Representative Bureaucracy: The Politics of Access to Policy-Making

Positions in the Federal Executive Service

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What is This?
Representative Bureaucracy: The Politics of Access to Policy-Making Positions in the Federal Executive Service

Ronald C. Clark Jr.¹, Holona LeAnne Ochs², and Michael Frazier³

Abstract
Does the bureaucracy represent the interests of the public or react to the partisan and ideological demands of political principals? This study uses data from the federal workforce reports and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management’s Central Personnel Data File to demonstrate that partisanship and ideology influence the demographic composition of the federal senior executives. The analysis indicates that fluctuation between administrations is largely attributed to presidents nominating and appointing individuals who share similar ideological views. The analysis also suggests that political control by ideologically driven principals has the potential to perpetuate divisiveness over polarizing issues. The partisan and ideological influences that continue to influence access to policy-making positions contribute to the perpetuation of patterned disparities in the representation of interests and undermine government performance.

Keywords
representative bureaucracy, Senior Executive Service (SES), diversity, race, gender

Introduction
Demographic shifts during the last two decades in the U.S. population have led to increased racial and ethnic diversity in America’s labor force. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) estimated that people of color will become the demographic majority in 2042

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due to the effects of immigration. These demographic trends and population projections have renewed attention to the promise and challenge of attaining diversity at all levels of the federal workforce.

Diversity in the federal service has been a preeminent concern since the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978, requiring a “federal workforce reflective of the Nation’s diversity.” diversity is salient because it connotes democracy, citizenship, inclusion, parity, and equal opportunity. Managed effectively, the assortment of racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives within the federal workforce enhances innovation and problem solving, and strengthens employee retention which, in turn, improves government performance. Diversity at every level of the federal service reassures the public that they are descriptively represented by those who might be better able to understand and represent the range of interests in such a diverse society (Crum, 2008). Yet, 30 years after the CSRA was ratified, the demographic profile of the federal workforce indicates that women and people of color remain concentrated at the lower level, while White men occupy the bulk of middle-management and senior leadership positions (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2008; Greene, Selden, & Brewer, 2001; Hsieh & Winslow, 2006; Riccucci & Seidel, 1997). People of color also tend to be concentrated into jobs that are administrative, are perceived as inferior, and offer lesser rewards. Whites, however, are most overrepresented in high-ranking positions that regulate the scope and operations of government and professional occupations that are generously rewarded (Collins, 1997; Colvin & Riccucci, 2003). In spite of the expanded use of targeted minority recruitment programs and diversity training throughout the federal service, the evidence suggests that there remains a good deal of work to be done to achieve the inclusive workforce intended by the CSRA. The occupational and structural segregation across the federal workforce also seems to indicate the persistence of social inequality, further indicating an illusion of opportunity without a concerted commitment to overcoming the various forms of discrimination.

Discrimination against women and people of color has historically been enforced through various means, thereby limiting minority opportunities for upward mobility. For example, the requirement that a photo had to be submitted with an application for government employment was an explicit method used by Woodrow Wilson’s administration to exclude minorities from government service and prevent the advancement of those already employed (Gest & Maranto, 2000; King, 1995). Data also suggest that discretion and subjectivity exercised by administrators have adversely affected people of color, particularly African American and Hispanic men, in attaining career executive positions (Powell & Butterfield, 1997, 2002). Moreover, women have not advanced to senior leadership positions in proportionate rates as men, despite possessing comparable education, work experience, and performance ratings (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1992). A substantial body of literature demonstrates that discrimination and systemic barriers impede women and people of color from attaining access to senior executive policy-making positions (Mani, 2001; Naff & Kellough, 2003; Riccucci, 2002). In an effort to curtail the deficiencies and systematic barriers to meeting the statutory intent of the CSRA, the Senior Executive Service (SES) Diversity Assurance Act was introduced for the second time during the 111th Congress. Among
other provisions, the proposed bill includes mechanisms to remove barriers in the merit staffing process to boost diversity in the senior ranks and requires the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to strengthen policies and oversee the SES. This legislation, however, was referred to committee and died thereafter.

Notwithstanding the premise or motivation of discriminatory practices and systematic barriers within the SES hiring process, a series of U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO; 2001, 2003, 2007, 2008) reports show gradual increases for women and people of color in reaching the top rung of the federal service. Yet, the fluctuation across the presidential administrations is not reflected in GAO assessments. Consequently, these reports reveal little about the tenor and tone of the reported gains. These studies also do not provide a theoretical basis that assesses or explains why racial and gender disparity persists among career senior executives. Naff and Crum (2000) used equal employment opportunity and affirmative action as ideological benchmarks to show that Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton made more political appointments of women and people of color to career senior executive positions than Republican presidents. Kim (2003) substantiated Naff and Crum’s results after finding no relationship between the size of the federal senior leadership corps and education, occupation, population, and unemployment. In addition, the literature has yet to identify the current partisan and ideological variations in the administrative appointments to the SES.

