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Statewide political races lack diversity?

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

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Men, particularly white men, dominate the list of major-party candidates for statewide offices in Illinois.

Thirty-one of 45 Democratic or Republican candidates for U.S. Senate, governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, comptroller and treasurer, are white men. Five of the 45 are women, seven are black, and two each are Asian and Hispanic.

The GOP list of candidates is less diverse than the group running as Democrats. Of 25 Republican candidates for the offices, 20 are white men, two are white women, one is a black man, one is of Asian descent and one is Hispanic.

Among the 20 Democrats in the running, 11 are white men, four are black men, two are black women, one is a white woman, one is a Hispanic man and one is a man of Asian heritage.

Is more diversity needed? The chairman of the state Republican Party says yes.

"We've just, quite frankly, done a poor job recruiting, and we need to improve that," said Pat Brady of St. Charles

"I actually tried recruiting some very high-powered women to run for governor a year ago," Brady said. "Let's face it — this next election cycle is going to be controlled by suburban women. I mean, that's the key vote, so we need to appeal to them."

Brady also recognizes the growing presence of Hispanic voters, and his party hopes, as the general election nears, "to be making a big push into the African-American communities."

Brad Mills of Springfield, a GOP precinct committeeman and elected member of the board that oversees the Prairie Capital Convention Center, is black. He says he finds the GOP welcoming.

"Believe it or not, I come from a long line of Republicans," Mills said. He said the values that draw him include fiscal conservatism.

"I've always felt welcome," he said. "It's always open to anybody."

'Comes in cycles'

On the Democratic side, Steve Brown, spokesman for House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, who is also chairman of the Democratic Party of Illinois, didn't concede there's a lack of black or women candidates on the Democratic ballot.

"It's a party that is inclusive and welcomes people (of) all shapes and sizes and all regions of the state, and every other category, and I think the results speak for themselves."

Statewide officeholders, all Democrats, now include Attorney General Lisa Madigan, a white woman, and two black men, Secretary of State Jesse White and outgoing U.S. Sen. Roland Burris.

Though not in any of the top offices now, Republicans in Illinois won all six state constitutional offices in 1994 with a slate that included two women — Comptroller Loleta Didrickson and Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka.

Topinka, who lost a race for governor in 2006 to Rod Blagojevich, is now one of three GOP candidates for state comptroller.

"It comes in cycles," Topinka said of the lack of women on this year's GOP ballot for top offices. "Some years we have more. Some years we have less. I can remember when Loleta and I ran, there was concern that there were two of us on the ticket, and yet it worked out very successfully."

Democrats that year had four women in the running, including gubernatorial candidate Dawn Clark Netsch and running mate Penny Severns. That team lost to then-incumbent Gov. Jim Edgar and his GOP running mate, Bob Kustra.

Gender irrelevant?

Topinka and Brady both point to the inclusion on the GOP ticket this year of Steve Kim of Northbrook, whom Topinka called "a Korean-American who is brilliant," for attorney general, and Robert Enriquez of Aurora, a Hispanic candidate for secretary of state. Topinka rejects the idea that this is tokenism, even though both those candidates face tough incumbents in November -- Madigan and White.

"You have to start somewhere," Topinka said.

Jim Dodge, a white man who is running against Topinka for the GOP nomination for comptroller, said that, as he campaigns, the gender of the candidates is "the last thing on anybody's mind."

"It was all about 'Do they like, or not like, Judy?' 'Do they like, or not, Jim Dodge,'" he said. "I have viewed Judy Baar Topinka from the word go as a formidable opponent — period. Gender is irrelevant."

Also in the GOP race is William Kelly, who hosted cable TV shows in Chicago — sometimes drinking shots and flirting with scantily clad women, as a video Dodge had put together shows.

Kelly says opponents had to scour his video archives to find instances with which to attack him.

"I would be more than happy to have a woman president of the United States," Kelly said. "Who knows — if I'm comptroller in 2010, I might be the statewide director for a Republican female candidate for president of the United States."

