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Article

Public Administration Review

Lael R. Keiser
University of Missouri-Columbia

Sally Coleman Selden

A Solution in Search of a Problem? Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and the New Public Service

November | December 2006
Volume 66 | Number 6

Lael R. Keiser is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She received her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1996. Her research focuses on bureaucratic politics, policy implementation, representative bureaucracy, social welfare policy, and education.

E-Mail: keiserl@missouri.edu

In this article, Professor Sally Selden draws lessons about affirmative action from empirical research. This is a worthy endeavor, and it is very informative to bring together research to make recommendations for policy actors. This article will be especially helpful to master's students in public affairs, public administration, and public policy, because it demonstrates the importance of scholarly research for understanding policy debates.

As Professor Selden points out, existing scholarship on diversity, representation, and the bureaucracy is relevant for several important policy questions related to affirmative action, such as public support, legal status, and costs and benefits. Selden

does an impressive job of bringing together a vast amount of research that is relevant for understanding affirmative action.

The tradeoff of including so much research and exploring so many questions is that some of the lessons are a little underdeveloped. In this commentary, I will focus on lesson 8 of Professor Selden's article concerning the link between passive and active representation. Although I do not necessarily disagree with Selden's lesson that "mixed evidence, especially regarding women, suggests that active representation is a byproduct of diversity in public agencies," I think the literature allows us to be much more specific. To make this point, I draw seven lessons from prior research on active

representation for practitioners and researchers to consider in their work. These seven lessons are organized around three important sets of questions surrounding affirmative action and active representation. First, when should we expect affirmative action to have an impact on policy outputs? Second, at what levels in an agency does it appear to have an effect on policy and why? Third, how valid are the claims of opponents and agnostics about the negative implications of affirmative action?

My analysis of the literature suggests that affirmative action has policy consequences for clients when the program is directly relevant for women and minorities, that affirmative action matters at both the upper and lower echelons of the bureaucracy, and that increasing representation does not lead to less organizational effectiveness or partiality. More research on this last point, however, is especially needed.

When Should We Expect Affirmative Action to Have an Impact on Policy?

The literature on representative bureaucracy is particularly interesting for the affirmative action debate, because it helps to answer whether or not creating a more diverse or representative public bureaucracy has implications that go beyond increasing opportunities for minorities and women. Insofar as affirmative action is responsible for an increase in diversity, and insofar as a link exists between passive (descriptive) and active (action benefiting a particular group) representation, affirmative action, or the lack thereof, has policy consequences for clients.

Professor Selden highlights the fact that the evidence is mixed about whether or not a link exists between passive and active representation. The literature is mixed, but with

the exception of two agencies, it provides consistent results. Enough case studies exist of different types of public agencies that we can be more specific in our conclusions about whether or not a link exists between passive and active representation.

Existing research consistently shows that a link does exist when the policy area in question is relevant to a particular demographic group. The theory of representative bureaucracy posits that passive or descriptive representation leads to active representation, because people with similar characteristics share similar attitudes about policy. These attitudes then shape how bureaucrats implement policy (Dolan 2000; Meier 1993a).

A person's racial/ethnic identity and gender are just two of the characteristics, however, that influence their attitudes about policy. Class, religion, education, and place of employment also may influence attitudes. We should only expect ethnicity or gender to be an important identity when the organizational task is relevant for people sharing that gender or race/ethnicity (Keiser et al. 2002). More precisely, whether the policy or program has a direct tangible benefit for people who share a particular demographic will influence whether or not that particular demographic characteristic has an impact on policy attitudes and, consequently, on how bureaucrats carry out their tasks (Wilkins and Keiser 2006).

Furthermore, interest groups play a role in making a particular policy seem relevant to gender or race/ethnicity by highlighting the importance of the policy for people with a shared demographic characteristic. When we look only at bureaucracies that implement policies relevant to a particular demographic group, we find less mixed evidence that in-

creasing representation will result in more positive policy implementation for that particular group.

Specifically, scholars consistently have found links between passive and active representation in a variety of policy areas where a particular demographic group benefits from implementation and/or when the issue is salient to the demographic group in question. For example, Senior Executive Service (SES) women have more favorable attitudes toward policies that aid women in the workplace than do comparable SES men (Dolan 2000). Similarly, upper-level minority state bureaucrats are more likely to support policies that benefit minorities than are non-minorities (Brudney, Hebert, and Wright 2000). In contrast, when we use race and gender to predict attitudes toward general policy, the agency in which a bureaucrat works is most important (Meier and Nigro 1976).