There are three primary objectives for this article. First, it empirically analyzes the relationship between party identification and the demographic representation of senior executives in federal executive branch departments. Second, this article analyzes the upward mobility prospects for women and people of color notwithstanding political ideology. Third, it questions whether public policy change is necessary to attain diversity in federal senior executive positions.

This study proceeds as follows. The theory of representative bureaucracy and the evolving strand of research on inclusion and integration are described. Subsequently, the data and method examined within the context of representative bureaucracy in the SES are specified. Next, the variations across presidential administrations in the career SES compared with the noncareer SES are analyzed, and the representative nature of executive administrations is examined with respect to partisanship and ideology. Finally, the implications of these findings are discussed in the context of the proposed legislation.

Theory

Representative bureaucracy is a term first used by Donald Kingsley in 1944 in his description of the British civil service. Representative bureaucracy refers to the relationship between a demographically representative public service and policy outcomes. The idea is that the social backgrounds and status of public administrators have the potential to enhance performance and make government more responsive based on their different perspectives, experience, and socialization. President Abraham Lincoln alluded to this concept in his Gettysburg Address by declaring “government for the
people, by the people, and of the people” (Goss, 2004). Similar to Pitkin (1967), Mosher (1982) effectively dissected this theory by declaring a distinction between passive and active representation. Passive representation concerns how bureaucracies demographically reflect their constituents. Active representatives subsequently advocate for public policies that affect the populations and communities they serve. Active representation in public administration requires a degree of bureaucratic discretion on salient issues specific to the group being represented (Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Meier, 1993; Selden, 1997). Active representation, however, is not automatic and does not necessarily benefit the interests of the populations and communities affected (Nielsen & Wolf, 2001).

This strand of research explores issues of inclusion and integration, and attempts to understand how well different groups have been able to move up the ranks in the federal workforce. Empirical evidence shows that the overall representation for some groups has increased but continues to lag behind Whites in terms of grade and pay (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2008). Similar studies also indicate that there is a segmented equality, whereby women are significantly underrepresented in high-level jobs (Hsieh & Winslow, 2006). Furthermore, the homogeneity of White men in senior level positions is not commensurate with their performance ratings. Lewis (1997) found that higher percentages of women than men received outstanding performance ratings at every grade level; yet, women were not advancing through the ranks at the same rate as White men. Moreover, data from federal agencies show that racial and gender stereotypes influence attitudes about the significance of inclusion and integration (Soni, 2000). Representative bureaucracy is also generally less affected by the external environment than by the internal environment (Goode & Baldwin, 2005). In other words, the presence of minorities with authority over policy and personnel decisions is an important predictor of inclusiveness.

Previous research suggests that women and people of color may have greater access to the executive suite during Democratic administrations than Republican (Kim, 2003; Naff & Crum, 2000). The theoretical basis for this perceived disparity may be attributed to differences in conservative and liberal views regarding affirmative action. Democrats have championed this divisive issue since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, whereas Republicans consistently resist it. The conservative view of affirmative action may be described in two distinct forms: (a) those who are against quotas but do not oppose equality of opportunity and (b) those who believe that affirmative action amounts to or has the potential to result in “reverse discrimination” or “reverse racism.” The liberal perspective on affirmative action, however, champions policies that provide opportunities to underrepresented and historically disadvantaged groups. Overcoming negative stereotypes and myths that perpetuate discrimination and eliminating barriers to equal opportunity as they relate to affirmative action are core liberal beliefs.

Data and Method

Demographic data from federal workforce reports and the OPM’s Central Personnel Data File (CPDF) were used for this study. OPM’s CPDF contains employment data
for the entire federal civilian workforce that consists of approximately 1.9 million employees. Demographic data from executive branch departments were aggregated and analyzed according to six variables: (a) year; (b) race; (c) gender; (d) number of permanent, full-time employees in noncareer senior executive positions; (e) career senior executive positions; and (f) General Schedule and related (GSR) grade grouping GS 14-15—the middle-management feeder grades.

Federal senior executives are essentially categorized in one of two groups: (a) noncareer executives comprising presidential political appointees and (b) career executives consisting of administrators who had to undergo the SES merit staffing process for their initial appointment. Noncareer senior executives are primarily political appointees who may or may not require U.S. Senate approval. Cabinet secretaries and their immediate leadership are normally presidential appointees confirmed by the Senate. Presidential appointees excluded from Senate confirmation typically include numerous policy advisors and heads of independent federal agencies and government corporations. Political appointees are not subject to the merit staffing processes and are also strategically chosen to maintain control by political principals to advance the sitting president’s executive agenda (Stehr, 1997; Williams, 1993). Whether they are exempt from Senate confirmation or not, presidential appointees are placed in noncareer executive policy-making positions throughout the federal service.

