Toward a Representative Bureaucracy: Can Gender Make a Difference?

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“It matters to women observing this Presidency from all over the country. It matters to women in colleges and universities who want to be in government working in public policy. It matters to little girls in first, second and third grade looking for role models.” Anne Wexler

In making this statement about the lack of women in the George Bush administration, former presidential aide Anne Wexler put into words what scholars have known for a long time—people expect to see people who look like them as officials in government agencies at all levels. In fact, this became the official policy of the U.S. government with the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978, which called for a “federal work force reflective of the nation’s diversity.” That Act directed federal agencies to take steps to ensure that women and people of color are fully represented in all occupations and at all levels. Government agencies at the federal, state and local level measure and report annually to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) on the gender and racial composition of their workforces at each grade (salary) level and in each occupational category.

In academic circles, this is known as the theory of representative bureaucracy. The theory assumes that a government agency (or bureaucracy) that reflects the demographic makeup of the nation will exhibit the same values as its citizens. That theory developed at a time when there was concern about the fact that unelected bureaucrats were holding important positions executive branch agencies.

WHY A REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACY?

While their primary role is to implement policies directed by the executive and legislative branches, in practice bureaucrats have a lot of discretion within the broad policy parameters handed down by elected officials. This apparent incongruity between democratic principles and implementation has troubled scholars ever since sociologist Max Weber wrote about bureaucracies in the early 1900s. He suggested that bureaucracies serve a vital role in a democracy because of the regular, impersonal and uniform way they exercise authority. However, they are also, in some ways, anti-democratic because bureaucrats have discretion to exercise authority even though they are not elected by, and therefore are not directly accountable to, the people. Fifty years later political scientist Samuel Krislov expressed the dilemma this way: “Why go through the elaborate razzle-dazzle of elections if the crucial element in the discretion of the bureau chief? More charades are not needed in our society, which is notoriously direct in attitude but which has more than its share of empty formalism.”
Progressive reformers at the turn of the century who were concerned about the dilemma of bureaucratic power in a democracy found solace in the words of Woodrow Wilson. He argued that “administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics”\(^5\); that is, the two were entirely separate. However, as government grew over the next several decades, it became unrealistic to think that bureaucrats did not have significant policymaking authority. Members of Congress do not have the time or expertise to oversee the details of implementing the legislation they enact.

The term “representative bureaucracy” was coined by J. Donald Kingsley in his discussion of the British civil service during World War II. In his view, civil servants had carried out the policies of the party in power very effectively because they shared that party’s middle class origins. But when the working-class based Labour Party rose to power, it would be seriously hampered by a civil service that did not share its social background. He wrote that the “essence of responsibility is psychological” and it comes from “an identity of aim and point of view, in a common [social] background, which leads the agent to act as though he were the principal.” Therefore, he added, “the degree to which all democratic institutions are representative is a matter of prime significance.”\(^6\) This concept was adopted by other scholars and applied to the American context. Norton Long, for example, argued that a representative bureaucracy would contain a balance of social forces that learns from its mistakes. Moreover, it is likely to be more representative than Congress with its rural overrepresentation, seniority rule and interest-dominated committees. “The rich diversity that makes up the United States,” wrote Long, “is better represented in its civil service than anywhere.”\(^7\)

As the popularity of the notion grew, other scholars added to the benefits served by a representative bureaucracy. Samuel Krislov suggested that it serves as a funnel for divergent views and is likely to have diverse skills and talents. In that way, a representative bureaucracy is more likely to address a wide variety of social problems. A representative bureaucracy ensures that social responsibility is shared, resulting in a greater acceptance of governmental policies. Because government employment offers a desired social status, the extent to which all groups are represented in the bureaucracy serves as an index of the concentration of power. Those groups who are missing would view their absence as an affront. Moreover, that group would be less likely to invest in gaining the qualifications needed for public service, and thus a cycle is perpetuated.\(^8\)

Kingsley and many who followed him focused on the importance of the bureaucracy mirroring society in terms of social class. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, with the rise of the civil rights and women’s movements, the American bureaucracy was being evaluated in terms of its representativeness by race and gender. This became even more important as the government
assumed new roles in monitoring private sector companies’ compliance with equal employment opportunity laws.

DOES A REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In the early days of the scholarly study of the theory of representative bureaucracy, there was considerable debate as to whether passive representation would lead to active representation (Mosher 1968). That is, just because a group, such as women, may be found in great numbers in an agency, does that necessarily mean that female citizens will be better served? The first issue that must be established is whether those who work in the bureaucracy have the same values as the group in the population they are presumed to represent. Findings from the initial studies, mostly based on surveys of bureaucrats and the population, were mixed. In fact, in his review of these studies, Frank Thompson concluded that “Both pessimists and optimists concerning linkage [between passive and active representation] find some support for their conclusions in the existing theories and empirical findings.” One of the problems with this line of research is that there never was agreement as to which attitudes should be measured and how.

