Staff of the People? Assessing Progress in Descriptive Representation under the Obama Administration

José D. Villalobos, University of Texas at El Paso
Staff of the People? Assessing Progress in Descriptive Representation Under the Obama Administration

José D. Villalobos
Political Science Department
University of Texas at El Paso

Abstract: Over the past few decades, presidents have made some increasingly noticeable efforts to fill their administrations with a higher number of minorities. Though not yet fully representative of the general public, such advances in descriptive representation are a sign of progressive change occurring within the executive branch, with positive potential implications for the state of representative democracy and public policy. In this article, I survey the current state of descriptive representation under the Obama presidency and the extent to which the president’s policy agenda has substantively addressed the needs of historically underrepresented groups. Descriptively, I find that President Barack Obama has been symbolically progressive in adopting an inclusive approach for staffing the upper echelons of his administration. However, concerning substantive policy outcomes, I find that although the Obama administration has made some major strides concerning women’s issues, its record concerning the needs and expectations of the African American and Latino communities has been more mixed.

Keywords: president; Obama administration; descriptive representation; staffing

José D. Villalobos is an Assistant Professor of political science at the University of Texas, El Paso. His areas of interest are presidential management, presidential policy making, the public presidency, and studies on immigration and Latino/a politics. He has recently published his work in Presidential Studies Quarterly, Political Research Quarterly, Administration & Society, Race, Gender & Class, the International Journal of Public Administration, the International Journal of Conflict Management, and Review of Policy Research.

Address: University of Texas at El Paso, Political Science Department,
Studies on descriptive representation have looked at numerous underrepresented groups, including women, African Americans, and the Latino community, largely within the context of the legislative branch (Bratton, 2002; Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Burrell, 1994; Carroll, 2002; Dodson et al., 1995; Dovi, 2002; Gay, 2001, 2002; Grose, 2005; Haynie, 2001; Pachon & DeSipio, 1992; Preuhs, 2006, 2007; Reingold, 2000; Swain, 1995; Swers, 2002; Tate, 2001; Thomas, 1994; Whitby & Krause, 2001). Elsewhere, scholars have also paid much attention to the subject as it relates to the outer federal bureaucracy (Keiser et al., 2002; Kellough et al., 1992; Kingley, 1944; Krislov & Rosenbloom, 1981; Meier, 1975; Meier et al., 1999; Mosher, 1968; Naff, 1998; Naff & Crum, 2000; Riceucci, 2002; Selden, 1997; van Riper, 1958). By comparison, far fewer studies have investigated the merits of descriptive representation as it relates directly to presidents and their administrations (but see Borrelli, 2002; King & Riddlesperger, 1996: 503-504; see also Naff & Crum, 2000). In addition, most works tend to focus on a single group rather than a broader array of historically underrepresented groups. In this article, I help to fill these gaps by exploring the current state of descriptive representation under the Obama administration and the extent to which the president’s policy agenda has addressed key issues concerning women, African Americans, and Latinos. Focusing on the president’s first two years in office, I find that although Barack Obama has been descriptively progressive in staffing his administration, his record concerning substantive policy outcomes has been more mixed.

I begin by reviewing the literature on descriptive representation. Therein, I outline scholarly knowledge concerning recent trends in descriptive representation, the impact these trends have had on public policy as well as public perceptions of the government, and the extent to which such symbolic changes may substantively influence the public policy agenda. I next turn my attention to exploring the state of descriptive representation as it relates specifically to the Obama administration. In doing so, I attend to the significance of having Barack Obama as the first African American president and then explore the extent to which the president has applied an inclusive approach for staffing the upper echelons of his administration. I conclude with a general assessment of whether and to what extent the Obama administration has been progressive in attending to the needs of historically underrepresented groups.
In her seminal work, Pitkin (1967) offers a comprehensive discussion of the various conceptualizations of representation, each with its own set of standards for assessing the state of representative democracy. One of the main concepts she identifies is that of descriptive representation (adopted from Griffiths & Wollheim, 1960:188), which centers on the idea that representatives should resemble the people they represent (i.e., have similar physical characteristics and/or previous experiences and backgrounds). The idea dates as far back as the American Revolution, when John Adams and others argued—mainly with respect to occupation and geographic origin—for the inclusion of a broad range of citizens in governmental institutions as a means to help engender healthy doses of government responsiveness and guard against the rule by a privileged few (Dovi, 2007:29; see also Manin, 1997:109-14; Pitkin, 1967).

The concept of descriptive representation has since grown widely in its application to include gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as other cultural and economic factors. Over time, for many underrepresented groups, the U.S. has gradually, if not persistently, become a more inclusive community. In grasping more of an equal stake in society, a greater number of historically underrepresented groups have also begun to gain greater access to government positions, making their way into Congress, the federal bureaucracy, the Supreme Court, and many other areas of public service, nationally as well as at the state and local level.

