

# Legislative Studies and REP Research

EXPERIENCES OF SCHOLARS WORKING AT THE NEXUS OF LEGISLATIVE STUDIES AND REP RESEARCH: A MESSAGE FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

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The contributions in this spotlight of “From the Sections” were published in the American Political Science Association (APSA) Legislative Studies Section (LSS) newsletter, *The Legislative Scholar*, in Fall 2020. This spotlight focuses on the experiences of scholars who work at the nexus of legislative studies and race, ethnicity, and politics (REP). Few REP scholars in political science identify as legislative scholars or maintain LSS membership but many are doing important and timely research on legislative politics. By hearing directly from these scholars about their experiences in conducting research at the intersection of REP and legislative studies, we gain insight on when and why some scholars are more (or less) likely to identify with the LSS; understand the ways that a focus on REP research structures how scholars approach questions in legislative studies and vice versa; and hear advice from successful scholars about how to thrive as a REP and legislative scholar.

Not only does identity influence the study of institutions; it also influences the experiences of scholars who study institutions. It is widely known that the APSA LSS has a history of being fairly

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homogeneous. The section welcomes a broader range of scholars but, of course, there is more work to be done.

This was most recently made overtly apparent when Roberts (2018) revealed the gender breakdown of all APSA sections, with LSS faring among the worst. Although we are not aware of similar data regarding the racial and ethnic composition of APSA sections, we know that scholars of color are underrepresented in the discipline at large. According to data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates reported by the National Science Foundation, in 2017, black scholars earned 42 of 753 (3.2%) of PhDs awarded in political science.<sup>1</sup> Latinos similarly are underrepresented in the discipline.

These patterns are replicated (to a greater or lesser degree) in APSA sections. Although we do not have data on the share of underrepresented minorities in the LSS, we suspect that they may be less well represented in the section than in the discipline. It becomes readily apparent at any LSS business meeting that people of color are dramatically underrepresented. Moreover, although

some whites do study REP, the study of racial and ethnic politics is itself rare, being perceived as a subfield rather than central to the study of politics more broadly.

In a March 2020 spotlight published in “From the Sections” in *PS: Political Science & Politics* and edited by Laurel Harbridge-Yong and Gisela Sin (2020), we heard from a group of women legislative scholars to gain insight into the underrepresentation of women in the LSS. They related their experiences with the section and working in the field. Inspired by former *Legislative Scholar* editors Harbridge-Yong and Sin, we hope to advance what they started by hearing from scholars who work at the nexus of identity politics and legislative studies. This will give us the opportunity to reflect on the ways that the academy as an institution reproduces the same patterns that we observe in political institutions. We can use our scholarship on institutions to learn about ourselves and to ask about policy prescriptions for becoming a more inclusive section.

The first of these spotlight contributions is an honest and reflective article by Nadia Brown, in which she chronicles her experiences of being a black woman who studies black women, and she describes the dearth of research that centers black women elected officials. Although it is not the case that only black women can effectively study black women, Brown’s article highlights the important perspective that black women contribute when studying black women lawmakers.

In an interview with Kristen Smole, Valeria Sinclair-Chapman describes her experience as a woman of color studying legislatures. She mentions that although it initially was difficult to find her way as a graduate student, a year on Capitol Hill in the office of Representative Maxine Waters changed the trajectory of her

career. Sinclair-Chapman also discusses why she thinks it is important to study minority representation in legislatures, and she raises several questions that scholars can answer by studying the intersection of these two topics.

In a related article, Artemesia Stanberry challenges the field to take up the study of black lawmakers—especially in this era of awakening and racial reckoning—bringing to bear her vast experiences on Capitol Hill and in teaching at historically black colleges and universities.

Niambi Carter honestly articulates why she considers herself a REP scholar and not a legislative studies scholar, despite conducting research on legislators. She pushes the discipline to make space for and to center the experiences of marginalized groups.

Anna Mahoney discusses the benefits and the challenges of conducting community-engaged research, making a compelling argument for why more people should participate in research that advances the public good. By engaging in community-engaged research, perhaps scholars are more likely to be compelled to

grapple with the ways that identity intersects with research on political institutions.