However, more recently a growing number of researchers have posed a different question. Rather than focusing on attitudes, they have asked whether a bureaucracy that is representative in terms of gender and/or race produces measurable benefits for women and/or people of color. Much of this research has found evidence that a representative bureaucracy does make a difference. That is, albeit with some exceptions, women and people of color benefit when their group is well represented in a public agency.

For example, Kenneth Meier and colleagues have extensively analyzed data on school systems in the state of Texas. They have found that a greater the proportion of school teachers or school board members who are African American or Latino, the more likely there will be positive benefits for African American and Latino students, respectively. John Hindera and Cheryl Young have found evidence of active representation in EEOC field offices. They have found that, under certain conditions, the presence of African American and Latino investigators increases the likelihood that complaints brought by African Americans and Latinos will be pursued. Sally Selden’s work similarly found a positive relationship between the presence of African American, Latino and Asian American county supervisors in Farmers Home Administration Offices and favorable loan eligibility determinations for members of those three groups.

The first study to examine whether the passive representation of women translates into positive benefits for women was done by John Hindera in his study of EEOC field offices. But, contrary to expectations, he found district offices with a greater number of white women
actually pursued fewer complaints filed by white women, although the opposite was the case for Black women.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, Sally Selden failed to find a relationship between the presence of women home loan officials and positive eligibility determinations for women.\textsuperscript{16} More recently, however, Lael Keiser et al. did find a link between female representation among teachers and positive educational benefits for girls. Importantly, they also found that the context in which the women work makes a difference. The greatest benefits for girls occurred where women were well represented at higher levels in the organization.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, Julie Dolan found that a greater representation of women in elite ranks in the federal government led to more “female friendly” policies being supported by both male and female executives. She postulated that women at lower levels may feel more pressure to conform, and thus are less likely to advocate for women’s interests. So, Dolan provided further evidence that having women at the top of organizations is critical to realizing the benefits of passive representation of women.\textsuperscript{18}

**THE BUREAUCRACY TODAY**

Given that representation of women in bureaucracies does make a difference, how representative are federal, state and local government agencies in general and, perhaps even more importantly, at higher levels? Figure 1 shows the proportion of the total federal white collar jobs held by women and how that has changed between 1984 and 2008. It also shows the proportion of each occupational category held by women. Note that women hold just under half of federal white collar jobs, and have during the more than two decades shown. Their representation in the jobs categorized as professional and administrative workers has grown dramatically from 27\% of professional jobs in 1984 to 44\% of those jobs today. It is many of the jobs in these categories that have an impact on agency outputs as well as the potential for moving into higher levels.

*FIGURE 1 Women’s representation the Federal white collar workforce 1984, 1996, 2008*
Figure 2 shows that women’s share of higher level (senior executive service) jobs in the federal government more than doubled from just 11.2% in 1990 to 28% in 2007. Still, they have a long way to go before they comprise the same proportion of the senior executive service as they do of the federal workforce in general.

**FIGURE 2 Women and men’s representation in Senior Executive Service 1990, 1996, 2007**

Figure 3 reports the portion of jobs categorized as professional and as “officials and administrators” by the EEOC at the state and local level across the U.S. It shows that women’s share of professional jobs grew from 44% in 1980 to over half (56.3%) in 2005.

**FIGURE 3. Women’s Representation in Specified Job Categories, 1980-2005.**


Officials and administrators are those who set broad policy and are in charge of overseeing the execution of those policies. It also includes those who head agencies or divisions within them. While women’s share of these jobs has also increased from 23% in 1980 to 31.3% in 1990 and 38% in 2005, they remain underrepresented in this category. It is also telling that the median salary for women in state and local government in officials/administrators jobs remains below that of men. In 2005 the median salary for women was $61,000, compared to $69,000 for men.

**WHY AREN’T WOMEN BETTER REPRESENTED AT THE TOP?**

It is clear from figures 2 and 3 that while women comprise nearly half of the federal, state, and local government workforces, they remain underrepresented in high level jobs. Research has shown that some of this has to do with differences in “human capital.” The term refers to the investments individuals make in themselves that affect their likelihood to be promoted, such as education and work experience. Federal senior executives, for example, have worked for the
federal government for an average of 25 years and 63.2% have advanced degrees beyond a baccalaureate.¹⁹ These days, Census data show that women in the U.S. have almost as much education as men; 28% of women have completed at least four years of college compared to 30% of men. However, 25 years ago when the average federal executive started working for the federal government, men were more likely than women to have 4 years of college (22% of men compared to 14% of women).²⁰ So, it is taking time for women to catch up. That is part of the reason that women are not better represented in the federal government.²¹

However, research has shown that even accounting for human capital factors, women have not advanced as far as men.²² The term “glass ceiling” has come to denote other more subtle, often invisible factors that adversely affect women’s (and people of color’s) opportunities for advancement into high level jobs.²³ Research in both the public and private sectors has found evidence of such barriers.²⁴ The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1991, concluded from its research that “equally qualified and similarly situated citizens are being denied equal access to advancement into senior-level management on the basis of gender, race, or ethnicity.”²⁵

A key element of the is stereotypes and biases. Stereotypes are a natural process by which people categorize information, and so they are not necessarily wrong or detrimental. However, they become problematic when assumptions are made about a group of people that are then incorrectly applied to every individual within that group. Chapter 3 gives some examples of stereotypes perpetuated by the media; for example that women are unreliable and weak.