In the field of education, interest groups representing minorities and women have highlighted inequities in educational performance between minorities and non-minorities and boys and girls. Several studies have found that increasing passive representation of minorities or female teachers in unrepresented areas leads to educational improvement for minority and female students (Keiser et al. 2002; Meier 1993b; Meier and O'Toole 2006; Meier and Stewart 1992; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989; Pitts 2005). Likewise, the Department of Agriculture's Farmers Home Administration has a record of historical discrimination against African Americans. Researchers have found that increasing African-American representation in the agency leads to better outcomes for African Americans (Selden, Brudney, and Kellough 1998). John Hinderer (1993) also finds that a link exists between passive and active representation in the Equal Op-

portunity Commission (EEOC). This occurs after minority groups have long criticized the EEOC for lackluster enforcement.

Furthermore, Vicky Wilkins and I (2006) find that increasing female representation in child support offices leads to greater enforcement of cases where women, rather than the state, gain financially. Female supervisors spend more time overseeing cases where single parents benefit financially, and they place a higher emphasis on assisting families than on recovering money for the government (Wilkins 2006). Importantly, women's groups have long criticized child support enforcement policy as being inadequate and focused on recovering money for the government rather than providing more income for single parents (Josephson 1997). Women's interest groups also have criticized law enforcement agencies for failing to enforce sexual assault charges vigorously. Not surprisingly, increasing the number of women in law enforcement agencies increases reporting and convictions of sexual assault cases (Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006).

It is important to note that there are two exceptions to the finding that passive representation leads to active representation when the issue is important to a particular demographic group (e.g., the EEOC and police departments). Despite the fact that women's groups have criticized the EEOC for a lack of enforcement of sex discrimination charges, adding more women to the agency does not appear to benefit female clientele, even though adding African Americans to the agency benefits minorities (Hinderer 1993; Meier, Pennington, and Eller 2005). Furthermore, no link between passive and active representation exists in police departments on the issue of police homicides. Police departments with more female and racial minority representation do not have

any fewer police homicides (Smith 2003). Neither of these studies, however, includes data on the sex of managers as opposed to frontline workers. As will be discussed below, some studies find that it is representation at the management level that matters more than representation at the street level (Wilkins and Keiser 2006). This fact, and the fact that the bulk of studies find a link between passive and active representation, makes me comfortable in drawing the following lesson for affirmative action:

Lesson 1: Increasing affirmative action in organizations that implement policies that have a recognized impact on minorities and women will have positive policy consequences for female and minority clients.

When, How, and Why Does It Have an Impact?

In addition to having implications for the general policy impacts of affirmative action, we also can draw lessons from the literature on representative bureaucracy about which levels of the bureaucracy are most important for representation. Professor Selden argues that a link between passive and active representation is more likely to occur in the lower echelons of organizations, where representation of those groups is higher. A closer reading of the literature shows, however, that both levels are important.¹

Several studies find a link between passive and active representation at the upper levels of the bureaucracy (see Brudney, Hebert, and Wright 2000; Dolan 2000; Selden, Brudney, and Kellough 1998; Wilkins and Keiser 2006). Other studies find effects at both the upper and lower parts of the bureaucracy (Meier 1993b; Meier and Stewart 1992; Pitts 2005), and still others find effects only at the lower levels (Keiser et al. 2002; Meier and O'Toole 2006). For those studies that test for effects at both levels,

David Pitts (2005) finds more effects at the upper levels, Kenneth Meier (1993b) and Meier and Joseph Stewart (1992) find more effects at the lower level, and Wilkins and Keiser (2006) find effects only at the upper level. Taken together, the research leads me to comfortably draw the following lesson:

Lesson 2: Affirmative action has important policy consequences at both the upper and lower echelons of the bureaucracy.

In addition to whether affirmative action should be focused on the upper or lower levels of organizations, the literature on representative bureaucracy provides warnings about the hiring of tokens under affirmative action policies. The ability of unrepresented groups to act as advocates for their demographic group is affected by the level of representation that exists in the bureaucracy. Several studies have demonstrated that the link between passive and active representation is stronger when minorities or women have reached a critical mass (Kanter 1977; Meier 1993b). Consequently, prior research offers the following lesson:

Lesson 3: We should not expect increases in passive representation to have policy consequences when levels of representation are very low.