Renita Miller describes how her training in REP and legislative studies has allowed her to thrive as an administrator in the realm of higher education, showing that a PhD in political science does not have to circumscribe our career choices. In doing so, she explains how findings from legislative studies and REP research inform her approach to her job.

By hearing directly from scholars about their research and research experiences, we can better understand their experience working in this area so that the APSA LSS will benefit from useful insight on how to improve the diversity among scholars and scholarship in the section. ■

#### NOTE

1. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf19301/data>, table 22. Accessed August 26, 2020.

#### REFERENCES

- Harbridge-Yong, Laurel, and Gisela Sin. 2020. "A Message from the Guest Editors." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53 (2): 299–300.
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#### ALL THE FEELINGS: DOING RESEARCH AS A BLACK WOMAN ON BLACK WOMEN POLITICAL ELITES

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As a flood of emotions washed over me, I first drew shallow breaths that later quickened. I fought the urge to cry. Instead, I took deep and intentional breaths in an attempt to center myself. "I'm a researcher, this is my job" was the calming refrain I repeated to my inner self. "Nadia, please get yourself together" was my last internal dialogue before I welcomed a group of

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15 Black women candidates and elected officials to participate in a focus group. My coauthor, Danielle Lemi, and I had the fortunate opportunity to partner with the [Black Women's Political Action Committee \(PAC\)](#), a group whose mission is to increase Black women's political representation in Texas. To our knowledge, this was the first-ever focus group of its kind. The scholarly significance of this study led me to have an unexpected visceral reaction.

I was overcome with emotions for several reasons. First, I was overjoyed by the larger-than-anticipated group of participants for our study. Danielle and I had worked with the Black Women's PAC before but we had yet to conduct research with group members. We honestly did not know what to expect. We prepared

for an estimated six to eight participants. When more women entered the room and we struggled to make space around the table, gathering additional chairs to squeeze them into the room, Danielle and I quickly realized that our focus group would not be as effective. Focus groups that have 10 or more participants are not ideal for robust conversations. Nevertheless, we welcomed the women because they *wanted* to be there. They desired to participate in our research study because they felt that their experiences are ignored. These political elites needed an opportunity to speak with their peers about the challenges, opportunities, hopes, and pitfalls as candidates seeking elected office and as Black women governing. Danielle and I were the conduit for this cathartic exchange.

Second, I was painfully aware that Black women's narratives are not centered in political science research (Brown 2014). In the subfield of legislative studies, we most often rely on sophisticated statistical analysis to examine the political behavior of political elites. Rarely are our research participants given the opportunity to narrate their experiences to researchers. As a qualitative researcher and an interpretivist scholar, my scholarship prioritizes the voices of Black women political elites, using their experiences as the starting point for my studies. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to talk with so many Black women and to include their narrative in academic scholarship. For me, this focus group signaled an opportunity to radically transform how Black women political elites are studied in political science.

Third, and for the most part, I was moved by the willingness of the participants to share their experiences with us. These women noted that they wanted scholarship to reflect their understanding of the historical and current political landscape. They also were painfully aware of how their political calculations often were misunderstood and that they were stereotyped by both voters and other political elites. I was in awe of their courage to openly discuss political challenges that often did not paint flattering portrayals of their political party, other Black elites, their opponents, and their constituents and/or voters. The women also

shared unique political opportunities and displayed a sense of sisterhood that was refreshingly unexpected.

My heart was full at the onset of the focus group. Although I anticipated the collection of rich and dynamic data, I was pleasantly surprised at the conversations that we facilitated. The focus group caused me to experience a series of unforeseen emotions; however, as a Black woman researching other Black women, I was prepared to do this research.

Researcher reflexivity is undertheorized in legislative studies. The gold standard of qualitative methods in our subfield is perhaps Fenno's canonical *Home Style* (1978). His "soak-and-poke" method is an exemplar in how to learn about legislative behavior outside of formalized structures. Fenno's *Going Home*