewed in one light, this can mean that women of color are able to reach office successfully without needing party recruitment. However, this means that women of color have not reaped the benefit of recruitment, which is disproportionately responsible for women reaching state legislative office compared with men's typical route.<sup>33</sup> Women of color are also more likely than their non-Hispanic white female colleagues to have encountered efforts to discourage their candidacies, meaning they have surmounted higher hurdles.<sup>34</sup> Together, this evidence suggests that were parties to become more receptive to and appreciative of their candidacies, women of color could be recruited for many more state legislative races.

Meanwhile, achieving statewide elective executive office remains a particular challenge for women of color.<sup>35</sup> It appears that women of color are overlooked as candidates for these important offices.

Campaign trainings—such as the Center for American Women and Politics' Ready to Run® Diversity Initiative

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that offers specific workshops for African American women, Asian American women, and Latina women—can help women of color build networks, access role models, and develop strategies for challenging traditional recruitment patterns.<sup>36</sup> Women of color are developing financial networks and organizations specifically tailored to women of color candidates.<sup>37</sup> Such efforts dedicated to electing more women of color are extremely important in light of the unique perspectives women of color bring to government.

Rethinking what is “political” opens the door to a wider range of potential candidates because of the important roles that women of color play in their communities.<sup>38</sup> Cathy J. Cohen argues that the political participation of women of color doesn't always fit conventional definitions of “political activity” as defined by mainstream political scientists; instead, research—and particularly research on African American women—has highlighted political activities that women of color undertake through work in local communities and churches and through labor organizing.<sup>39</sup>

Recent studies are seeking to turn the idea of the double-disadvantage faced by minority women candidates on its head, arguing that the intersection of gender and race may put women of color at an advantage rather than a disadvantage.<sup>40</sup> African American women and Latinas constitute a larger share of African American legislators and Latino legislators, respectively, than white women constitute of all white legislators.<sup>41</sup> Wendy Smooth argues that women of color candidates

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can appeal to a broader range of voters by tapping into communities of color and by appealing to women voters across racial lines.<sup>42</sup> Christina E. Bejarano’s book about Latinas reaches a similar conclusion; it challenges the notion that Latinas are inherently disadvantaged in politics. Instead, Bejarano argues that Latinas have fewer electoral disadvantages due to the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender.<sup>43</sup>

Electing more women from all racial/ethnic backgrounds is likely to lead to policy change. A growing body of research addresses differences among women legislators and assesses the impact of women of color. Studies show that race/ethnicity and gender intersect to give women of color unique perspectives as officeholders.<sup>44</sup> For example, Edith J. Barrett analyzed African American state legislators through a 1992 survey and found that African American women legislators coalesced around a common agenda of education, health care, and economic development—an agenda that differed somewhat from that of their African American male and white female colleagues.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Kathleen Bratton, Kerry Haynie, and Beth Reingold find in a study of ten state legislatures in 2001 that African American women sponsor both Black interest and women’s interest bills, and that African American women’s legislative behavior differs from African American men and white women.<sup>46</sup>

Likewise, Reingold and Smith find that intersectionality is apparent in legislating on welfare policy in the states, with women of color state legislators associated with higher cash benefits.<sup>47</sup> In one of the few studies to examine Latino state legislators, Luis Fraga and his coauthors find considerable overlap between Latinas and Latinos but note that Latina state legislators are more likely to feel it is important to represent multiple minority groups.<sup>48</sup>

A recent book by Nadia Brown proposes a new way of conceptualizing the role of identity in shaping legislative behavior.<sup>49</sup> In a multimethod analysis of Black women state legislators’ behavior in Maryland, Brown proposes that both racial and gender identities are consequential, and labels this identity “race-gender identity.” She also argues for “representational identity theory”; this approach builds on past theories that find a role for collective race and gender identities in representation, while also allowing for Black women’s individual experiences to matter as well. The book provides powerful evidence that Black women make a difference in office while also challenging the conventional wisdom that Black women are monolithic. While Brown’s study shows that Black women’s legislative behavior is distinct from other legislators and cannot be fully understood without attention to intersectionality, she also argues for the importance of differences among Black women. One implication of her work is that the effects of identity appear to be more fluid than previously thought.

## Winning office does not always guarantee influence

At the same time that women of color have made their mark in office, studies show that interpersonal dynamics within legislatures can produce and reproduce gender and racial categories, making legislative life challenging for women of color.<sup>50</sup> Winning office does not always guarantee influence. Because women of color are a numerical minority within legislatures and have not typically been part of a state’s traditional power structure, they may not have equal access to formal or informal leadership positions.<sup>51</sup>

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## Future Research Directions

Studies of women of color in politics, and studies using an intersectional approach to American politics generally, are increasingly common. But much more research is needed due to the fluidity of race/ethnic categories and variation in how social categories and identities change across space and across time.<sup>52</sup> For example, while some districts are majority-minority and have a long tradition of officeholding by people of color, other districts are experiencing recent changes in racial and immigrant composition. More research is needed to examine the experiences of women of color candidates and particularly candidate emergence, primary election experiences, and fundraising. Scholars have observed

that women of color often participate in politics at a higher rate than the standard models of participation would predict.<sup>53</sup> Thus, new theories, approaches, and data collection efforts designed to capture the political lives of women of color are still very much needed.

Kelly Dittmar's recent report for Higher Heights for America illustrates the gains that African American women have made in politics—even attaining state legislative leadership positions in some cases.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the analysis shows that minority women have yet to achieve their potential. Additional research within states is needed in order to fully understand how more women of color can be elected.

## Further Reading

Brown, Nadia E. 2014. *Sisters in the State House: Black Women and Legislative Decision Making*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This path-breaking book examines the role of identity in legislative decision making with a focus on Black women state legislators in Maryland—one of the largest groups of Black women state legislators in the country. Using multiple methods—interviews, case studies, participant observation, and feminist life histories—Brown examines how Black women legislate and how they perceive their representational role. Brown develops a theory of representational identity to explain how Black women are both collectively and individually shaped as legislators; she also leverages differences across the women and across policy areas to better understand the consequences of race and gender for representation. Although Brown finds that Black women often work together on issues that affect Black

women as a group, she also finds important differences among Black women by generation, parental status, and sexual orientation.

Smooth, Wendy. 2014. "African-American Women and Electoral Politics: Translating Voting Power into Officeholding." In Carroll, Susan J. and Richard Logan Fox, eds. *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*. Third Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In this chapter, Smooth identifies the significant role that African American women play as voters and demonstrates their growth as candidates and officeholders. Smooth also argues that an intersectional perspective helps to identify some of the unique opportunities that African American women candidates hold as they appeal to both the women's community and the African American community.

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Bejarano, Christina. 2015. *The Latina Gender Gap in U.S. Politics*. New York: Routledge.

While most gender gap research examines the American electorate as a whole, Bejarano offers a new perspective on the gender gap with this thorough comparison of gender differences among Latinos. Using data from a series of national surveys of Latinos, the book inves-

tigates the gender gap with respect to public opinion, partisanship, and voting behavior. Bejarano shows that gender interacts with ethnicity, immigration, and generation to make the Latina gender gap distinctive in comparison with other groups. She also shows that the overarching Latino community needs to be disaggregated by gender.

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