

Minority representation gaps, by the numbers

By Tyler Reny and Sayu Bhojwani October 22

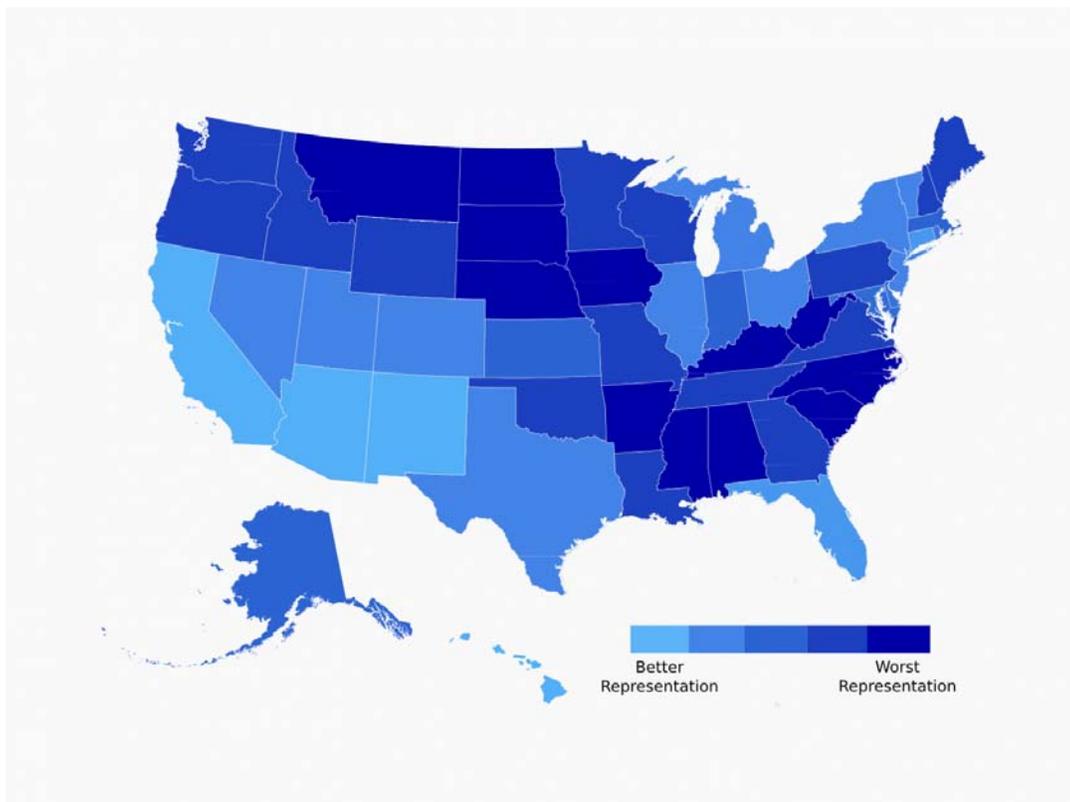
When protests broke out in Ferguson, Missouri over the shooting of an unarmed black teenager Michael Brown this summer, [attention](#) turned toward the lack of black representation on Ferguson's city council. Scholars of representation have long examined the [range of factors](#) that [encourage](#) or [depress](#) the likelihood that African Americans can win local, state, and national elections and the impact this [representation](#) or [lack of representation](#) has on African Americans.

Ferguson is hardly an anomaly in terms of its representation gap. Still, African Americans have made electoral gains for decades at the state and local level. Using data from research conducted by [Jessica Trounstein and Melody Valdini](#), Seth Masket [shows](#) that contemporary black representation in city councils, for example, roughly increases in tandem with the size of the black population in a city. Similarly, African Americans [make up](#) about 8.1 percent of state legislators and 12.6 percent of the total population. It's not parity, and it's far from adequate, but it's progress.

But what about the emerging majority? American demographics are shifting as Asian American and Latino populations continue to expand. Over the last four decades, the absolute number of foreign-born immigrants has [surged](#) to nearly triple the historical high. In 2003, Hispanics and Latinos [surpassed](#) blacks as the largest racial/ethnic minority group. Even the number of non-White [school children](#) in U.S. schools this year surpassed the number of white non-Hispanic children, building the foundation for a far more diverse electoral landscape over the next several decades.

In response to these drastic demographic shifts, recent electoral cycles are peppered with coverage of the importance of the Asian or Latino vote. However, little attention is paid to the gaps in Asian American and Latino representation. At the national level, the gaps are sobering. Only seven percent ([37 members](#)) of Congress are Latino or Hispanic despite composing nearly 17 percent of the total U.S. population. Similarly, only 2.4 percent ([13 members](#)) are Asian American, despite composing 5.8 percent of the total population.