In terms of raw numbers, the presence of women, African Americans, and Latinos serving in Congress has unquestionably increased over time (e.g., Manning et al., 2011:2; O’Connor et al., 2011:171-2). Particularly with respect to women, the increase has been incremental from the time that Jeannette Rankin was first elected as the sole female member of the House of Representatives in 1916 to today where there are currently ninety-one women serving in the 112th Congress (Manning et al., 2011:1-2). In addition, the 112th Congress has a record of four openly homosexual members serving in the House of Representatives. For many political observers, such raw number increases in representation serve as an important barometer of the country’s progress towards greater equality in representation. As Browning et al. (1984) note, “the most widely used indicator of a group’s position in a political system is the presence of members of that group in elective offices” (p. 19). However, are such increases in the level of descriptive representation proportionate to the size and population growth of these key underrepresented groups?

While the growing presence of underrepresented groups is promising, one can better ascertain the scope of progressive change by measuring the extent to which such increases among representatives may or may not parallel the electorate. Indeed, what if the population size of a minority group is growing
disproportionally compared to the growth in the number of elected officials? Could growth in representation nevertheless demonstrate a net loss? Generally speaking, if a particular group in American society constitutes “x” percentage of a particular constituency, but there is less than “x” percentage of that group represented in a corresponding government body, then such group may be considered underrepresented. On the other hand, when the percentage is approximately equivalent between a constituency and a corresponding government body, then the group may be considered to have reached parity (e.g., see Hero, 1998; King-Meadows & Schaller, 2006). With that in mind, how far has the United States come in reaching parity across groups?

Despite signs of progress, when one compares the demographics of today’s American society with that of its governmental institutions, there remain large gaps in descriptive representation. For instance, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) has long kept track of changes in descriptive representation for Latinos, providing annual reports on Latinos elected and appointed to public office. Over the years, NALEO has consistently reported that, despite an overall growth in numbers, Latinos continue to be severely underrepresented “in virtually every representative body in the United States” and particularly at the national level (Garcia and Sanchez, 2008: 202). With respect to the U.S. Congress, for instance, although Latinos make up about 16 percent of the U.S. population, they constitute less than six percent of the legislative body (see Manning et al., 2010; Manning, 2011). Meanwhile, African Americans make up about 13 percent of the population but constitute only about eight percent of the U.S. Congress. For women, although they make up slightly more than half the populace (nearly 51 percent according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), they currently represent only 17 percent of the national Congress and constitute less than a fourth of the membership in state legislatures on average (see Manning et al., 2011:4). Clearly, increases in the number of minority and female legislators over the past few decades, though promising, have yet to demonstrate a measure of parity in descriptive representation.

When it comes to the executive branch, presidents have felt a growing amount of pressure (particularly in the last two decades) to take heed of the dearth of minorities in the federal workforce (see Table 1). In 1990, President George H.W. Bush was heavily criticized by NALEO for having appointed only fifteen Latinos out of the 1,312 positions filled for the Executive Office of the President, a dismal 1.1 percent (Garcia & Sanchez, 2008:225). When Bill Clinton stepped into the oval office, he promised a presidential cabinet that “looked like America” and set forth to assign numerous Latinos to top posts, including Federico Peña as Secretary of Transportation and Henry Cisneros as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Garcia & Sanchez, 2008:225). Like George H.W. Bush, however, Clinton also lagged with respect to noncareer SES appointees (see Naff & Crum, 2000:102) while the numbers concerning career SES civil servants were even more bleak (see Naff & Crum, 2000:103). Just before leaving office, Clinton issued Executive
Order 13171 in October 2000, which provided recommendations for increasing the number of Latino federal employees within merit system principles (Garcia & Sanchez, 2008:225-228). Since then, further increases have occurred in terms of Latino federal employment, though at a notably marginal pace, from 5.7 percent in 1994 to 6.6 percent by 2006.

**Table 1: Executive Branch (Non-Postal) Employment Trends by Gender and Race/National Origin (1994-2006)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,043,449</td>
<td>1,890,406</td>
<td>1,804,591</td>
<td>1,755,689</td>
<td>1,813,047</td>
<td>1,851,349</td>
<td>1,848,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (%)</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority (%)</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (%)</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islanders (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Alaska Natives (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


More recent figures for 2009 and 2010 under the Obama administration demonstrate further marginal growth with about 7.9 percent Latinos attaining federal employment positions compared to 10.7 percent Latinos in the civilian workforce (EEOC, 2009; Newell, 2010; Wallechinsky & Brinkerhoff, 2010). Meanwhile, women constituted about 44.1 percent of federal employees—much better than the percentage of women represented in the legislative branch but still falling short of mirroring the nearly 51 percent female populace. More notably, African Americans made up about 18 percent of federal employees in 2009-2010, surpassing not only the 10.7 percent of African Americans in the civilian workforce, but also the general population tally of 13 percent. Previously, African American federal employment hovered at around 16 percent of the federal workforce dating back to 1994 (refer to Table 1).

