The Political Leadership of Women of Color in Massachusetts: Uneven Progress Amid Historic Advances

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Highlights

- Several breakthrough victories over the past few years signal a notable shift in historically limited representation by women of color in key elected leadership positions in Massachusetts and in the City of Boston.
- The election of Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley and Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins reflect groundbreaking candidacies.
- More women of color serve as state legislators than ever before.
- The trend of increased electoral leadership of women of color in municipal government suggests continued expansion of representation at the local level.
- Even with gains made, progress is uneven given persistent underrepresentation at most levels of government.

Since the 2015 release of Profiles in Leadership: Women of Color Elected to Office in Massachusetts which documented the electoral leadership of 94 women of color who had ever served in office in Massachusetts, at least 34 women of color have been elected to office, reflecting a 36% increase in the past four years.

The Local Level: Increased Representation

- The majority of women of color ever elected in the Commonwealth have been elected to municipal office.
- According to currently available data, since 1972, 61 women of color have been elected to school committee and 53 to local governing bodies (such as city councils and select boards).
- Most women of color elected locally who have held two offices have served first on school committee, followed by city council.
- Six of 13 Boston City Councilors are women of color – the most women ever to serve on the Council.
- Of nine female mayors currently in office, one is a woman of color; Framingham Mayor Yvonne Spicer is the first African-American woman to be popularly elected as mayor in the Commonwealth.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity of Women in MA

According to 2017 population estimates, more than one of four women in Massachusetts is racially and/or ethnically diverse:

- 28% of 3,529,454 females are racially and/or ethnically diverse
  - 313,248 female residents are Hispanic White
  - 310,085 are Black or African American*
  - 246,793 are Asian*
  - 16,321 are American Indian or Alaska Native*
  - 3,594 are Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander*
  - 83,815 identify with two or more races*
    - including Hispanic and non-Hispanic

The statewide diversity among Massachusetts women is not reflected in governing bodies across the Commonwealth, even as some communities such as Boston and Chelsea stand out due to increased representation by women of color on their City Council and School Committee, respectively.
The Massachusetts Legislature: Increased Representation in House, One Woman of Color in Senate

- More women of color are serving in the legislature than ever before: one as State Senator and five as State Representatives.
- Senator Chang-Díaz is the longest-serving woman of color in the legislature.
- Racial and ethnic diversity reflected in current House membership includes the first Korean American (Rep. Robinson), the first Vietnamese-American (Rep. Nguyen), and the first Cape Verdean-American woman (Rep. Miranda) elected to the legislature.
- Women of color comprise 3% of all legislators, reflecting a slight uptick from the previous session.

| Women of Color, Massachusetts House and Senate (191st General Court) |
|--------------------|-------|------------------|
| Legislator          | District | Year First Elected |
| State Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz | 2nd Suffolk | 2008 |
| State Representative Chynah Tyler | 7th Suffolk | 2017 |
| State Representative Nika Elugardo | 15th Suffolk | 2019 |
| State Representative Liz Miranda | 5th Suffolk | 2019 |
| State Representative Tram Nguyen | 18th Essex | 2019 |
| State Representative Maria Duaime Robinson | 6th Middlesex | 2019 |

Top Offices and Congressional Delegation: Historic Election of First Black Woman to Congress, Statewide Representation Gap

- The first woman of color elected from MA to Congress, U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley (MA-7th), was elected in 2018.
- No woman of color has ever been elected to statewide constitutional office.

District Attorneys, Governor’s Councilors, and Sheriffs: Limited Representation in Key Judicial and Law Enforcement Roles

- Of the 11 elected District Attorneys, three are women and one is a woman of color – Suffolk DA Rachael Rollins.
- Four of eight Governor’s Councilors are women but no woman of color has ever been elected to the Council.
- Of fourteen elected Sheriffs in Massachusetts counties, none are women of color. The first female and woman of color elected Sheriff in the Commonwealth was Andrea Cabral in 2004.

| Women of Color, Key Elected Leadership Positions, Massachusetts, 2019 and to Date |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                | Total # of Officeholders | # of Women of Color in Office (2019) | # of Women of Color Elected to Date |
| U.S. Senate    | 2                      | 0              | 0 |
| U.S. House of Representatives | 9                      | 1              | 1 |
| Constitutional Offices [Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Auditor, Treasurer] | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| MA Senate      | 40                     | 1              | 3 |
| MA House of Representatives | 160 | 5 | 18 |
| MA Legislature | 200                    | 6              | 20* |
| District Attorneys | 11              | 1              | 1 |
| Governor’s Councilors | 8                      | 0              | 0 |
| Sheriffs       | 14                     | 0              | 1 |

* Linda Dorcena Forry is the only woman of color to have served in both the MA House and the MA Senate.
Sources


Data also collected from the Massachusetts Legislature (https://malegislature.gov), Massachusetts Secretary of State (www.sec.state.ma.us), as well as town and city websites by researchers from the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black Culture, Institute for Asian American Studies, and Institute for New England Native American Studies. Additional data sources, primarily for past officeholders, include: Latino Politics in Massachusetts: Struggles, Strategies and Prospects by Carol Hardy-Fanta, Jeffrey Gerson (New York: Routledge, 2002), National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), Women’s Pipeline for Change, EMERGE MA, MA Women’s Political Caucus, LIPPI at the Women’s Fund of Western MA.

Women of Color: Definitional Considerations
While commonly utilized by scholars and advocates, the term “women of color” in this fact sheet is intended to be inclusive and broad even though it remains controversial in part because there is no consensus about its meaning or its use. In current discourse, it often reflects an intention of empowering women who are underrepresented, invisible, disenfranchised, marginalized, and/or who self-identify as having a diverse racial, ethnic, and/or immigrant background. Yet there are limitations and drawbacks to the term as it may not be recognized and/or embraced by all women of diverse backgrounds.

Currently there is no standardized or government-provided data on the sex, gender identity, or the racial/ethnic backgrounds of elected officials. Therefore, data for Profiles in Leadership: Women of Color Elected to Office in Massachusetts and this fact sheet were collected primarily through publicly available, credible sources of information such as biographies and campaign websites when self-identification of racial/ethnic background was not possible through direct contact with the elected official.

The Massachusetts Representation Project: Diverse Leadership for a Diverse Commonwealth

Racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in political leadership is vital to a healthy democracy. Yet information about the backgrounds of Massachusetts’ elected officials - from School Committee to Congress – is not easy to access. The searchable public web portal under development at UMass Boston will change that.

A collaborative project of:
McCormack Graduate School’s Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy
Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy
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Institute for Asian American Studies
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