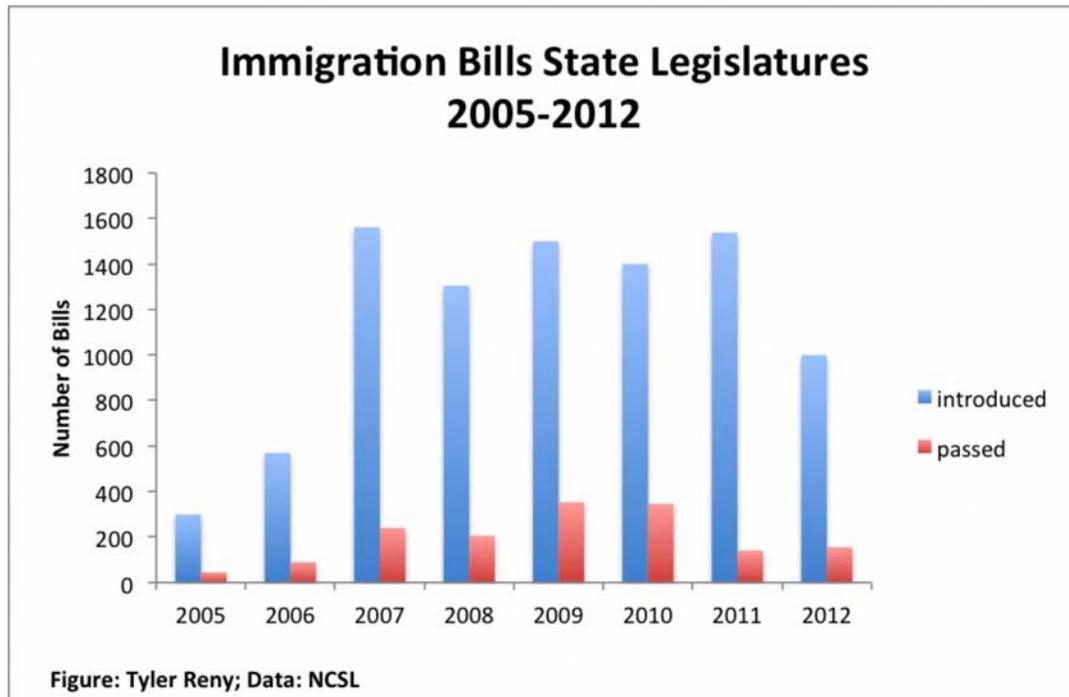
A new [report](#) from The New American Leaders Project ([NALP](#)), finds that these representation gaps are even more pronounced at the state level. In the first ever analysis of Latino and Asian state legislators in all 50 states, NALP finds that only 5.1 percent (377 of [7383](#)) of state assembly and senate seats are held by Latinos or Asian Americans, far below their combined share (nearly 23 percent) of the population.



Map of 2012 Asian/Latino parity scores. States with a darker shade of blue have lower rates of representation of minorities, by proportion in the population. (Figure: New American Leaders Project; Data: Christian Phillips)

Disaggregating the data by state shows even more pronounced gaps. Eleven states have zero Asian American or Latino state legislators. A traditional progressive bastion like Massachusetts has large Asian and Latino populations (a combined 15 percent of the state's residents) but only four Asian American and four Latino state representatives (for a total of four percent of the state legislature). Even immigrant gateway states like New York fall behind. With a combined 25 percent of the state's population composed of Latinos and Asian Americans, the state legislature is less than ten percent Latino and Asian American, with a particularly egregious gap in Asian American representation.

The consequences are dramatic, particularly for the country's immigrants. Over the last decade, stalemate and gridlock at the federal level has pushed immigration policy down to the state level, where states have eagerly adopted a [smorgasbord of measures](#), including punitive omnibus legislation like Arizona's SB1070, Georgia's HB87, and Alabama's HB56.



Even without parity in every state, an increase in the numbers of Asian and Latino legislators would certainly help block, or at the very least [temper](#), punitive legislation from being enacted. Similarly, Latino and Asian members are more likely to [author, sponsor, co-sponsor, and advocate](#) for legislation that corresponds with their communities' preferences and their presence in Congress increases the chances that minority perspectives and concerns will be addressed in [committee deliberations](#).

[Projections show](#) that the white population will shrink from the majority to a plurality as early as 2042 while Asian and Hispanic populations continue to increase. Addressing the policy needs of this growing demographic will be a challenge if minority representation in state and local legislatures continues to fall short.

[Sayu Bhojwani](#) is a Visiting Scholar at the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University and the Founder and President of The New American Leaders Project. [Tyler Reny](#) is a PhD student in political science at the University of Washington and a fellow at the UW Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Sexuality.