Aside from the gradually increasing presence of underrepresented individuals in the executive branch, federal civilian workforce employment data from 2007 shows a major discrepancy in representation between low-level entry and high-level senior positions (see Table 2). In that year, women constituted about two-thirds of the low-level entry positions but only about a fourth of the senior positions. For minorities in general, they constituted about 40 percent of the entry positions compared to only about 14 percent of senior positions. Thus, although some historically underrepresented groups, such as African Americans, have made notable gains towards parity in terms of overall numbers, representation across levels of government positions remains markedly unequal.
Table 2: Percentage of Women and Minorities Working in the Federal Bureaucracy by Job Category (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Category</th>
<th>GS 1-4</th>
<th>GS 5-8</th>
<th>GS 9-11</th>
<th>GS 12-13</th>
<th>GS 14-15</th>
<th>Senior Pay Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women (%)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority* (%)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Amid these recent increases in descriptive representation and in assessing the gaps that remain to be filled in order to achieve full parity, scholars have continued to explore the merits of seeking a more descriptively representative government. So how much do scholars know about the substantive impact that these gradual increases in descriptive representation have on society, governmental institutions, and public policy?

The Merits of Descriptive Representation

Over the years, numerous scholars have found that increases in descriptive representation, although helpful and symbolically important, are no guarantee of a greater voice for underrepresented groups (see, for example, Diamond, 1977; Dovi, 2007, 2002). Early on, Pitkin (1967) noted that despite the symbolic significance of descriptive representation and its potential for progress, the concept itself falls short because it provides “no room for representation as accountability” (p. 89; see also Young, 1997:354). More recently, Swain (1995) found that a greater number of elected African Americans may “not necessarily lead to more representation of the tangible interests of blacks” (p. 5). Furthermore, the presence of racism within large legislative bodies can hinder the potential influence that increased numbers of minority legislators would otherwise exert (Hawkesworth, 2003). Pitkin and others have also warned that increases in descriptive representation may inadvertently lead some to focus too much on the symbolic victory of elective placement and forget to pay enough attention to the actions and substantive accomplishments (or lack thereof) of a particular elected official.

Nevertheless, numerous works indicate that increases in descriptive representation can play an important role in increasing female and minority group influence over policy decisions across various types of institutions. For instance, some scholars have found that descriptive representation has a significantly positive impact on policy outcomes within small nonpartisan organizational bodies, such as school boards (Meier & Stewart, 1991; Meier et al., 1999; Stewart et al., 1989; see also Meier et al., 2001; Pitts, 2005). With respect to Congress and state legislatures, the influence of female and minority
representatives may be conditional on certain factors, such as membership in key coalitions, partisanship, or widespread discrimination existing within the political context (Browning et al., 1984; Preuhs, 2006). With regards to agenda setting, the presence of female and minority legislators can increase the likelihood that issues important to underrepresented groups will garner serious legislative consideration (e.g. Bratton, 2002; Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Swers, 2002).

Scholars have also noted that when the level of descriptive representation increases incrementally over time (as in the case for women in Congress), the potential influence over substantive policy outcomes may also increase significantly (Beckwith, 2007; see also Bratton, 2005). Moreover, as societal values become more inclusive amid increases in gender and minority representation across institutions over time, acts of substantive representation on behalf of underrepresented groups may more likely follow (e.g., Borrelli, 2010; see also Dovi, 2007). Even in the absence of legislation that exclusively deals with issues facing certain underrepresented groups, increased collective and partisan substantive representation may nevertheless lead to the enactment of broad legislative acts that indirectly aid key underrepresented groups (e.g., Hero & Tolbert, 1995).

Aside from the linkage between descriptive and substantive representation, there are other positive effects related to the increased presence of females and minorities across institutions. For instance, studies show that having a person of the same gender, race, and/or ethnicity helps increase perceptions of trust in government (e.g., Gay, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999, 2003; Williams, 1998). At the individual and group level, it may also engender a sense of empowerment and of having a greater stake in government, thereby alleviating past sentiments of alienation and/or apathy towards the political system (e.g., Pantoja & Segura, 2003; Banducci et al., 2004; Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Gilliam, 1996; Gilliam & Kaufman, 1998; Jones, 1978; Overby et al., 2005). Moreover, increases in descriptive representation may encourage individuals to more actively participate in the political process (Michelson, 2000; see also Phillips, 1991), perhaps by feeling more comfortable about reaching out to a representative to speak on minority-related issues. Therein, the presumption is that these minority groups will react positively to increases in descriptive representation with the expectation that improvements in substantive policy representation will follow (Hamilton, 1986; See also Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Taken together, these previous scholarly works serve as a foundation of knowledge concerning the important potential role and influence descriptive representation can have on U.S. governmental institutions and American society. The context of this rich literature provides the impetus for further exploring the topic within an institution that has previously been largely overlooked—the modern American presidency.
DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION AND THE MODERN AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Over the past few decades, presidents have made some noticeable efforts to fill their administrations with both high-profile female and minority appointees and, more generally, a higher number of females and minorities across the executive branch hierarchy (see King & Riddlesperger, 1996:503-4; Borrelli, 2002, 2010; Naff & Crum, 2000). Though still far from being fully representative of the general public, such advances in descriptive representation are a sign of progressive change occurring within the institutional presidency and broader executive branch, with positive potential implications for the state of representative democracy and substantive public policy outcomes. So how much do scholars know about descriptive representation as it pertains to the institutional presidency?

