

Fostering Diversity on Appointed Boards and Commissions

Every local government has numerous citizen boards and commissions that guide programs, monitor procedures, seek funding for activities, and make decisions that influence the provision of local government services. Appointments to such boards and commissions represent a significant opportunity to build communication with different groups in the community, to ensure that policy processes include varying points of view, and to give future leaders an entry point for involvement in civic activities. Local officials can enable their government to be more reflective of cultural, linguistic, racial, and other communities by encouraging a diverse pool of applicants to apply for positions on local boards and commissions. They should also consider the issue of cultural and gender balance as one criterion in making appointments to boards and commissions.

Many local officials are committed to ensuring representation of community ethnic and racial groups because they want the different experiences and values of these groups reflected in local policy discussions. A cautionary note, however, is warranted. Selecting individuals for a board or commission based on their ethnicity, race, or gender can be appropriate, but one cannot expect those people to hold specific views based solely on those factors.

Stephen Carter, author of *Reflections of An Affirmative Action Baby*, describes his concern about a 1990 Supreme Court decision that states that minority ownership regulations were justified "primarily to promote programming diversity." Carter says, "Perhaps it is likely that black

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people, formed in the crucible of a racially divided society where they have too often been the losers, would in many instances develop a different politics than white people. Even so, one might remain concerned over the prospect of the government sorting out what the differences are likely to be—not only because there is no particular reason to have such faith in officialdom but, further, because placing government imprimatur on racial generalizations establishes an enormous pressure to conform.”¹ Carter argues that race is an important factor but that many other factors, such as education and economic status, play a role in shaping an individual’s approach to issues.

Gender Differences in Values, Leadership Style, and Policy Orientations

An analysis of gender differences reveals some inconsistencies. There is evidence that women’s approaches to decision making differ from men’s and that women have different policy priorities than men. Author Carol Gilligan describes studies that show women emphasizing the understanding of responsibility and relationships and men focusing on the understanding of rights and rules.² Author Judy Rosener reports on a study she conducted to explore leadership style differences between men and women which found that women’s preferred style is “interactive” and oriented toward transforming the self-interests of employees into the interests and goals of the group. The men she studied tended toward a “transactional” leadership style that used rewards and punishments to influence performance.³

Research by the Center for American Woman and Politics (CAWP) found a gender gap in responses to six of eight policy questions asked of legislators. The group identified consistent differences between the top legislative priorities of women and

men, and determined that women are more likely than men to support open, inclusionary decision-making processes.⁴

CAWP conducted a survey of large, representative samples of women and men serving in state legislatures across the country to explore how women behave in public office. Additional research on women public officials at various levels of government confirmed many of the findings of the study. Their research showed women approach the policy agenda differently than men. The study identified that women policymakers were more likely than men to have a bill focusing on women’s rights, health care, children and family, education, environment, housing, or the elderly as their top priority. Specifically:

- Women public officials have different policy priorities. When officeholders were asked about their top priority, women were three times more likely than men to identify children and family policies as their top priority. Women were twice as likely to name either health care or women’s rights their top priority than men.
- When women move into leadership positions in governing institutions, their commitment to reshaping the policy agenda remains strong. Those most active in reshaping the policy agenda are feminist, liberal, younger, and African-American women.
- Younger men, liberal men, and men who call themselves feminists are joining women in reshaping the policy agenda.⁵

The CAWP study also shows that women officeholders are changing the process of decision making. Women are more likely to bring citizens into the process, more likely to support the goals espoused by sunshine laws, and more responsive to groups previously denied full access to the policy-making process.⁶

Boards and Commissions Can Improve Gender Balance

Nailing Jello to a tree is easier than defining the precise impact of race, ethnicity, and gender on styles of leadership and commitment to a specific policy agenda. The more important question for many local officials is whether their community’s current and future population is effectively represented in appointed positions on boards and commissions. Available research suggests that many city and county boards and commissions are not fully representative of the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of their citizenry.

While research is limited, a 1989 study of California boards and commissions showed that women held 28 percent of statewide board seats, 36 percent of city board seats, and 34 percent of county board seats.⁷ The study found that on state boards, men were more likely to hold regulatory positions (50 percent) than they were to hold advisory positions (44 percent), while women were more likely to hold advisory positions (47 percent) than regulatory positions (44 percent).⁸

If women receive about a third of all city and county appointments, this is far below their 51 percent representation in the general population. The study also found that the appointment of women varied significantly, depending on the type of board. Health and social services boards, library boards, and arts and culture boards typically were near the parity level with women representing between 46 and 55 percent of those board members. The study showed that women were twice as likely to be appointed to social service, library, and arts and culture boards than to fiscal and development boards.⁹

