

Racial and Ethnic Diversity Within Political Science

Where Do We Begin? Preliminary Thoughts on Racial and Ethnic Diversity Within Political Science

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How can the discipline of political science increase racial diversity among the professoriate? This is a question whose importance has increased in recent years as institutional actors from the American Political Science Association (ASPA) to universities invest time and resources to investigate the current status of racial diversity in the profession and to recruit people of color, especially from historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, into political science graduate programs. It is a truism that Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous scholars are underrepresented in the greater discipline, but as we set about gathering articles and research for the symposium, we realized that many questions still need to be answered before we can fully understand what racial equity means in political science.

Research has shown that the hiring of faculty from historically underrepresented groups in political science specifically (Fraga, Givens, and Pinderhughes 2011), and in academia more broadly (Vasquez Heilig et al. 2019), has consistently been at a disproportionately low level. From this vantage point, it appears pretty clear that the answer to our diversity woes stem from the ever-present pipeline problem of recruiting students, retaining them, and then successfully placing them on the tenure track where they can obtain tenure and promotion. Although much has been written about what political science needs to do to increase racial diversity (Sinclair Chapman 2015)—including providing mentoring, appointing

committees dedicated to the status of such groups, and explicitly considering race in hiring and recruitment—we also need to understand the interpersonal, social, and structural issues that allow for this continuing inequality.

In addition, there is still a great need to systematically collect data on the percentage of people of color in graduate programs and on the tenure track. We also must ask deeper questions about what inequality means and what exactly influences the pipeline. Racial equality is primarily defined by the idea of numerical underrepresentation, but it also exists in the undefined spaces of social and interpersonal interactions that construct the everyday life of the scholar. Questions about whether the discipline values racial diversity in and of itself and the study of racial differences in political phenomena also matter to the discussion (e.g., Alexander-Floyd 2015). The answers to such questions play a role in determining whether the discipline can successfully recruit and retain people from historically underrepresented groups. Are people from such groups welcome in political science? The relative invisibility of race as an area of ongoing stratification in the discipline, in conjunction with other systems of stratification such as gender and colonialism, might signal to some that political science is not welcoming to people of color. It is also possible that certain subfields seem to be more attentive to underrepresentation and more proactive about the inclusion of underrepresented groups than others (Lake 2016; Reid and Curry 2019).

THE VIEW FROM THE INSIDE

Publicly available data on the profession primarily come from APSA, which collects data in the aggregate on race in regard to membership from the graduate level to senior professors. It also does an admirable job of surveying the placement of recent PhDs in the job market and displaying the results by race. Using data from APSA's dashboard, it is clear that the overall numbers of people of color from historically underrepresented groups in the profession relative to their numbers in the general population leave a lot to be desired (see table 1).

APSA's data demonstrate how far the profession has to go in reaching numerical parity for historically underrepresented groups, indicating that recruitment and retention in the profession will remain the primary focus when it comes to increasing diversity among the professoriate. More data need to be collected on structural factors related to recruitment in specific subfields, as well as on the specific reasons why people of color leave the profession and whether they actually leave in proportions larger than those of whites. How do we obtain

Table 1

Historically Underrepresented Groups Relative to Whites in the Profession and General US Population Racial/Ethnic Group

Racial/Ethnic Group ¹	% of Racial/Ethnic Group in Profession ²	% Of Racial/Ethnic Group in US Population ³
Black/Afro-Caribbean/African American	4.47	13.4
Hispanic/Latinx	6.03	18.5
Native American or Alaskan Native (Indigenous)	0.28	1.3
Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American	71.88	60.1 ⁴

¹ Due to differences between how APSA and the US Census count and report people with ancestry from East Asia and South Asia (APSA disaggregates them based on regional categories, whereas the US Census records national subgroups and a larger pan-ethnic category), Asian and Asian Americans are not reported in this table. According to the APSA dashboard, East Asians and Asian Americans make up 9.06% of APSA's membership and South Asian or Indian Americans make up 2.48%. We can assume that Asian Americans are not underrepresented, because the number for East Asians and Asian Americans is larger than the US Census figure of 5.9% (2019). According to the Census's 2015 numbers, Indian Americans by themselves constituted 1.8% of the US population, meaning they make up a share of APSA's membership larger than their percentage of the overall population. It is not known what percentage of APSA's membership consists of Southeast Asians. We do not mean to imply that Asian Americans do not face racism or discrimination, but only that they do not face a problem of underrepresentation in the profession, broadly defined.