In a recent study, Naff and Crum (2000) investigated the extent to which the Carter, Reagan, Bush (41), and Clinton administrations were willing and able to influence the state of descriptive representation within the executive branch regarding the outer federal bureaucracy as well as higher-level political appointees and career senior executive positions. On the one hand, Naff and Crum find that recent presidents appear to have had little influence on female and minority representation as it pertains to the outer federal workforce, regardless of their personal views on the importance of having a representative federal bureaucracy. Instead, other factors, such as equal opportunity and affirmative action policies, key court decisions, and changes in the size of the government workforce appear to explain more of the variation. On the other hand, when looking specifically at higher-level politically appointed Senior Executive Service (SES) positions, Naff and Crum find that presidents do, in all practical terms, have a notable amount of influence for instituting a more diverse staff environment. As such, it is at the upper echelons of the executive branch that a president’s willingness to seek diversity makes a key difference.

In addition to a president’s personal inclination for diversity, there are also outside pressures that influence staff diversity. According to King and Riddlesperger (1996), unlike in earlier decades, “the constituencies to which modern presidents owe their allegiance are often outside of the traditional party structure or coalitions. This is particularly true for Democratic presidents, who today are more likely indebted to activist women’s groups, and African Americans and Hispanics” (p. 503; see also Polsby, 1978:22-3). Thus, the movement towards diversity is both a product of a presidential predisposition as well as constituency demands.

More recently, Borrelli (2010) found that cabinets of the modern presidency (from FDR’s administration to today) have seen shifts in gender segregation, desegregation, and integration, each of which has had notable consequences on the actions of women secretaries in their role as executive decision makers. In earlier years, women secretaries were largely marginalized
within the White House and their level of influence was quite disproportionate, with most having limited influence and just a few standing out. With the advent of further integration, Borelli (2010) finds that women secretaries now have a more equal footing with their male counterparts in terms of their inter-cabinet interactions and their access to executive branch resources. As it stands currently, one can observe women secretaries within the Obama administration holding top cabinet positions across key policy spheres, including diplomacy (Hillary Clinton), homeland security (Janet Napolitano), health and human services (Kathleen Sebelius), and labor (Hilda Solis).

Though few in number, such recent studies provide important insights into why and how presidents can shape their administrations via descriptive representation, with a particular emphasis on the president’s capacity to influence staff diversity at the highest levels of government. Building on these works, I next examine the state of descriptive representation vis-à-vis the Obama presidency. I begin by exploring the significance of Barack Obama’s historic election as the nation’s first African American president. I then examine the staff President Obama has surrounded himself with and embark on a midterm assessment of the administration’s current progress in responding to the needs of key underrepresented groups.

**Barack Obama: Significance of the First African American President**

In 2008, U.S. voters elected Barack Obama their forty-fourth president in a whirlwind victory against John McCain. So how significant was the election of the first African American president in the nation’s history? On the heels of Obama’s triumph, many Americans embraced the new commander in chief. The day after the election, over 200,000 supporters gathered in Chicago’s Grant Park to witness Obama’s victory speech while millions more watched proudly through their home television screens or at local grassroots gatherings (CNN, 2008a). A few days later, a CNN (2008c) polling survey found that about eighty percent of African Americans viewed Obama’s victory as “a dream come true.” Around the country, reports of inspiration spread as students, educators, and other community members made special efforts to demonstrate their pride in having Obama elected the nation’s new leader (e.g., CNN, 2008b). Since then, while there has been much reflection on the remarkable turn of events that led a Chicago-based community organizer to hold the highest office of the land, relatively less attention has been paid to the attitudinal changes and challenges that Obama has faced from the time he started his campaign until today.

Just two years before the election, a 2006 national poll taken by the Gallup organization determined that 58 percent of Americans were “ready” to accept an African American as president (Jones, 2006). Although clearly a majority, that still left 42 percent who were otherwise “not ready” for an African
American leader—a startling figure, particularly when one considers the generic nature of the question. People were not asked about a particular candidate—a liberal, conservative, or otherwise; nor were they given information about previous work experience, personality traits, etc. Instead, they were simply asked on the basis of race and a very sizable percentage of the public expressed reservations. Similar results arose when asked about the prospect of a female president—although 61 percent said they were ready, a substantial 39 percent pronounced otherwise. Last, far worse were the prospects for a Latino candidate—“less than a majority (41 percent) believed that America was ready for a Hispanic president” (Garcia & Sanchez, 2008:222).

Once Barack Obama set out to capture the White House, the presidential hopeful faced an unprecedented amount of threats as a result of his candidacy. In fact, according to a 2008 annual report released by the U.S. Secret Service, Barack Obama received a protection detail “more than a year before a typical candidate would… All told, Obama had 517 days of protection compared with his eventual challenger, Sen. John McCain, who received just 157 days” (U.S. Secret Service, 2008; see also Bedard, 2009). As the newly-elected president, Obama was reported to be receiving as many as 30 potential death threats a day (see Harden, 2009). Since then, there has been no shortage of concern for keeping the nation’s first African American president out of harm’s way.

