
Beyond DEI: The Democratic Value of Diversity in Public Service

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Résumé

Les récents revers politiques à l'égard des politiques de diversité, d'équité et d'inclusion (DEI) ont ravivé le débat sur la valeur de la diversité dans la fonction publique. Ce texte soutient que la diversité dans la fonction publique est importante pour la gouvernance démocratique, car elle renforce la légitimité organisationnelle et améliore les résultats des politiques publiques. En s'appuyant sur la théorie de la bureaucratie représentative, il définit la diversité comme la représentation passive de groupes politiquement significatifs et mobilise sa conceptualisation de la représentation symbolique afin d'expliquer comment la représentation démographique renforce la légitimité et encourage la coopération citoyenne. Il retrace ensuite l'évolution des politiques de diversité dans la fonction publique au Canada et aux États-Unis, où des pressions externes ont conduit à deux conceptualisations différentes de cette notion. Enfin, il passe en revue des études expérimentales et observationnelles afin de démontrer que les bureaucraties représentatives sont perçues comme plus légitimes, indépendamment de leur performance, et que cette légitimité accrue améliore les résultats des politiques publiques en favorisant plus de coopération citoyenne et de coproduction. Il réfute également une affirmation répandue selon laquelle l'augmentation de la diversité diminuerait la légitimité perçue de la fonction publique auprès des groupes dominants. Ainsi, la diversité dans la fonction publique revêt à la fois une importance normative et instrumentale dans un sens largement utilitariste, ce qui met en lumière son importance dans un contexte où les politiques de DEI font face à une opposition croissante.

Mots-clés: bureaucratie représentative, diversité, fonction publique, DEI, représentation passive, représentation symbolique.

Abstract

Recent political backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies has renewed debate over the value of diversity in the public service. This paper argues that diversity in the public service is valuable for democratic governance because it enhances organizational legitimacy and improves policy outcomes. It begins by drawing on the theory of representative bureaucracy to define diversity as the passive representation of politically salient groups and leverages its conceptualization of symbolic representation to explain how demographic representation strengthens legitimacy and encourages citizen cooperation. It then traces the evolution of public service diversity policies in Canada and the United States, where external pressures led to two different conceptualizations of the concept. Finally, it reviews experimental and observational studies to demonstrate that representative bureaucracies are perceived as more legitimate independent of performance, and that this increased legitimacy improves policy outcomes by fostering greater citizen cooperation and coproduction. It also refutes a popular claim that increasing diversity decreases perceived legitimacy of the public service among dominant groups. In this way, public service diversity has both normative and instrumental importance in a broadly utilitarian sense, highlighting its enduring importance in a political environment where DEI policies face increasing opposition.

Keywords: representative bureaucracy, public service diversity, DEI, passive representation, symbolic representation.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies have been the subject of increasing debate. These policies are characterized by their proactive nature; they are designed to ensure that members of historically marginalized groups are adequately represented within an organization's ranks and feel welcomed within it. Broadly, they include targeted recruitment programs, training and mentorship opportunities for equity-deserving groups, preferential treatment in hiring and promotion competitions, and diversity training aimed at raising awareness on unconscious bias (Iyer, 2020, p. 2). In the public sector, American President Donald Trump's directive to end DEI policies in federal agencies has raised questions on the value of diversity in the public service (Basilio, 2025).

Amid this increasing political debate, this paper will argue that diversity in the public service is valuable in democratic societies because it strengthens public service legitimacy and improves organizational outcomes. These benefits can be conceptualized in both normative and instrumental terms. Diversity is normatively beneficial because representative institutions are perceived as more legitimate; it is also instrumentally valuable since it improves citizen cooperation and policy outcomes, reflecting a broadly utilitarian concern with maximizing public welfare. Drawing on the theory of representative bureaucracy, this paper begins by defining diversity and conceptualizing its impacts. It subsequently

compares the evolution of diversity in the United States civil service and Canada's public service, highlighting key similarities and differences. Finally, it leverages empirical evidence to highlight the significant role diversity plays in improving public service legitimacy and outcomes in democratic contexts.

The Theory of Representative Bureaucracy: A Conceptual Framework

Scholars of public administration employ the theory of representative bureaucracy to highlight the benefits of bureaucratic diversity. First developed by Donald Kingsley, the theory is grounded in the assumption that the demographic composition of a bureaucracy matters (Fernandez, 2020, p. 4). It presumes that bureaucrats' social identities affect a bureaucracy's responsiveness, legitimacy, performance, as well as citizens' willingness to cooperate with bureaucrats as they carry out their responsibilities (p. 4). Public administration scholars apply this theory to argue that a representative bureaucracy is more responsive and legitimate in its exercise of political power (p. 145). As a result, the theory of representative bureaucracy provides a valuable framework for defining diversity in the public service and conceptualizing its benefits.