Not enough in pipeline

Democrats also have three candidates for comptroller. While all are men, they form a diverse picture: Raja Krishnamoorthi, who was born in India; state Rep. David Miller, who is black; and Clint Krislov, who is white.

"As I see it, voters are increasingly embracing a more diverse set of candidates," said Krishnamoorthi, whose campaign points out he could be the first Asian-American elected to statewide office.

"One of the reasons in the past that there wasn't as much diversity is simply that there may not have been as many ... candidates among Asian-Americans in the pipeline, so to speak, for higher offices," he said.

Miller said the diversity of Democrats seeking statewide office reflects, for example, the House Democratic caucus. While all House Republicans are white, he said, "You see on the Democratic side black, white, Latino, openly gay, straight, upstate, downstate — clearly a broad diversity."

Krislov sees roadblocks to getting top office in Illinois as a matter of money and "bucking the party powers." He notes that both he and Krishnamoorthi had to fend off objections to their nominating petitions.

"I think we long for a time when candidates will be viewed on their merits and their substance," Krislov said. "We're certainly not there yet."

In the Chicago area, he noted, many people think having an Irish-sounding name is an advantage in judicial races, where voters tend to know little about the candidates.

Hispanic vote crucial

In the January edition of Illinois Issues magazine, Charlie Wheeler, director of the Public Affairs Reporting Program at the University of Illinois Springfield, wrote that Illinois is becoming more Hispanic and Asian. The GOP should be concerned, Wheeler wrote, because "voters in burgeoning ethnic communities — particularly Latinos — tend to vote Democratic.

"I'll quote what (former) Governor (Jim) Edgar has said on various occasions," Wheeler said in an interview. "If the Illinois Republican Party does not find a way to attract Hispanic voters and doesn't do any better with Hispanics than it does with African-Americans, the Republican Party of Illinois will go the way of the Whigs and cease to exist as a viable party."

Wheeler said former GOP President George W. Bush proposed an immigration policy that would have provided a way for many people who came to America illegally to achieve citizenship, but conservative elements in the GOP "tubed" the plan. As a result, Wheeler said, Republicans "just totally lost" the Hispanic vote.

Brady, the state GOP chairman, said he thinks the party still has common ground with Hispanics.

"The focus for us needs to be on securing the borders first, and I think even the Hispanics that are here agree that that is an important issue," Brady said.

Wheeler, who is white and who identifies himself as a Democrat, thinks "the official Republican attitude concerning some minorities is, 'Well, I pulled myself up by my bootstraps — you should too.'"

Brady responds that "Democrats are by nature more paternalistic, and they believe in government solutions to everything, whereas the Republicans do believe in the individual and bring yourself up from the bootstraps.

"I don't think that the racism component is fair — not in what I've seen," Brady added.

Women active in local politics

Christine Dudley, a past president of the Illinois Lincoln Excellence in Public Service Series, a training program for Republican women interested in being politically active, said women tend to be more active in local government. They also have gained parity in judicial roles, she said.

"The county and municipal races tend to be more female-friendly," Dudley said.

Those trends, she said, are based on women's executive skills, but also "lifestyle choices."

"A lot of marriages and relationships have evolved, but the primary caretaker of the home and the children still tends to be the women," she said.

In Illinois, she said, the GOP had "a great boomlet" with Topinka and Didrickson winning state office in 1994, but, "We're not even close to being where we should be as a state."

Loretta Durbin of Springfield is president of Illinois Women's Institute for Leadership, a training program generally for Democratic women who want to run for office.

"Statewide, I think it takes a long time for women to rise up the chain," she said. "I think you just have to pull more women into the system."

Hispanic Republican says he's no 'token' candidate

Robert Enriquez, the GOP candidate for secretary of state, doesn't see himself as a token candidate.