As Obama took on the responsibilities of his new position, including the burden of a heavily faltering economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the usual partisan debates over policy direction began to heat up while also producing some atypical public polling questions and responses. For instance, about a year after Obama was sworn into office, a Daily Kos national survey of Republican views of the president revealed some particularly unsettling findings. Among the various questions posed, the Daily Kos asked its respondents: “Is Obama a racist who hates whites?” The results indicated that 31 percent thought so, 36 percent disagreed, and 33 percent were “not sure” (Daily Kos, 2010). The question originated in part from a comment made a few months earlier by conservative radio talk show host Glenn Beck who had suggested that the president was a person with “a deep-seated hatred for white people” (CBS, 2009). Other questions concerning the possibility of impeachment, conspiracies about the president’s birth place, and whether the president wanted “the terrorists to win” yielded similar if not more notably negative results (see Table 3). In all, the results of this survey provide an interesting glimpse into the level of ill will felt by some members of the public towards this particular president.

Over the airwaves, much speculation has been cast about such reported sentiments against the president and how best to interpret them, with some observers tying the discontent more to the economy and/or the president’s policies while others, including former President Jimmy Carter, have suggested racism as a major driving factor (see MacAskill, 2009). Looking ahead, it
appears that such views may persist and are likely to be compounded by a growing conservative opposition to the president’s policy agenda amid the ongoing economic recession. As such, although Obama’s election was undoubtedly an extraordinary victory in progressive descriptive representation—one that tore down walls that only a few years prior seemed impenetrable—it would be naïve to assume that the country as a whole has progressed into a post-racial period or that access to the White House is now somehow free of racial prejudice. Nevertheless, Obama’s presence in the White House today remains a remarkable touchstone in American history. Going forward, it will be interesting for scholars to continue observing how future minority and female presidential candidates are able to cope with the gradually changing political atmosphere.

Table 3: Republican Views of President Obama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>% No</th>
<th>% Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should Barack Obama be impeached, or not?</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe Barack Obama was born in the United States, or not?</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe Barack Obama wants the terrorists to win?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe Barack Obama is a racist who hates White people?</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Descriptive Representation in the Obama Administration: Diversity in the Cabinet

Aside from assessing the progress made in descriptive representation concerning the election of Barack Obama, exploring the extent to which the president has, in turn, surrounded himself with a diverse staff is equally important. As previously noted, the federal workforce under Obama has seen some notable, though not historically high, increases in descriptive representation, both with respect to the outer bureaucracy, as well as for staff located within the Executive Office of the President (EOP). Given Naff and Crum’s (2000) insights on how presidential influence centers largely on choices about upper-level staff appointments, I take a closer look at President Obama’s inner cabinet-level staff and other top appointees.

When it comes to Barack Obama’s cabinet advisors, the president has shown a preference for surrounding himself with a diverse set of personnel (Ali, 2009; see also White House, 2011a), demonstrating some initial gains in descriptive representation when compared to his predecessor (see Tables 4 and 5). While George W. Bush also had a highly diverse cabinet, Obama’s cabinet by comparison has had a notably higher percentage of women (+9%), African Americans (+5%), and Asians (+5%). With respect to Latino appointments, on
the other hand, Bush’s cabinet had 9 percent compared to Obama’s 8 percent (-1%).

**Table 4: Obama vs. Bush: Scorecard on Cabinet Diversity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This scorecard compares George W. Bush’s outgoing cabinet to Barack Obama’s initial cabinet appointees up to November 2009. Note also that the vice president, though a cabinet-level officer, was not included in this scorecard. Source: DiversityInc study report by Ali (2009).

Over time, as is usually the case with presidential administrations, some cabinet secretaries and cabinet-level officers come and go. Now heading into the third year of the administration, there have been changes for the Chairperson of the Council of Economic Advisors, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the National Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, and the White House Council (see White House, 2011a). With the exception of the Chairperson of Economic Advisors, wherein Christina Romer was replaced by Austan Goolsbee, the other four changes in personnel did not further alter the balance in descriptive representation (refer to Table 5 below). As such, the president’s inner-circle of cabinet secretaries and cabinet-level officers remains nearly as diverse now as it was at the start of Obama’s term in office.

Just outside of the president’s inner-circle of top cabinet officials, one can find numerous women and minorities serving in other prestigious and influential posts, such as Melody Barnes (Director, Domestic Policy Council), Carol M. Browner (Director, Office of Energy and Climate Changes Policy, a.k.a. the “Climate Czar”), Joshua DuBois (Director, Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships), Chris Lu (Cabinet Secretary, Office of Cabinet Affairs), Rob Nabors (Director, Office of Legislative Affairs), Sonal Shah (Director, Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation), and Nancy Sutley (Chairperson, Council on Environmental Quality) (Washington Post, 2011; see also Villalobos & Vaughn, 2010 regarding “czar” appointments).