Planning boards, a common stepping-stone to council seats, were about 26 percent female. The study noted that given the strong represen-

tation of women in the real estate profession and their involvement with neighborhood associations, it is doubtful that qualified women were not available. Other boards with low percentages of female representation were in construction, transportation and public works, redevelopment, and finance and economic development.¹⁰

The study also found that a higher percentage of women were appointed to boards and commissions in larger cities, in those communities with higher black populations, and in those communities with more female elected officials.¹¹

Since 1986, many states have enacted gender balance laws which require or recommend the appointment of equal numbers of women and men to all public boards, commissions, committees, and councils. These states include Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, and Rhode Island. Other states considering gender balance laws include Alaska, California, Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. (To our knowledge, gender or ethnic balance laws have not been enacted by any local governments.)¹²

Local Boards Open Access to Political Process

Local boards and commissions represent a key entry point to the political process—and a nationwide survey indicates that women elected to state, county, and local offices are more likely than their male colleagues to have held appointive government positions.¹³

A High Priority for Local Governments

Cities and counties can help build a diverse pool of community, state, and national leaders by actively encouraging greater diversity on citizen boards and commissions. This strat-

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egy can have the additional benefit of creating role models from various social, economic, and political elements of the community. An informal survey of 10 local governments throughout the United States showed that all indicated that achieving diversity on boards and commissions is a high priority; however, few had formal programs to recruit, track, and appoint volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Local governments can take the following steps.

Review the current ethnic and gender composition of individual boards and commissions and compare those statistics to both the current and projected composition of your community. Identify the "power boards"—

those that have significant decision-making authority for the community—and pay particular attention to their composition.

Set up a reporting system to track the number of applications and appointments by ethnicity and gender. In other words, are minorities and women not applying to boards and commissions or are they *not being appointed* to boards and commissions?

San Diego County, for example, has a Community Involvement Office under the county administrator which tracks appointments and makes official reports on age, ethnic, and gender balance.

If you are not achieving diversity in volunteers, develop strategies to increase outreach in ways that will increase the number of qualified individuals who apply to serve on local boards and commissions.

In November 1990, Abilene, Texas, held a seminar on community involvement on city boards and commissions. Members spoke on how to get involved, get noticed, and get appointed. They discussed the time and resource commitments, the importance of matching personal interests with the right boards, the qualities of effective board members, and the appointment process. A local organization, the Center for Nonprofit Management, created a board bank to maintain lists of citizens with their interests and qualifications for use by nonprofit organizations and the city in future appointments. Use of the board bank spurred a leadership retreat gathering community leaders to learn to best work together in a multicultural environment. Since then, a multicultural volunteer network, Team Abilene, was created for nonprofits and city use.


Sedgwick County, Kansas, has compiled a bank of volunteers to use when vacancies occur. Orange County, North Carolina, gets good response for volunteers from public

service announcements on local stations. Pasadena, California, sends letters to a variety of community organizations when commission vacancies arise; they also post all openings at public libraries and announce them on cable television.

If appointments are not reflective of the community, that is, minorities and women are volunteering but not being appointed, consider the ethnic and gender composition of boards when the appointment process is under way.

The city of Visalia, California, applies its affirmative action policies to its boards and commissions, and it conducted a study of the representation of women and minorities. Abilene, Texas, examines each board and commission when vacancies occur and seeks to rebalance them with the new appointments.

While Pasadena, California, does compile reports on the demographic makeup of their board and commissions, this information is only available to the councilmembers who make appointments.

The Center for the American Woman and Politics published three reports from their study. These include *Reshaping the Agenda, Gender and Policymaking*, and *The Impact of Women in Public Office*. For ordering information, contact CAWP at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901. 

¹Stephen Carter, *Reflections of An Affirmative Action Baby*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, p. 38.

²Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 1982, pp. 24-63.

³Judy Rosener, "Ways Women Lead," *Har-*

vard Business Review, November/December, 1990.

⁴*The Impact of Women In Politics: Findings At A Glance*, Center for the American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1991, p. 7.

⁵*Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

⁶*Ibid*, pp.6-7.

⁷*California Women Get On Board*, Women Legislators Caucus, State of California, Sacramento, California, 1989, pp. 4, 18, 25.

⁸*Ibid*, p. 19.

⁹*Ibid*, pp. 19-21.

¹⁰*Ibid*, p. 21.

¹¹*Ibid*, p. 27.

¹²*Feminist Majority Campaign For Gender Balance Laws*, Fund for the Feminist Majority, Arlington, Virginia, 1991.

¹³From a seven-report series "Bringing More Women Into Public Office," Center for the American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1991.

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