Career appointments to the SES are determined through an administrative merit staffing process. Career executives occupy 90% of all senior executive positions and typically advance from the lower ranks of the federal service. The bulk of careerists advance from the middle-management feeder grades. They essentially serve as key leaders just below presidential appointees. Careerists act as the major link between appointees and the federal workforce and, to a certain extent, influence public policy (Brewer & Maranto, 2000; Dolan, 2000a; Dolan, 2000b; Dolan, 2004; Maranto, 2005; U.S. OPM, n.d.).

This analysis also includes a measure of presidential social ideology. Developed and used by Jeffrey Segal, Richard Timpone, and Robert Howard, this measure reflects the mean ideology scores for each President with the exception of George W. Bush in the social policy domain based on expert ratings (Segal, Timpone, & Howard, 2000), ranging from 0 (most conservative) to 100 (most liberal). This allows for an examination of the relationship between the ideological disposition of the President and the representative nature of the bureaucracy.

**Findings**

American Indian representation in GSR 14-15 remained constant at 1% from 1998 to 2007. As shown in Figure 1, Asian and Black representations gradually increased by 3% and 4%, respectively. Hispanic representation in the feeder grades increased from 3% to 4% during the 10-year span, and White representation declined by 8%. The results indicate that the candidate pool from which career senior executives are likely to be promoted has become slightly more diverse, as there are presently more Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics in the feeder grades than in the past. Yet, promotions from
middle-management seem to vary in accordance with presidential partisanship and ideological disposition.

It appears that the merit staffing process for career executive appointments is affected by presidential prerogatives across the administrations. The findings suggest that the gains in the representation of Blacks in the SES were reversed, and the representation of Asians during the Carter administration were eliminated under the Reagan administration. Similarly, Native American and Black representations were reversed from the Carter administration to the Reagan administration.

The composition of the SES under the Reagan administration reflects the perceived constituency of the Republican Party at that time. Reagan’s campaigns catered to White and Hispanic voters. For the sake of comparison, Gerald Ford obtained 15% of the Hispanic vote in 1976. Reagan doubled the percentage of the Hispanic vote to 30% in the 1980 presidential election and attained 37% to 40% in his 1984 reelection (DiSepio, 1996; DiSepio, de la Garza, & Setzler, 1999). Reagan declared in several campaign fora in 1979 that “Hispanics are Republicans. They just don’t know it.” Alternatively, the George H. W. Bush’s (Bush I) administration reflects the philosophy of an executive focused on “integrity in government.” The demographic makeup of the SES under his leadership illustrate the policies of a president whose administration saw the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 and worked behind the scenes to increase federal spending on education, child care, and advanced technology research and development. The changes in the composition of the career SES under the Clinton administration reveal a trend toward greater diversity that also exhibits the demographic characteristics of the Democratic Party constituents that helped Clinton get elected. The SES under Clinton’s leadership remained predominantly White; yet,

Figure 1. Percentage representation of GSR 14-15 grade grouping, from 1998-2007.
the Clinton administration included more Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans than any previous administration. Those changes in the representation of minorities in the SES were not maintained by George W. Bush (Bush II). Fewer appointments of Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans were made under his administration. Despite his record support from Hispanics during the 2000 and 2004 elections, appointments to the SES under Bush II’s administration remained relatively stable (see Figure 2).

When the data are aggregated by party, as illustrated in Figure 3, partisan differences in the representative nature of the bureaucracy are evident. Minority representation in the career SES significantly increases under Democratic administrations when compared with Republican administrations. The change in the appointments of minorities to the SES by Democrats is more than 5 times that of Republicans.

To understand the representative nature of the bureaucracy, it is necessary to examine the data on career SES within the context of the broader population. Figure 4 illustrates the racial and ethnic composition of the career SES in relation to the broader population across presidential administrations. It is important to note that the higher rates of Native American representation in the career SES over time may reflect a gradual increase compared with other minority groups, particularly because the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of the American Indian identity is based on bloodlines. People are also identifying themselves as American Indians more now than before. The results indicate that Whites are consistently overrepresented in the career SES relative to their proportion of the overall population of the United States. The over-representation of Asians during the Carter administration, however, is difficult to

**Figure 2.** Percentage change in composition of career senior executive service by presidential administration.
Figure 3. Percentage change in minority representation in the career senior executive service by party.

Figure 4. Representation in the career senior executive service of racial/ethnic groups in relation to the broader population.
untangle. The Census Bureau’s definition of Asian includes descendants from the entire continent of Asia, which lumps together groups with very different partisan leanings, perspectives on governance, and histories of inclusion, or the lack thereof, in American society.

