



## **WHY WE NEED MORE WOMEN OF COLOR IN GOVERNMENT**

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Record numbers of women of color have run for and been elected to office in recent years. Increasing diversity in elected office is better for democracy because it enhances feelings of belonging and representation for previously excluded groups. Further, a substantial body of political science research suggests that elected women prioritize different policy areas than their male peers, and people of color prioritize different policy areas than their white peers. However, less is known about whether or how women of color differ from white women or from men of color in terms of the policies they prioritize when they hold office. To find out, we compared the bills introduced by all legislators in 15 different state legislatures in two years – 1997 and 2005 – to examine how the combination of race and gender shaped the issues legislators chose to champion. We find that women of color, particularly Black women and Latinas, are uniquely attuned to the needs of multiple and multiply marginalized groups.

### **WOMEN OF COLOR ARE MOST ATTENTIVE TO MARGINALIZED GROUPS**

Our work is consistent with prior research in finding that women are most likely to sponsor bills addressing “women’s interests,” Black legislators are most likely to sponsor bills addressing “Black interests,” and Latinx legislators are most likely to sponsor bills addressing “Latinx interests.” We go further than much of the previous research, however, to look at the ways in which those interests overlap and intersect. We find that women of color are the most likely to address the needs of multiple marginalized groups with their legislative portfolio, but Latinas and Black women approach issues somewhat differently. We find that Latinas are more likely to introduce separate legislation – some bills addressing women’s issues and some addressing racial/ethnic issues – while Black women are more likely to introduce bills targeted at the way different types of disadvantage intersect, especially for low-income communities of color. Regardless of approach, we find that women of color are distinctly attuned to the needs of marginalized communities.

### **BLACK WOMEN ARE MOST ATTENTIVE TO THE NEEDS OF POOR COMMUNITIES**

Black women do the lion’s share of the work in proposing legislation that addresses issues of poverty or social welfare. Approximately 31% of all Democratic legislators in our sample sponsored at least one poverty or welfare bill, but Black women were by far the most active, followed by Black men and Latinas. Republicans were less likely to introduce poverty or welfare bills overall; only 20% of them did so. Though few in number, Republican legislators of color were much more active on these issues; among them, Latinas were the most active. Our analysis shows that these differences were not driven by district characteristics. Black women legislators led in the introduction of poverty and welfare legislation irrespective of the average income and racial composition of their districts. Moreover, the content of the bills sponsored by Black women was uniquely attuned to the ways that poverty intersects with other forms of marginalization. For example, Black women

introduced bills focused on single mothers and caregiving grandparents, as well as bills that sought to extend benefits to people with criminal records or without citizenship status.

## **WOMEN OF COLOR TAKE RESTORATIVE APPROACHES TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

Black and Latina women in our study were more active than white or Black male colleagues in sponsoring legislation aimed at countering or opposing practices and policies that result in the disproportionate arrest and imprisonment of poor people of color. For example, they were early sponsors of legislation aimed at ending racial profiling in traffic stops and creating audio and video recordings of police interactions with civilians. Further, they were frequent sponsors of legislation that would ensure people who have interactions with the criminal justice system can return to full economic, familial, and civic participation. To mitigate economic dislocation, they introduced legislation to seal or expunge criminal records and to expand education and vocational opportunities for incarcerated people. Women of color were particularly attentive to the effects of incarceration on family relationships, introducing bills to ensure incarcerated people are informed about how to maintain their parental rights and involvement and how to modify child support obligations. With respect to civic participation, both men and women of color introduced legislation to restore voting rights, but women of color also introduced innovative proposals to ensure that people returning from prison are informed of their right to register to vote and are assisted in doing so.

## **WOMEN OF COLOR ARE ATTENTIVE TO HOW POLICY AREAS INTERACT**

In several instances we find women of color participating in what Hankivsky and Cormier (2011) refer to as addressing social problems at the intersections of different policy silos. That is, because the problems they are seeking to address are often multifaceted, their policy proposals sometimes do not fit into one policy category. For example, the women of color in our study recognized that criminal justice overlaps with family law, housing policy overlaps with drug policy, and childcare and education overlap with all areas of activity. They introduced legislation that sought to create dialogue and cooperation among overlapping policy areas, often by establishing diverse governmental task forces and policy research institutes to address a wide array of complex issues facing marginalized constituencies.

## **WOMEN OF COLOR ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO LEAD AT THIS MOMENT**

The distinctive focus of the women legislators of color that we studied suggest that women of color are uniquely suited to lead in this moment. Public attention is increasingly focused on inequity in law enforcement and the systemic nature of racism and sexism more generally. The interaction between our economic, healthcare, and childcare systems has been highlighted by the global pandemic. The women of color we studied were prioritizing proposals to address these kinds of issues in 1997 and 2005, long before they were mainstream. Our research shows that the representation that is being called for on these issues – representation of those marginalized by multiple, intersecting systems of power and inequality – is intricately bound to the representation provided by women of color.

Read more at Beth Reingold, Kerry Haynie, and Kirsten Widner, *Race, Gender, and Political Representation: Toward a More Intersectional Approach*, (Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).