Last, one should also note the increase in diversity brought about by Obama’s recent Supreme Court appointments. Specifically, Obama replaced David H. Souter (retired) with Sonia M. Sotomayor, the first Latina (and third female) Supreme Court justice in U.S. history and soon after replaced John Paul Stevens (retired) with Elena Kagan, the fourth female Supreme Court justice in U.S. history (Supreme Court, 2011). With these two appointments, Obama changed the ratio of female to male justices from 1:8 to 3:6.
Table 5: Barack Obama’s Cabinet Secretaries and Cabinet-Level Officers (2009-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet-Level Position</th>
<th>Office Holder</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/ Ethnicity</th>
<th>Tenure Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency</td>
<td>Lisa P. Jackson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>01/23/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney General</td>
<td>Eric Holder</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>02/03/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairperson of the Council of Economic Advisors</td>
<td>Christina Romner</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/28/09-09/03/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of the Office of Management and Budget</td>
<td>Austan Goolsbee</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>09/09/10-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security Advisor</td>
<td>Jacob Lew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>11/18/10-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security Advisor</td>
<td>James L. Jones</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/20/09-10/08/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Agriculture</td>
<td>Thomas J. Vilsack</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Agriculture</td>
<td>Lisa P. Jackson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>02/03/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Commerce</td>
<td>Gary Locke</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>03/26/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Defense</td>
<td>Robert Gates</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12/18/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Education</td>
<td>Arne Duncan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Energy</td>
<td>Steven Chu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Health and Human Services</td>
<td>Kathleen Sebelius</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>04/28/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Housing and Urban Development</td>
<td>Janet Napolitano</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of the Interior</td>
<td>Ken Salazar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>01/20/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Labor</td>
<td>Hilda Solis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>02/24/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Transportation</td>
<td>Ray LaHood</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/22/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of the Treasury</td>
<td>Tim Geithner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/26/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Veteran Affairs</td>
<td>Eric Shinseki</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>01/21/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations</td>
<td>Susan Rice</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>01/22/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Trade Representative</td>
<td>Ron Kirk</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>03/18/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>Joe Biden</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/20/09-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House Chief of Staff</td>
<td>Rahm Emanuel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/20/09-10/02/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House Council</td>
<td>Greg Craig</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/20/09-01/31/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House Council</td>
<td>Robert Bader</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>01/03/10-present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In all, the president has made a commendable effort to promote diversity at the highest levels of government, sending a strong signal of inclusiveness and empowerment. With that in mind, to what extent can observers say that the Obama administration has, aside from instituting descriptive diversity, also promoted substantive policy measures for aiding underrepresented groups?
Obama’s Policy Record Thus Far: From Descriptive Hope to Substantive Change?

For those that extol the virtues of descriptive representation, one key belief they hold is that as the make-up of the government begins to more closely mirror the demographics of the country, government responsiveness to societal needs will also progress in a more representative manner. When it comes to presidential administrations, top officials in the president’s cabinet and others serving near and within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) have much influence over the policy agenda. As such, one may expect that greater diversity amid the president’s staff may provide an additional impetus for officials to address the needs of underrepresented groups in society.

To be fair, not all government officials have an equal level of influence over key issues that affect underrepresented groups. For instance, the Secretary of Transportation does not have as broad a capacity to address minority workforce issues in the way that the Secretary of Labor does. Nevertheless, one can presume, in the same vein as John Adams did so long ago, that the inclusion of a broad range of citizens within governmental institutions—in this case the presidency—may help breed a more representative and responsive administration (see Hamilton, 1986). So how have the men and women of the Obama administration performed so far in this respect?

Progress on Women’s Issues

Of the various underrepresented groups, women have received a particularly notable amount of attention and responsiveness from the Obama administration. In fact, one of Barack Obama’s first major acts after being sworn into office was to sign the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 into law, a piece of legislation aimed at “restoring basic protections against pay discrimination for women and other workers” (White House, 2011e; see also Lee, 2010b). The president has since formed the National Equal Pay Enforcement Task Force to help “bolster enforcement of pay discrimination laws” (White House, 2011e). Meanwhile, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis has also been recognized for her efforts to further promote and educate the public about the law. In addition, it is worth noting that equal pay has long been a priority issue for President Obama. In fact, prior to his election as president, Obama had previously co-sponsored and voted for a similar Equal Pay Act to add protections for approximately 330,000 women workers when he was an Illinois senator in May 2003 (see Illinois Department of Labor, 2011).

Improving the treatment of women in the workplace has also been a prominent focus of the administration’s Council on Women and Girls, which was newly established by Barack Obama by executive order to “provide a coordinated Federal response to challenges confronted by women and girls and to ensure that all cabinet and cabinet-level agencies consider how their policies
and programs impact women and families” (White House, 2011e). The council is led by Valerie Jarrett who also serves as Obama’s Senior Advisor and Assistant for Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement (Council on Women and Girls, 2011).

In addition to these direct substantive actions taken by the president and his staff, it is also worth noting that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2009, and the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010 all contain key provisions geared towards aiding women (see White House, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e). Meanwhile, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has recently launched a “100 Women Initiative” to attend to “policy issues that directly impact women and girls worldwide” (U.S. Department of State, 2011). In all, it is apparent that, given the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the establishment of the Council on Women and Girls, and the president’s inclusion of numerous top-ranking female cabinet members (as well as two major Supreme Court female appointments), the current administration has demonstrated some substantive progress in addressing women’s issues, particularly as it pertains to the equal treatment of women in the workplace (see Broendel, 2011; Knox, 2011).