The analysis of administrative career SES appointments compared with the political noncareer SES appointments suggests how the orientation toward representative bureaucracy may be reflected symbolically. Figure 5 shows what appears to be a relationship between partisanship and the demographic representation of noncareer senior executive positions in executive branch departments. Whites have the lion’s share of noncareer executive positions across the administrations and hold a higher percentage during Republican administrations. Yet, compared with the Reagan and the Bush administrations, people of color held a higher percentage of noncareer executive positions during the Carter and Clinton presidencies. Given that political appointments are temporary, they are less likely than administrative career SES appointments to have a consistent impact on personnel. Political appointments may give the impression that the bureaucracy is more diverse when, in fact, the temporary political appointments reflect the elected party’s constituents and, subsequently, affect the promotion potential of people of color in the administrative ranks in a manner that corresponds with the party’s social ideology.

The way in which political appointments to the SES affect representative bureaucracy may also be understood by evaluating the relationship between presidential social ideology and minority representation. Figure 6 demonstrates that minority representation corresponds closely with presidential social ideology. The correlation between presidential social ideology and minority representation is .86, indicating that
socially liberal presidents are likely to be associated with an increased minority representation in the bureaucracy. Conversely, socially conservative presidents are likely to be associated with a less demographically diverse bureaucracy.

Existing research on the representation of women in the bureaucracy has shown a pattern indicating that they have often been underrepresented in policy-making positions and overrepresented in lower paying, clerical positions (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2008). This finding demonstrates that women are gradually gaining access to policy-making positions. These gains, however, are primarily concentrated...
among White women. Figure 7 also shows the changes in the representation of women in the career SES by race and ethnicity across presidential administrations.

From Figure 7, one can see a discrepancy in the pattern of representation by women in the bureaucracy when the data are aggregated by party and compared in a dichotomous manner. The gains by White women in securing policy-making positions appear to have come largely at the expense of women of color. Democratic administrations have appointed more women to the career SES, but those increases tend to favor White women. Figure 8 reveals that women of color seem to be more represented in the bureaucratic administrations of Republican presidents and curiously less represented in the bureaucratic administrations of Democratic presidents when compared with White women.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that partisanship and ideology appear to influence the demographic composition of senior federal executives. The analysis indicates that fluctuations among administrations are largely attributed to presidents appointing individuals with whom they share similar ideological views. Given the philosophical differences regarding affirmative action, it is not surprising that access to policy-making positions for women and people of color under Republican presidents remain low compared with Democratic administrations in spite of the general trend toward inclusion. This particular wedge issue seems to maintain the balance between those that question whether the glass is half empty or half full, while sustaining the belief that a representative bureaucracy at the executive level is actually achievable.
Hsieh and Winslow (2006) showed that segmented inequality pervaded the federal workforce in 2000 and provide recommendations that may in fact have contributed to changes reflected in the data analyzed in the present investigation. The representation of White women in the career SES suggests that data lumped together might indicate general progress toward greater inclusiveness. Yet, those gains appear to be lopsided. White women are replacing overrepresented White men in middle-management and career executive positions at a higher and faster rate than people of color, particularly women of color. White women may have essentially broken the glass ceiling by progressively advancing from the feeder grades to senior policy-making positions, but their success seems to come at the expense of women of color. This trend suggests racial preference in career executive appointments and detracts from the notion of attaining a “representative” bureaucracy at the highest level of the federal workforce. Interestingly, women of color are more affected by this pattern under Democratic administrations than Republican. Future research could focus on the nature of this curious finding by examining differences in the qualifications of the résumés submitted for career executive jobs across the presidential administrations.

The analysis indicates that enacting the SES Diversity Assurance Act or similar legislation will strengthen the SES merit staffing process and accelerate the access of people of color to policy-making positions. Public policy change, however, will only minimize the affect of party control. The analysis also suggests that political control has the potential to augment divisiveness and hinder openness and equal opportunity over polarizing issues. Research consistently demonstrates the value of diversity in terms of ethical obligations (Fine & Johnson, 1990; McDaniel & Walls, 1997) and managerial performance in the public and private sectors (Cox & Beale, 1997; Dobbs, 1996; Fernandez & Barr, 1993; Pitts, 2006; Riccucci, 2002; Wise & Tschierhart, 2000). Yet, the partisan and ideological influences that affect access to policy-making positions contribute to the perpetuation of patterned disparities in the representation of the public, their interests, and government performance.

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Notes

1. Public Law No. 95-454 (October 13, 1978)
2. For a comprehensive review of managing a diverse workforce effectively, see Reichenberg, 2001.
3. At the time of publication, no social ideology scores are publicly available for George W. Bush.
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