

Public administration should consider effects of whiteness, masculinity and representation, researchers say

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For most of the nation's history, white men have held the vast majority of U.S. government bureaucracy jobs. One recent way to address that has been representative bureaucracy, or ensuring governing bodies are made up of people who reflect their communities. While that is a

positive step, continuing to avoid conversations about how race and gender have traditionally shaped public administration can limit effectiveness, according to new research from the University of Kansas.

In the early decades of American [public administration](#), the spoils system handed out government jobs to loyalists and friends of those who won elections. Reformers during the Progressive Era pushed back against that, arguing that corruption should be countered by appointing politically neutral bureaucrats. During this time, President Woodrow Wilson pushed to segregate the federal government, leading to a normalization of white men in bureaucratic roles and the xenophobia, racism and other issues that accompanied it, said Shannon Portillo, professor of public affairs & administration at KU and lead author of an article on the issue, published in the journal *Public Administration Review*.

Portillo and co-authors examined representative bureaucracy theory and how it has almost exclusively focused on those seen as "other" in the professional workforce: people of color and women. They said that more research is needed on dominant whiteness and masculinity in the field and the results they have in communities.

"We've never really addressed the other side of this issue. White men have been in charge pretty much forever," Portillo said. "That has effects on the communities they represent, which could be beneficial or harmful. We need more empirical evidence on what happens in those situations."

The article, co-written by Nicole Humphrey, assistant professor at the University of Miami and KU alumna, and Domonic Bearfield, associate professor at the Rutgers University, acknowledged the value of representative bureaucracy but advocated for further examination. Portillo cited research in education that has shown that when there are

more math teachers who are women, not only do results for girls improve, but results for all students improve. Similar evidence has shown representative bureaucracy improves outcomes for all members of a community, but the question of the benefits or harm of [representation](#) by predominantly white men is almost never asked.

Understanding both representative bureaucracy and the traditional majority representation can be viewed as understanding both sides of the same coin, she said.

"We support calls for initiatives like increased diversity hiring, but we need to understand why and how that matters for the entire community bureaucracies serve," Portillo said. "Also, understanding what is going on in organizations where that is not happening is vital."

To better understand the issue, the authors wrote that first, the field needs to acknowledge that identity matters. It is also necessary to understand that the past affects what happens in bureaucracies now and how historical overrepresentation led to current [inequities](#). There is a natural tendency to want to publish new or innovative findings or solutions to problems such as underrepresentation, but to ignore the status quo and how it came to be holds the potential to perpetuate the systems that made it dominant, authors wrote.

For their part, the authors are addressing the call for more research into the overrepresentation of whiteness and masculinity by working on a book about the myth of neutrality. The work is examining how the intent to install neutral actors in bureaucratic positions resulted in the overarching assumption that the predominantly [white men](#) who received those positions were neutral. The researchers said that no one is completely neutral and that more review of the outcomes of historical overrepresentation would help address solutions to the problem.

"Representative [bureaucracy](#) pushes identity politics. Representation is still very good. Having a variety of perspectives produces better outcomes," Portillo said. "But we argue it's not really possible to be completely neutral. We need to take a deeper look at the ways whiteness and masculinity shape the values, practices and ideas in our field."

More information: Shannon Portillo et al, Representative Bureaucracy Theory and the Implicit Embrace of Whiteness & Masculinity, *Public Administration Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/puar.13477](https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13477)

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