² APSA membership data are from February 2020.

³ US Census data are from July 1, 2019.

⁴ The US Census includes people of Middle Eastern and North African heritage in its definition of "white" persons.

such data? This is a question the discipline must answer if it hopes to reach parity and be truly inclusive.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON RACIAL EQUITY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

As stated earlier, we know that the primary problem of racial and ethnic diversity in political science is the continued underrepresentation of people of color. Certain measures of equality,

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such as how many scholars from particular backgrounds publish in top journals (e.g., Saraceno 2020), will not mean much if the number of scholars from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups does not increase across the discipline. What constitutes racial equality beyond empirical parity based upon broader population trends? The contributions to this symposium attempt to answer these questions by tackling them from different viewpoints. Harbin uses a first-person narrative to discuss the unforeseen difficulties she, a Black woman, would face while attempting to do fieldwork in majority-white areas. How, she asks, do race and racism affect

the questions that scholars of color, especially Black scholars, study? Are Black women, in essence, "space invaders" in the realm of political science research even outside the halls of academia?

Some scholars in the symposium tackle the pipeline problem as one that needs to be reconceptualized altogether to reflect the diversity within underrepresented groups. Asian Americans and Latinx populations feature large foreign-born populations that include a substantial number of undocumented individuals (Baker 2017). Therefore, for any solution to fully succeed in incorporating both groups into the profession, we will need to understand how the intersecting categories of race and ethnicity and citizenship status might present unique obstacles to pursuing a PhD in political science. Landgrave gives a persuasive argument on how current discussions of racial diversity and equity do not fully incorporate the views of undocumented individuals who are prone to a particular kind of exclusion and prescribes how the profession can remedy this disparity. Becker, Graham, and Zvobgo document how they created a research lab with the explicit intention of attracting first-generation and underrepresented students to the study of international relations, a field that has been characterized as largely white and male (Lake 2016).

Michelson and Lavariega-Monforti present data from their survey of participants in the Women of Color workshops at APSA, demonstrating the difficulties that women of color in the profession continue to face in the profession. The data and testimonials they share reinforce how important mentoring is and how women of color still face a double bind in political science that must be taken into consideration if their numbers are to increase in the professoriate. Their article complements other accounts detailing the hostility and race-gendering that women of color experience in political science (Sinclair Chapman 2019; Smooth 2016).

It is important to acknowledge that underrepresented scholars have agency even as we acknowledge the burden of intervention should not rest on their works. While the last two articles previously discussed focus on practical efforts undertaken by political scientists to tackle the pipeline problem, Tormos-Aponte gives an overview of how scholars of color

have organized themselves to help address the issues surrounding racial diversity in the profession and why going beyond status committees is necessary. Status committees have the mission of raising key issues that affect their constituencies and often take on the work of resolving them. Tormos-Aponte argues their actions are necessary but insufficient.


These articles address different stages of the recruitment and retention process and ask us to consider what constitutes racial equality and what it might take for the diverse groups that fall under that banner to achieve it. We hope this symposium will spur more conversations and research in

the area of racial and ethnic equity. There is plenty to do beyond widening the pipeline. More must be done to produce data not only in regard to the pipeline but also to address intersectionality involving gender, citizenship, and other meaningful categories of difference. Future discussions must focus on the experiences of Asians and Asian Americans in the profession and how they might be affected by racism, race-gendering, or other processes of racialization. There is also a paucity of research regarding the experiences of Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asians, and Indigenous peoples in political science. There remains much work to be done in defining racial and ethnic equality and equity as they relate to our profession and in determining how we can most effectively achieve that goal. ■

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