Progress on African American Issues

When it comes to the needs of the African American community, the Obama administration has also made some notable progress, though its efforts to address issues affecting African Americans have been less visible and less direct as compared to issues affecting women. That said, some of the most prominent policies that have been implemented thus far under the president’s leadership include the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, the Claims Resolution Act of 2010, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, and, as mentioned previously, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, each of which include provisions intended in one form or another to combat racism and discrimination against African Americans and other underrepresented groups (see White House, 2011b). Of these, the most significant change pushed by the Obama administration for positively and directly affecting the African American community has been passage of the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, which is aimed at significantly reducing the highly disproportionate number of African Americans imprisoned due to racially biased drug enforcement policies (see Sirin, 2011 for an extensive review of the literature on this topic).

With regards to the Claims Resolution Act, it provides, in part, “funding and statutory authorities for the settlement agreements reached in the...Pigford II lawsuit, brought by African American farmers” (Lee, 2010a). Aside from that, the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, though helpful against discriminatory hate crimes in general, is primarily focused on combating hate crimes against individuals based on their sexual orientation and thus may be
considered helpful for further protecting members of the African American community who are also members of the LGBT community. Similarly, the Fair Pay Act helps reduce pay discrimination against underrepresented groups, with its primary focus on protections addressing gender issues, thus providing a particularly major boost to African American women and other minority women who face multiple layers of discrimination in the workplace. In addition, the administration also notes that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 both contain key provisions designed to help African Americans and other underrepresented groups overcome numerous economic and health inequities (White House, 2011c, 2011d).

Though each of these aforementioned legislative acts hold important implications for substantively improving the state of African Americans, only the Fair Sentencing Act focuses more directly on addressing the longstanding injustices faced by the African American community. At the same time, there has yet to be any presidential proposals put forth by the Obama administration that focus exclusively on African American needs, a fact that numerous African American political leaders, scholars, and pundits have used as a point of major criticism for the administration (e.g., SCPAC, 2010, 2011). As a prime example, members of the Shirley Chisholm Presidential Accountability Commission (see SCPAC, 2011) recently addressed this issue in detail as follows:

“Consultations with elected officials, civil rights leaders and advocacy groups in the Black community reveal an ongoing concern with President Obama’s refusal to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of the Great Recession on the Black community in terms of chronic unemployment, poverty, health disparities and high levels of incarceration. However, any objective assessment must cite the fact that President Obama is following a trend characterized by the gradual de-emphasis of civil rights and race based remedies resulting from a “White backlash” to Black gains in the 60’s. Despite social and economic indicators that suggest a need to target policies/programs to address conditions in the Black community, recent presidential administrations have been extremely reluctant to do so. Therefore, the frustration with this administration is not new. As the first African American President, Obama may feel that he is vulnerable to accusations of a bias in favor of Blacks in formulating policy. That notwithstanding, the Commission’s position is that it is a major abdication of leadership and responsibility for any President not to educate the public on the need to target policies to ameliorate the conditions of particular constituencies that are disproportionately affected by negative socio-economic conditions.”

Others have argued that Obama’s broader focus on societal needs has allowed him to lead effectively without being marginalized by conservative
critics who would, as the SCPAC members surmise, otherwise accuse the president of bias and attempt to drag him into a politically charged debate that would expend much time and political capital. Clearly, these opposing pressures facing Obama present a major conundrum for the administration.

Although President Obama has at times made efforts to more specifically address the difficulties facing African Americans in his public speeches (e.g., see Oakland Post, 2011), his reluctance to further and more directly address the needs of the African American community within his policy proposals has, in the eyes of ardent social activists, undermined key opportunities to significantly alleviate the longstanding social inequities and high levels of poverty still suffered by African Americans. In fact, Obama has at times faced heightened criticism and opposition from some leaders of the African American community who have otherwise been highly supportive of the administration. In one occasion, Obama was challenged with a boycott in the House of Representatives led by Rep. Maxine Waters on behalf of the Congressional Black Caucus (Grim, 2010). The boycott nearly blocked the passage of one of President Obama’s key financial regulatory reform bills when put to a final vote in the Financial Services Committee. Although generally supportive of the bill, members of the Congressional Black Caucus were gravely disappointed that the president had not more adequately addressed the extreme unemployment problems suffered by the African American community, which has been hardest hit by the recent economic recession (see Grim, 2010).

In responding to the boycott by the Congressional Black Caucus, Committee Chairman Barney Frank lamented as follows: “They face the prospect, and I’m very sympathetic, that the damage that’s being done to much of the country will be cyclical and people will recover, but permanent damage could be done to some of the important institutions in their community and I think that’s a very legitimate issue” (Grim, 2010). Soon afterwards, the White House provided its own response: “We share the concerns raised by CBC Members about struggling minority communities and that’s why we’ve engaged in a positive way to make progress on these issues. We have not been informed of the reasoning behind their decision not to vote on the bill, but we continue to think it is important to move financial reform forward to prevent future crises from damaging our economy and disrupting the lives of millions of Americans, including African Americans” (Grim, 2010).

Progress on Latino Issues

Last, the administration’s record in addressing Latino issues has been mixed. Concerning major policy initiatives, one can refer back to the comments in the previous section pertaining to the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, the Claims Resolution Act of 2010, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and the Patient Protection and
Affordable Care Act of 2010, and draw similar conclusions about their substantive, positive impact on Latino and Latina Americans. As with African American issues, however, there is much room for improvement when it comes to directly addressing the needs of the Latino community, which represents a highly diverse set of subgroups with a variety of ethnic ties, ideologies, and cultural as well as socio-economic components.