The theory's concept of passive representation offers a strong foundation for defining diversity. Coined by Mosher (1968), the term refers to the extent to which the demographic makeup of a bureaucracy "mirrors [that of] the total society" (p. 12). Scholars have since refined

this definition, yet two conceptual debates continue today. First, academics vary in the ways they measure representation; basic representation and representativeness are the two dominant approaches in the discipline. Basic representation refers to the “extent to which a social group is represented in the bureaucracy, without regard for that group’s representation in the general population” (Fernandez, 2020, p. 147). Contrastingly, representativeness considers a social group’s representation in the bureaucracy relative to its composition within the general population (p. 148). The latter is more faithful to Mosher’s initial description of passive representation as a mirror of society, since it considers the relationship between a social group’s composition within a bureaucracy and its share of the population. A second conceptual debate lies in which social groups should be included in measures of passive representation. Although scholars focus primarily on race and gender, characteristics such as religious preference, veteran status, and sexual orientation also appear in the literature (Kennedy, 2014, p. 404). An emerging standard of review argues that a group’s representation in a bureaucracy should be measured if its inclusion is politically salient in a particular society. Kennedy (2014) employs this approach when she argues that research on the United States civil service should assess race and gender representation, since political cleavages have historically formed along these lines. Similarly, Fernandez (2020, p. 7) highlights the importance of measuring the representation of linguistic minorities in the Canadian and

Belgian public services due to the significant linguistic divides in these societies; for example, the cleavage between French and English-speaking communities in Canada. This approach to identifying which groups to include in measures of representation aligns closely with the theory of representative bureaucracy: ultimately, a group’s degree of representation within an institution will only impact the latter’s responsiveness and legitimacy if the former is politically salient in the given social context. Consolidating these elements, passive representation can thus be conceptualized as the degree to which a politically salient group is represented within a bureaucracy relative to its share in the general population. Given that scholars frequently use passive representation and diversity interchangeably (Fernandez, 2020, p. 165), this definition can also be applied to the idea of diversity in the public service.

A second principle of the theory of representative bureaucracy, symbolic representation, outlines two distinct benefits of public service diversity. Regardless of how a bureaucracy performs, scholars believe that passive representation improves both its legitimacy and outcomes. Two mechanisms describe the normative benefit of passive representation: increased legitimacy. On an individual level, the mirror image explanation emphasizes the role of identity congruence and shared experiences in improving citizens’ interactions with the bureaucracy (Wang, 2025, p. 5). Engaging with bureaucrats who have shared social origins is believed to put citizens at ease, reassure them that their

needs will be addressed, and create feelings of trust and legitimacy (Fernandez, 2020, p. 160). From a broader perspective, the institutional symbol of democracy explanation argues that, by embracing democratic values such as equity and inclusivity, passively representative bureaucracies increase their public legitimacy and support (Wang, 2025, p. 5). In this context, legitimacy is best understood as the perception that a government body has the legitimate authority to issue commands (Benton, 2020, p. 800). This perception increases an institution's credibility, public support, and levels of public trust. While this strengthened legitimacy is normatively valuable, it also facilitates a second, instrumental benefit of representation: improved outcomes. Symbolic representation theorizes that heightened trust and support for the public service increase citizens' willingness to participate in public programs, cooperate with the bureaucracy, and make behavioural changes which facilitate optimal policy outcomes (Fernandez, 2020, p. 160). In this way, representative bureaucracy reflects a broadly utilitarian ethos: it defends diversity not only on normative, democratic grounds, but also because it improves collective welfare by improving the effectiveness of public administration.

The Evolution of Diversity in the United States' and Canada's Public Services

Historically, diversity initiatives in both Canada and the United States emerged in response to external political

pressures. However, the policies adopted in each jurisdiction differed markedly.

