

Diversity

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Similarly, the five-member Stearns County board has one woman and the Benton County board has no female members. Elected officials on both boards, as well as state representatives and senators from the area, also tend to be older than the population at large.

The data comes from census numbers and a demographic survey sent by the St. Cloud Times to members of St. Cloud-area cities, school boards, county boards and state bodies in April.

So does that matter? Two local experts say yes — and for many reasons.

Homogeneous elected bodies may have members with valuable experience and understanding of how to navigate the system, as well as many community connections. And even a board that skews more male, more white and older will likely have members with a vast array of life experiences.

But diversity in general has been shown to increase the number of ideas considered by a body, increase its responsiveness to constituents and even increase people's perception of whether the system is democratic, according to two professors at College of St. Benedict and St. John's University.

"If they are good politicians, they are listening," said Pedro A. G. dos Santos, associate political science professor at CSB/SJU. "But it's pretty clear: The literature shows that people like to see themselves represented at various levels. If people see themselves in the system, they are more likely to see the systems as legitimate."



Dos Santos

The Times' unscientific survey included basic demographic questions such as gender, age and race. It also asked about other things that help flesh out a person's identity and perception, including questions on political ideology, sexuality, household income, criminal background and whether they have school-age children.

The survey represents only a snapshot in time, thus insufficient in capturing people's experiences throughout their lives.

But it also provides a snapshot of who Central Minnesota's decision-makers are — and can provide insight into barriers that might be keeping people from running for office.

The Times sent the survey to about 70 elected officials; three-fourths of the officials responded. The Sartell-St. Stephen school board collectively declined to respond to any part of the survey.

'It matters because people's experiences matter'

Any organization benefits from multiple viewpoints to avoid group-think, according to Matt Lindstrom, political science professor at CSB/SJU and director of the Eugene J. McCarthy Center for Public Policy and Civic Engagement.

"When it comes to opinions and life experiences, it's very beneficial to have diversity," he said. "And in the corporate world, study after study show a diverse board of directors affects the company's financial performance. There's a correlation."

In the political realm, diversity leads to a greater array of interests on political

agendas and responsiveness to constituents, Lindstrom said.

For example, if a council is "overwhelmingly older males" and then some younger voices get elected, new topics such as installing baby-changing tables in parks might be considered. That's not to say the older men couldn't have proposed the topic or wouldn't support the idea, but it's just more likely to even be considered with a mix of members.

Diverse representatives also have a "demonstrated track record for being better advocates for diverse constituents," Lindstrom said. Whether it's a member of an elected body or someone employed by a government agency, diverse people are more likely to advocate on behalf of underrepresented people.

"They'll go to bat," Lindstrom said. Dos Santos cautioned against analyzing diversity too narrowly — emphasizing first and foremost, people are individuals and not defined by the boxes they check on a demographic form.

Dos Santos teaches comparative politics, international relations and global gender issues. He also researches women's representation and politics in Brazil, where he was born.

"Not all women are the same. Not all Somalis are the same. Not all men are the same. Not all businessmen are the same. There's all these intersections," dos Santos said. "If you focus so much on all these different identities, then we're not thinking about democracy more broadly speaking, which is just representing the people and doing what's best for the community."

Still, it's important elected bodies are representative of their constituents.

"At a very basic level, it matters because people's experiences matter," he said. "Their decisions are based on their experiences."

Study: Women and men of color just as electable — if on the ballot

In an ideal world, dos Santos said, elected bodies would be as representative as possible. But there are structural mechanisms that get in the way.

Both dos Santos and Lindstrom said the best predictor for winning an election is incumbency. And historically, incumbents in the United States have been white men.

Incumbents generally have better name recognition and better access to media exposure or fundraising, as well as the ability to take credit for projects completed during their tenure.

For example, the re-election rate in the U.S. House of Representatives is "staggeringly high" — routinely more than 90% — although public opinion polls repeatedly show approval ratings of below 50%.

"It's a paradox," Lindstrom said. Another barrier is the way politics work in the United States. Local elected seats are not highly paid positions and require officials dedicate a significant amount of time. That can make candidacy and service difficult for people with young children, people who work multiple jobs or night shifts, or people with lower socioeconomic statuses.

Campaigns also cost money. Even local elections can require hundreds or thousands of dollars for marketing.

Gender is often a barrier, too. Studies have shown as early as elementary school, children are exposed to gender disparities in society. Boys start to see themselves as political leaders; girls do not.

"From a political science perspective, men are much more likely to say, 'Hey, I think I can do this. I think I can run for president or for whatever position' and

women have to be asked many times to run for the same position," dos Santos said.

That becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"The running joke is 10 million men woke up today thinking they'd be great members of Congress," Lindstrom said. "Probably not 10 million women."

The Reflective Democracy Campaign, which studies demographics in American politics, analyzed national data in a 2015 study and again after the 2018 elections. It found white men hold 62% of elected offices at the local, state and federal level — despite making up only about 30% of the population.

But "when they're on the ballot, women of all races and men of color win elections at the same rates as white men," the report states.

"The problem is they are not on the ballot in the numbers that white men are," Lindstrom said. "But when it comes to being electable, are women and men of color as electable as men? The answer is unequivocally yes. That's not an opinion, it's empirical."

Cities, counties and school districts can't control who runs for office. But Lindstrom recommended organizations try to make it easier for people to get involved, whether by inviting a high school or college-age student as a non-voting member or setting term limits for citizen commissions such as park boards, where there likely isn't much turnover.

"It's a healthy organizational tool to inject new blood into the organization," Lindstrom said, because as the makeup of the community changes, it's important the makeup of elected bodies change, too.

"This is much more than being politically correct. This is about being democratic," Lindstrom said. "This is about having more robust, richer conversations. This is about more effective public policy and implementation. This is about more effective tax expenditures, getting government to work better."

"It seems to me that people other than white men have the ability to lead our communities or our country."

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Candidate filing runs through June 2

The two-week filing period for most federal, state and local elected offices started May 19 and runs to 5 p.m. June 2.

Those offices include the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, the Minnesota Legislature, county boards, St. Cloud City Council, St. Cloud school board, Sartell City Council and Sauk Rapids City Council.

Mayoral seats in St. Cloud and Sauk Rapids are also up for election.

In cities and school districts that do not have primary elections, the filing period is from July 28 to Aug. 11. Those include Waite Park, St. Joseph and St. Augusta, as well as Sartell-St. Stephen and Sauk Rapids-Rice school districts.

Candidates for most state and county offices file at the county auditor's office. City candidates file with the city clerk, and school board candidates file with the school district clerk.

Coming Monday

The Times continues to examine diversity and representation in Central Minnesota. Look for stories featuring Stearns County's second woman commissioner and the youngest Sherburne County board member, as well as reflections from a state representative and senator on how their experiences and perspectives impact public service.

Coming Tuesday

The Times wraps up its special coverage of diversity and representation in Central Minnesota. Look for a story exploring the makeup of leaders in St. Cloud's suburbs, as well as demographic trends of the officials who responded to a recent Times survey.

More online

Check out interactive charts and graphs at sctimes.com.

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