But regardless of level, is increased passive representation in and of itself necessary for more active representation on the part of the bureaucracy? The literature suggests not, which is why Professor Selden's claim that "active representation is overall a byproduct of diversity in public agencies" is correct. Research shows that passive representation leads to active representation because of the link between passive representation and an adherence to an advocacy role. Sally Coleman Selden, Jeffrey Brudney, and Edward Kellough (1998), for example, find that race

of the bureaucrat does not have a direct impact on active representation, but an indirect one through role orientations. African-American bureaucrats are more likely to have an orientation toward advocacy for minorities, and that role orientation increases awards of loans to minorities. Similarly, Brudney, Ted Hebert, and Deil Wright (2000) find that race and gender representation in an agency make it more likely that upper-level bureaucrats will have role orientations that support policies that would help minorities and women.

One thing that this research suggests about affirmative action is that it may be only one of the tools available to improve policy implementation toward a particular demographic group. Socialization of bureaucrats into advocacy roles also may be a viable solution. Consequently, I draw a fourth lesson from prior research:

Lesson 4: In public agencies with problematic relationships with a particular demographic group, bureaucracies may want to create advocacy orientations among personnel rather than focus only on affirmative action.

What Does Prior Research Suggest about the Opponents' Claims?

In addition to implications for the impact and usefulness of affirmative action in improving policy implementation for particular demographic groups, the literature on representative bureaucracy also has implications for some of the possible unintended negative effects of affirmative action. One of the claims against affirmative action is that it causes reverse discrimination. Although the literature on representative bureaucracy does not tell us anything about whether or not non-minorities are disadvantaged in equal

opportunity, the literature on representative bureaucracy posits some possible negative side effects of increasing passive representation.

Responsiveness can conflict with other values of good management such as neutral competence and equity. If demographic characteristics of bureaucrats affect bureaucratic behavior, policy implementation may not be equitable. If demographic characteristics create advocacy roles, increasing the number of minority bureaucrats does not necessarily lead to better management, but rather to management based on the interests of who is represented in the bureaucracy. This increases the likelihood of partiality in government and poses a potential threat to democratic governance (Keiser et al. 2005; Lim 2006). As Frederick Mosher states: "The summing up of the multitude of special interests seeking effective representation would constitute a major threat to orderly democratic government" (1982, 12). A link between passive and active representation might suggest that bureaucrats are engaged in partiality.

Using representative bureaucracy to ensure fair policy implementation also conflicts with the progressive notion of a neutrally competent bureaucracy. According to Herbert Kaufman, neutral competence is the "ability to do the work of the government expertly, and to do it according to explicit, objective standards rather than to personal or party or other obligations and loyalties" (1956, 1060). The theory of representative bureaucracy contradicts this practice since it relies on personal obligations based on race or gender to play a role in policy implementation. Inherent in the idea of neutral competence, however, is the view that bureaucrats will implement policy in ways that are equi-

table, treating people with different demographic characteristics such as race and gender similarly.²

Does representative bureaucracy contain within it a threat of partiality and a loss of neutral competence? Will affirmative action, therefore, lead to policy implementation that disadvantages non-minorities? Existing empirical research does not allow us to answer these questions very well due to the sample of bureaucratic organizations researchers have studied. As mentioned earlier, the research linking passive and active representation in the bureaucracy has focused most often on bureaucratic organizations with a history of distributing policy benefits in ways that discriminate against the groups in question. We do not know whether the increase in passive representation leads to greater equity between minorities and non-minorities or to an unfair advantage of minorities over non-minorities (Keiser et al. 2005).

A few studies do suggest, however, that increasing passive representation does not have negative consequences for non-minority groups. My colleagues and I (Keiser et al. 2002) find, for example, that both boys and girls perform better in math when school districts have more female math teachers, although girls benefit more. Similarly, Meier, Robert Wrinkle, and J. L. Polinard (1999) find that both minority and non-minority students gain academically in the presence of a representative bureaucracy. My colleagues and I (Keiser et al. 2005) also find that girls do not benefit relative to boys in school discipline with an increase in passive representation of women. Taken together, this research suggests that non-minority groups would not be disadvantaged in policy implementation if affirmative action leads to a more passively representative bureaucracy.

It is important to note, however, that this research is only in the field of education. In education, policy implementation may not be a zero-sum game as it may be in other types of bureaucratic organizations. Research shows that in the EEOC, for example, increasing positive implementation for one demographic group decreases positive implementation for other demographic groups. When the EEOC pursues more discrimination charges on the basis of race, the EEOC pursues fewer discrimination charges on the basis of sex and vice versa (Meier, Pennington, and Eller 2005). Consequently, I draw the following lesson from my review of prior research:

Lesson 5: Evidence does not exist showing that increasing passive representation leads to more negative policy implementation for non-minority groups, but the existence of tradeoffs in bureaucratic tasks suggests that more research is needed, especially outside of education bureaucracies.