In the United States, policy changes to increase diversity in the civil service were introduced in response to two waves of political pressure applied by Black Americans. Initial political organizing in the 1940s drove the implementation of nondiscrimination policies, which increased representativeness by raising Black Americans' representation within the civil service. In 1941, Black leaders organized a mass rally in Washington, DC to protest racial discrimination in the civil service (Kellough, 2018, p. 260). Under the threat of a mass protest, President Roosevelt compromised with the organizers, issuing Executive Order 8802. The Order institutionalized non-discrimination as a federal hiring practice and established a Fair Employment Practices Committee to uphold this principle (p. 261). These changes significantly increased the ranks of Black bureaucrats in the civil service (p. 262), demonstrating the extent to which public mobilization influenced bureaucratic diversification. Twenty years later, the Civil Rights Movement further increased diversity in the civil service by giving rise to affirmative action programs. Protests and rioting against discrimination during this time created a sense of urgency around fostering equality; scholars believe this climate led to legislation and executive orders establishing affirmative action in the civil service (Fernandez, 2020, pp. 5-6; Kellough, 2018, pp. 262-263). These policies' scope extended beyond Black Americans: mandates for representation also applied to racial minorities and women.

This inclusion reflected Civil Rights leaders' advocacy for broader social equality and consequently strengthened diversity in the civil service more broadly (Kellough, 2018, p. 264). In both waves, however, policy measures to increase civil service diversity were reactions to external pressures exerted by Black Americans.

Likewise, policies to enhance diversity in the Canadian public service responded to two waves of public pressure; these policies first increased linguistic representation and subsequently that of other social groups. The first efforts to diversify the Canadian bureaucracy followed the rise of Québécois nationalism. As nationalist sentiments grew in Québec during the Quiet Revolution, Francophones around the country became increasingly frustrated with the federal public service. Their frustration stemmed not only from what they viewed as inadequate French service delivery, but also from francophone underrepresentation within the institution's ranks (Lam et al., 2021, p. 109; see also Sandilands, 2021, p. 80). As a result, the federal government mandated the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to promote equality between Canada's two constitutionally recognized linguistic groups (Lam et al., 2021, p. 109). The Commission's recommendations were reflected in the 1969 *Official Languages Act*, which made the public service a bilingual institution. The Act guaranteed, for both English and French speakers, equal employment opportunities in federal institutions and the right to work in their preferred language—two changes which significantly improved the representation of

francophones in the public service (p. 109). In this way, pressure from French Canadians increased the representation of francophones within—and thus the diversity of—the public service. Subsequent efforts to increase the representation of women, Indigenous peoples, peoples with disabilities, and visible minorities similarly stemmed from public mobilization. Amid growing demands by these groups for affirmative action to redress historical discrimination, the government formed the Commission on Equality in Employment (Agócs, 2014, p. 15). Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella, its commissioner, coined the term Employment Equity, recommending it as a mechanism by which to increase bureaucratic diversity. She described Employment Equity as a group of “employment practices designed to eliminate discriminatory barriers and to provide in a meaningful way equitable opportunities in employment” (Abella, 1984, p. 7). In the 1986 Employment Equity Act, the Minister of Employment and Immigration implemented this framework (Abella, 2009, as cited in Agócs, 2014, p. 22), encouraging the federal public service to increase the representation of “women, Aboriginals, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities” (Lam et al., 2021, p. 111). In the case of francophones and employment equity groups alike, external political pressures gave rise to increased representation of historically marginalized groups in the Canadian public service.

Although policies to make the federal public service more diverse were driven by political mobilization in both countries, these policies had markedly

different mechanisms. In the United States, the affirmative action measures developed in response to the Civil Rights Movement set numeric targets for the representation of women and racial minorities. Timetables and conditional funding created strong incentives to attain these goals, and government agencies consequently understand them as quotas rather than goals (Hood, 2024, pp. 324-325; Kellough, 2018, p. 264). Contrastingly, the *Official Languages Act* and *Employment Equity Act* in Canada explicitly avoid being understood as hiring quotas. Rather, they recognize membership in an underrepresented group as a core element of merit rather than a means to increase representation (Lam et al., 2021, p. 112). Despite shared policy origins, the United States and Canada have evidently adopted two distinct strategies for promoting diversity in their bureaucracies.

Diversity: Increasing Public Service Legitimacy and Outcomes

Empirical evidence underscores the significant normative and instrumental value of public service diversity in democratic societies. As the concept of symbolic representation suggests, representation strengthens organizational legitimacy, which in turn improves outcomes by incentivizing citizen coproduction.