One major issue that the administration has raised as it affects large segments of the Latino community is that of immigration. Despite his notable and oft-repeated pledges during the 2008 campaign, President Obama was unable to keep his promise to institute major immigration reforms by the end of his first year in office. Instead, the president found himself embroiled in the health care reform debate that lasted until March 2010—much longer than he had anticipated. For a short time thereafter, there were a few signs that the administration would try to address the immigration issue before the 2010 midterm elections. However, some Democrats from conservative quarters of the country quickly urged him to hold off from taking on another major legislative reform proposal that could be as controversial as the health care reform bill had been. In the midst of these inner-party discussions, the BP oil spill suddenly hit in late April and immigration reform once again fell from the president’s policy agenda.

Right around the time of the BP oil spill, Arizona passed into law its controversial S.B. 1070 immigration bill (see Archibold, 2010), which soon set the Obama administration into a defensive mode. President Obama reacted by taking a firm position against the bill, citing both the federal government’s jurisdiction over immigration policy as well as expressing his concerns about racial profiling that would adversely affect members of the Latino community (see White House, 2010). Leading into the summer, the administration filed a lawsuit to stop the bill in its tracks with Attorney General Eric Holder citing the supremacy of federal jurisdiction over immigration policy. Not long after, District Court Judge Susan Bolton “struck down key portions of the law in late July 2010—a clear ruling against Arizona’s bid for expanded state level control over immigration policy, thereby reinforcing the interpretation of the Constitution’s Supremacy Clause that confers federal government dominance over the states” (Villalobos, 2011:164; see also Archibold, 2010; Curtis, 2010).

Despite these efforts, activists, academicians, and other observers have also noted that in lieu of directly addressing the needs of Latinos on immigration, the administration has, ironically, in some ways become more aggressive on the enforcement of existing policies that negatively affect the Latino community. For instance, the Obama administration has continued enforcing law 287(g), which was previously instituted by the Clinton administration in 1996 as a means for having deputized police officers capture and turn over suspects or criminals to ICE or other immigration authorities for their possible deportation. Although the law has long been criticized for its
tendency towards civil rights violations and racial profiling, both George W. Bush and Barack Obama have expanded its use (see Gorman, 2009). In fact, deportations during Obama’s first two years in office have exceeded those recorded during the last two years of George W. Bush’s term (Allan, 2010; James, 2010).

Elsewhere, with respect to Cuban Americans, the Obama administration has taken some notable strides in lowering the travel restrictions between Cuba and the U.S. and, more generally, has moved towards more normalized relations with the Cuban government, now headed by Fidel Castro’s brother, Raul Castro. While this has been seen as a positive step by some left-leaning Cuban Americans (and liberals in general), most Cuban Americans tend to be more conservative in their views towards the Castro regime and thus, to a certain extent, lie in disagreement with some of the administration’s new policies, preferring instead the more traditional, hard-line approach taken by previous administrations.

More recently, the administration attempted to pass the Dream Act through Congress, showing its support for allowing young, undocumented immigrants (many of Latino descent) attend college as they seek a passage way for amending their legal status. Perhaps coming too late in the aftermath of the 2010 midterm losses, this latest effort to move legislation failed in the Senate in December 2010. These efforts aside, it seems that the administration is currently more preoccupied in attending to the economic recession and numerous foreign affairs issues than on more aggressively tackling Latino issues, particularly beyond the issue of immigration.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I surveyed the current state of descriptive representation under the Obama presidency and the extent to which the president’s policy agenda has substantively addressed the needs of historically underrepresented groups. Whereas most previous studies on descriptive representation have focused on other institutions while looking at a single underrepresented group, this study provides new insights and points of comparison concerning the presidency across several underrepresented groups. Descriptively, there is little doubt that President Barack Obama has been symbolically progressive in adopting an inclusive approach for staffing the upper echelons of his administration. However, concerning substantive policy outcomes, the current administration has been more willing to take direct, substantive action on gender issues than it has in attending to the numerous societal challenges facing minorities. Going forward, it will be interesting to see to what extent the Obama administration may or may not move to further and more directly attend to key issues affecting underrepresented groups through the remainder of the president’s term in office.
While this study focused on issues pertaining to women, African Americans, and the Latino community, further research should explore the topic as it relates to other groups, such as the LGBT community, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and those that fall into the low-income stratum. In the coming years, scholars should also be mindful of whether and to what extent access to the White House may become more attainable for female and minority presidential candidates and administrative personnel, and the implications such changes may have on an administration’s ability and willingness to be responsive to the needs of underrepresented groups in the United States.

NOTES

1 Scholars also make comparisons at the individual level between citizens and their representatives, as well as with respect to more collective acts of representation. For instance, some scholars have considered the effects of “caucus” descriptive representation wherein state and national-level lawmakers form groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) to address minority group needs more broadly (see Menifield & Shaffer, 2005).

REFERENCES


Homeland Security, United States Secret Service.