Another possible negative side effect of the increased diversity that may accompany affirmative action policy is that diverse organizations may be less effective than homogeneous organizations due to the reduction in cohesion. On the other hand, diversity may have positive effects by enhancing creativity through the combinations of a diverse set of opinions (Pitts 2005).

Some research finds positive effects on organizational performance in workgroups for diversity, although decision making may take longer (Bantel and Jackson 1989; McLeod, Lobel, and Cox 1996; Watson, Kumar, and Michaelson 1993). Yet other research finds no effects (Earley 1993; Kilduff, Angelmar, and Mehra 2000; Pate, Watson, and Johnson 1998; Watson, Johnson, and Merritt 1998). Lisa Pelled, Kath-

leen Eisenhart, and Katherine Xin (1999) find, however, that diversity increases emotional conflict, and Keith Murnighan and Donald Conlon (1991) find it decreases performance on cognitive tasks.

Practitioners and researchers also should be sensitive to an important distinction that Pitts (2005) makes between representation and diversity. Representation reflects how similar the demographic characteristics of bureaucrats are to the client population, whereas diversity reflects the heterogeneity of the bureaucracy regardless of the characteristics of the clientele. Representation may have different effects on organizational performance than diversity.

Pitts finds that diversity of managers has no effect on performance, whereas representation among managers enhances performance. Diversity among street-level bureaucrats has some negative and positive impacts on performance, and representation has both no impact and a positive one depending on the measure of performance. In contrast, Rhys Andrews et al. (2005) find no impact for diversity, but a negative impact for representation when performance is measured by client satisfaction. Interestingly, when administrative organizational performance data is used as opposed to client surveys, representation has no effect. This suggests the possibility that clients may have negative feelings about making the bureaucracy more representative, even if it does not harm actual organizational effectiveness. Other studies show, however, that when measuring organizational performance by the satisfaction of minority groups rather than all clients, representation increases client satisfaction (Thielemann and Stewart 1996).

Taken together, the evidence is mixed about whether or not diversity reduces performance, but the weight of the evidence thus far

lies on the side of the debate that diversity does not have large negative effects. This leads me to a sixth lesson offered by prior research:

Lesson 6: Increasing diversity through affirmative action in public organizations should not, on average, reduce organizational performance. Doing so may reduce, however, non-minority client satisfaction. Targeting affirmative action for bureaucracies that have high numbers of minority clients might lead to better organizational performance, because it would increase representation rather than diversity.

In addition to the possible negative effects of diversity on organizational performance, researchers have explored the impact of diversity on the job satisfaction of minority employees and have found some negative effects. Anne Tsui, Terri Egan, and Charles O'Reilly (1992) find that members of minority groups are more likely to be absent and more likely to leave the organization. Supervisors also are more likely to give minority members and more diverse organizations lower performance evaluations (Baugh and Graen 1997; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley 1990; Lefkowitz 1994; Sackett, Dubois, and Noe 1991). This research leads to the final lesson suggested by prior empirical research on this topic:

Lesson 7: Increasing diversity through affirmative action may have some negative consequences on the individual experiences of minority workers.

Conclusion

As my commentary suggests, the literature on representative bureaucracy and diversity provides some more specific lessons for the impact of affirmative action than those Professor Selden was able to afford in her article. Not only can affirmative action lead to

more equality of opportunity, but it also can lead to better policy outcomes in implementation when the public policy is salient or relevant to the demographic group in question. Although more research is needed and the evidence is mixed, on balance, increasing diversity does not seem to bring with it the risk of worsening policy outcomes for non-minorities or of worse organizational performance. The literature suggests that targeting affirmative action policies that increase representation, rather than diversity, will have positive effects on organizational performance.

Notes

1. It is not clear what Selden means by upper and lower echelons of the bureaucracy. My interpretation is that "upper" refers to managers, whereas "lower" refers to frontline workers. If, however, Selden is referring to both managers and frontline workers who work in organizations that directly interact with clients as the lower echelon, her statement that representation is greater at that level is accurate. To my knowledge, none of the existing studies of representative bureaucracy examine the link between passive and active representation in central offices that oversee field offices.
2. Equity itself is a deeply ambiguous term and various definitions of equity exist. Policy outcomes can be considered equitable if government treats likes alike but also as inequitable if government fails to take into account differences in need or past opportunity (Stone 1984).

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