The normative importance of public service diversity in democracies is most evident in its impact on improving institutions' legitimacy in citizens' eyes. Two studies provide empirical support for the principle of symbolic representation, which argues that diversity lends bureaucracies democratic legitimacy by signalling that

citizens' concerns are represented in decision-making structures (Gravier, 2013, p. 820). Riccucci et al.'s 2014 online survey experiment, for instance, confirmed the impacts of diversity on perceptions of public service legitimacy. Taking a hypothetical domestic violence unit of a police department, the authors randomly varied both the representation of women in the unit and its performance, which was measured through its arrest rates. To a highly statistically significant degree, survey participants perceived the more gender-representative domestic violence unit as fairer, regardless of whether it had a high or low arrest rate. Similarly, Theobald and Haider-Markel (2009) found that Black Americans are more likely to view police actions as legitimate when the police force is comprised of Black officers. In the case of personal searches, for instance, their Black survey respondents were "twice as likely to perceive a personal search as legitimate when conducted by a black officer" (p. 419). Both studies illustrate how representativeness within the bureaucracy improves its perceived legitimacy. Public perceptions of legitimacy play an important role in democratic governance; legitimacy fosters public trust, which contributes to institutional stability and public cooperation. The role diversity plays in strengthening legitimacy, and thus facilitating this stability and cooperation, therefore suggests that diversity has normative importance for democratic public administration.

Beyond these normative benefits, legitimacy—and by extension, diversity in the public service—is also instrumental; it

improves bureaucratic performance by increasing citizen cooperation and coproduction. Riccucci et al.'s findings provide empirical support for the concept of symbolic representation, which posits that public perception that a government institution is legitimate makes citizens more likely to cooperate with bureaucrats in producing and delivering essential public services (2016, p. 123). In an experimental variation of gender representativeness in a hypothetical recycling program, they found that female participants were more willing to coproduce as the representation of women in the program's management grew. Where program management was presented as all-female, the number of women willing to practice light composting was twenty percent higher than when management was all-male, and thirty percent higher for heavy food composting (p. 127). These findings suggest that, as diversity within the public service grows and citizens view it as more legitimate, their willingness to cooperate with public servants grows. In democratic societies where participation in many public programs is strictly voluntary, citizens' willingness to cooperate with public servants is often an important contributor to program success. The benefits of citizens' willingness to coproduce are especially visible in law enforcement contexts, where stronger organizational legitimacy may increase citizens' willingness to report crimes or cooperate with investigations. For instance, more representative police forces may encourage members of marginalized communities to engage with law enforcement in cases where distrust might

otherwise discourage reporting. Representation within the bureaucracy is therefore instrumentally valuable in democratic contexts: it improves organizational effectiveness by increasing citizen cooperation and coproduction. In this sense, diversity can also be understood from a utilitarian perspective, since this increased legitimacy, cooperation, and coproduction improves collective policy outcomes.

Some scholars challenge the idea that diversity within the public service is meaningful; they apply the theory of representative bureaucracy in reverse to argue that, by decreasing the passive representation of dominant social groups, diversity delegitimizes the public service in the eyes of the majority (Riccucci et al., 2017, p. 25; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009, p. 421). This claim risks understating the theory's emphasis on representation as a function of a group's composition in a bureaucracy relative to its share of the general population. While it is true that the ranks of majoritarian social groups decrease as a public service becomes more diverse, it is important to note that they consequently become accurately represented as opposed to overrepresented. The principle of symbolic representation holds that this continual passive representation will sustain the perception of the public service as legitimate among these groups. Empirical research supports this argument. In their study of women's willingness to coproduce based on the gender representativeness of a hypothetical recycling program's management, for instance, Riccucci et al.

(2016, p. 127) found that female representation in the program did not significantly impact men's willingness to coproduce. Similarly, Meier et al.'s (1999) study on student success rates found that increased representation of ethnic minorities among teachers did not harm white students' educational outcomes but rather improved them. In both studies, increased diversity in public service bodies did not adversely impact dominant groups' ability or willingness to coproduce. This stable capacity for coproduction demonstrates that increasing diversity does not decrease public service legitimacy among these social groups, as Riccucci et al. (2017) and Theobald and Haider-Markel (2009) argued.

Conclusion

Amid growing criticism of diversity in the public service, the theory of representative bureaucracy provides a

theoretical lens for defining diversity and understanding its importance. In the United States and Canada alike, measures to increase diversity in the public service emerged in response to external pressures—yet these measures are fundamentally different.

Examining empirical evidence provides support for the concept of symbolic representation, highlighting the significant role of bureaucratic diversity in democratic societies. Studies show that representation is normatively valuable, as it legitimates the public service in citizens' eyes. Yet diversity is also instrumental, and broadly utilitarian: it encourages citizen cooperation and coproduction, improving bureaucratic effectiveness and collective policy outcomes. Particularly in a political context where policies promoting diversity face increasing opposition, these benefits highlight that they continue to play an important role in public administration.

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