"In the case of the Republican Party, I'm convinced — and I'm not easily fooled — that they are very genuine in their outreach to the Hispanic constituency," said Enriquez, an Aurora resident who was born a U.S. citizen in Honduras to a father from Panama and a mother from the United States. He served as a U.S. Marine and owns a company that does translations and is involved in workforce development.

He is unopposed in Tuesday's primary, as is his Democratic opponent in November, Secretary of State Jesse White.

Enriquez said White has benefited from increased diversity in society, but, "I'm very disappointed ... as an example, that he only employs less than 2 percent Hispanics in the secretary of state's office. I think he needs to answer some questions (about) what he's been doing for 12 years.

"I think both parties need to answer questions," he said.

Dave Druker, spokesman for White, said the last quarterly report filed with the state Department of Human Rights shows that, of 3,802 secretary of state employees, 1,670 were men and 2,132 were women. The statistics also show 3.5 percent are Hispanic, with the total percentage of minorities — also including blacks, Asians and Native Americans — at 20 percent.

Druker said he thinks minority figures in the office are actually higher, but not reflected in statistics because it is optional for employees to mark their ethnicity on a state employment form.

"The secretary feels that his office really does reflect kind of the United Nations," Druker said. "Jesse's very proud of the efforts we've made to recruit minorities."

Green Party diversity

Green Party candidates this year include one black man, LeAlan Jones of Chicago for U.S. Senate; one white woman, R. Erika Schafer of Chicago for comptroller; and five white men — Rich Whitney of Carbondale for governor, Don Crawford of St. Elmo for lieutenant governor, David Black of Belvidere for attorney general, Adrian Frost of Plano for secretary of state and Scott K. Summers of Harvard for treasurer.

Bernard Schoenburg can be reached at 788-1540.

Comments (24)

cessch

2 days ago

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Empty comment box with a vertical scrollbar on the right side.

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i dont get it are whtie men some sort of devils? its a free country. exactly what did we do to get such attention? what the point of this article?

College Student

2 days ago

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Empty comment box with a vertical scrollbar on the right side.

Report Abuse

I do not see color. Period. People that are so-called progressives like to keep a quota, as if white men need to be punished. That is racism. Period.

Stop looking at color. Simple!

Mark Observed

2 days ago

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Report Abuse

This whole article is based on the false assumption that a person of one race cannot adequately represent a person of a different race.

vet66

2 days ago

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Report Abuse

It's a free country and anybody can run-What's your point
demented
2 days ago
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Why keep looking at color? Most of the citizens don't, and those that do have issues with color. White, black, red and yellow, they can still be racist, prejudiced or just plain biased. Looking beyond the color of my skin, to the content of my character, is still the best way to live your own life.
gkfb
2 days ago
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If we are voting on color and/or sex then we need more diversity. We have a black president. It's time to get past that.
hdguy
2 days ago
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who cares, if people of other colors want to run for offices they will. doesnt mean their going to get votes. most people vote for the person anyway not the color.
Odd Job
2 days ago
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I agree with vet. It's just like the police and fire departments in Springfield. Quotas are bad.
lg sarg
2 days ago
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I'm having a hard time understanding the point of printing this article! Is this another blunder by the SJ-R? As long as all contestants are a product of the human race, (and I assume they are) , I'll make my choice as to who I think can best represent me.
Steve 2

2 days ago
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At least the Republicans had the decency to let one 'Gay Guy' run for office.
grsetze
2 days ago
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Report Abuse

Bernie.
It doesn't seem like your article was very popular today..I agree with 'all' of the previous posts. Why do you insist on making race an issue, when most people could care less about color, creed, etc. We vote for the person and what they represent, not the color or race. You are starting to remind me of Chris Mathews and Harry Reid.
ash
2 days ago
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[Empty report abuse form box]