The same process often occurs in the workplace. Employers tend to engage in sex stereotyping when evaluating candidates for a job. Women are often viewed as friendly and willing to cooperate, but also passive and uncompetitive. Men are viewed as decisive and assertive. Similarly, particular characteristics are attached to jobs. Managers are thought to be decisive and “tough-minded.” Men, then, and not women are assumed to have the traits that are associated with competent managers.²⁶ Such stereotypes can be self-reinforcing in that people tend to remember information that confirm them and discount information that contradicts them. For example, if a female manager makes a mistake, the stereotype of her incompetence is confirmed; conversely, an accomplishment is attributed to luck.

Research has also shown that hiring officials tend to select people from their own gender group. (This is a concept sociologists call “homsocial reproduction”). As one moves up the organizational ladder, decisions as to whom to promote become less routine and more subjective. To reduce the risk of hiring the wrong person, people opt for those who are most like themselves. There is greater shared understanding and trust where there is gender homogeneity. So, women are less likely to advance in hierarchies dominated by men.²⁷ This,
then, creates a self-perpetuating cycle where men continue to replicate the male-dominated rungs at the top of the career ladder.  

Another persistent stereotype affects women with children and women of childbearing age. In recent years there has been a surge of women with children into the workplace. Whereas in 1975 less than half of women with children under the age of 18 were in the workforce, now nearly ¾ are. What has been slower to change is the persistent stereotype that women are more family- than career-oriented. As a result, many employers have been leery of the amount of authority they have been willing to give to women. There is often an assumption that high level work requires working late into the evenings and the ability to drop things on a moment’s notice if a new priority emerges. One who is stereotyped as a “mother first” is presumed unable or unwilling to make such commitments. In the 1990s the term “mommy track” was used to denote separate career paths that organizations would employ. One path would allow career-minded women to forsake family responsibilities to advance in their careers while leaving a separate track for family-oriented women who were presumed to be less ambitious. What is unfortunate is the assumption that women cannot be equally oriented to their careers and family.

In order to accommodate the perceived flood of women into the workforce, there has been a growth of “family friendly” policies, such as flexible work schedules and job sharing programs designed to give parents more time to spend on childrearing. The federal government has been called a “trendsetter” in this respect. However, many women (and men) are unwilling to take advantage of such policies because of the fear that doing so will confirm the stereotype of family- rather than career-oriented and derail their careers by situating them permanently on the mommy track. In fact, there is little evidence that women choose not to seek positions of authority because of family responsibilities or that such self-selection explains the gender gap in authority. It is not just the stereotypes about women that are harmful. Employers need to reevaluate such informal criteria for promotion as ability to work long hours. As long as such criteria continue to run headlong into stereotypes about women, women will have less opportunity to advance. The employer may well be overlooking the best employees for the job.

Thus, there are reasons related to lower human capital that explain part of the continual poor representation of women in top level jobs in federal, state and local bureaucracies. But there are also reasons related to persistent stereotypes of women as not having the characteristics required to be effective managers, and to be more concerned with their families than their careers. It will take time and determined effort for more women to advance into higher levels, thus increasing the contribution they can make to women in American society.

CONCLUSION
This chapter has suggested many reasons that it is important to have women (and people of color) represented in governmental agencies. Research has shown that, given the right circumstances, they will further the interests of women and people of color, respectively. For women, the limited research so far suggests that this is especially the case when women hold high level positions in organizations. In addition, having women and people of color represented in important positions in government adds to government’s legitimacy, ensures more viewpoints will considered in policy development and implementation and provides role models for young people that encourage them to pursue careers in the public sector.

This chapter has also shown that while women’s representation in public sector agencies continues to grow, they remain underrepresented in high level jobs. While that, in part, may have to do with lower qualifications, in some cases, there is considerable evidence that there is also a “glass ceiling” in operation. That is, there are subtle biases that work against women. These include stereotypes about women as not having the requisite characteristics to be effective managers and about their devotion to family above career.

The glass ceiling can be dismantled with conscious efforts to identify questionable assumptions about what characterizes an effective manager and inaccurate stereotypes of women. Given the considerable role that federal, state and local bureaucracies play in delivering services to the nation, and the purpose served by representative ones, it is worth making the effort.

NOTES


2. 5 U.S.C. §7201.


Journal of Politics 61 (Nov. 1999), pp. 1025-1039 which found that minority and nonminority students receive benefits from a bureaucracy that is representative.


16. Selden, The Promise of Representative Bureaucracy


23. The term was originally used in an article by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy D. Schellhardt, “The Class Ceiling,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1986, pp. 1D, 4D-5D.


FURTHER READING