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Mark is the only one who gets it -- the idea of the article is representation. If white men are able to look out for their constituencies, who cares? That said, if there is dominance by one group, do all of the others feel that they aren't being taken care of and that their vote does not matter? When this happens, there is a general view of the system as being for everyone else. This part is dangerous in a so-called democracy. The image can lead to actual apathy which, in turn, leads to real dominance and lack of representation because nobody other than the 'chosen ones' bothers to vote. I promise you, that while many whites say that race doesn't matter, other groups (the ones impacted) are not saying the same thing. BTW, I would be in the protected group -- I just study this stuff and am only offering this as food for thought.

eccdekab
2 days ago
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This article confirms what we now all know. The media (print.radio,TV) is obsessed with race, gender,and sexual orientation. If you happen to be a white male Catholic you are immediately suspect They need to read the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

vet66
2 days ago
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Do we need Diversity in sports?????????????

Daily Fatwa
2 days ago
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The Quota count continues.....by the MSM anyway!
Countrylife
2 days ago
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Good gosh, people! Bernie wrote a simple article that involves race and diversity of the political ticket. Nothing sinful about that. In reality, a person's race will always be a factor in life, in politics, in everything. I'm not saying that is good or bad; It's just a fact. We should not publicly flog Bernie because of this article. I, at times, find other articles penned by Bernie more interesting, but this question of 'race' is a legitimate topic that will always be discussed. And, I dare say, it needs to be discussed. I also dare to say that we should not appoint or elect a black person simply to diversify the ticket or a public office. If the white candidate is the stronger candidate of the 2 (black and white), the white candidate should win. I don't believe in diversity to the point of appointing or electing a candidate only because the person is a member of 'x' race. If the black candidate is not the more qualified, that person should lose. That simple.
hdguy
2 days ago
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ash what makes you think we live in a democracy, last time i looked at everything going on it seems like we are leaning towards communism. lol
MySay
2 days ago
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It would probably do all of us some good to 'walk a mile' in the other persons shoes. We are fast becoming a multi-racial society. When the shoe is on the other foot and white people become the minority, let's see if you still think that race soen't matter. I think not.
Budman
2 days ago
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Maybe they need more diversity in the NBA. Looks to me that we need to even the playing field there as well. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Jim Hall
2 days ago
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Report Abuse

Well....thank goodness you didn't go after religion!

Last I checked, there were no signs 'Only White Men Need Apply.' Give us a breakdown of the reporters and columnists involved with the SJR. How many are white, black, Hispanic, female, gay?

Now that would be an interesting side by side comparison. It would probably point out that these statistics are simply a fact of life and not some dark agenda. People vote for who they think is best qualified. If it's a person of Asian descent, they will get the job. If they are black and are better qualified, they will get the job.

The purpose of this wasn't just to point out that Republican elected officials are predominantly white males....was it?? I starting to see why many think Bernie is hopelessly Democrat.....leaning a bit left?

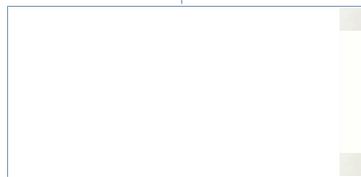
daddio
2 days ago
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Report Abuse

Mr. Schoenburg - I wasn't aware that the candidates had to be a certain color, religion, sex, or ethnicity to run for political office in Illinois ! I always thought that any citizen could put forth his or her ideas, and let the voters decide which person had the best agenda. Silly me !!

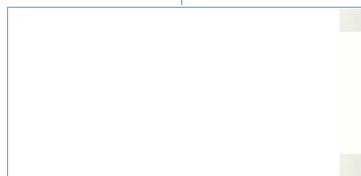
ash
2 days ago
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Report Abuse

hdguy,
I'm willing to bet you don't know what communism really is... we are nowhere close.

bill1953
2 days ago
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come on sjr what is your break down in the news writer dept???????????????

newwave
1 day ago
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Report Abuse

No one is holding anyone else back, and no one should get a job because of race or sex. Just hire the most qualified. If that happens to be mostly white males, then that's just the way it is. Are you going to hold people back because they are a white male? That would be racism, and sexism.

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