

Exploring First-Generation Underrepresentation: How American Political Systems Impact Immigrant Women's Political Engagement

RepresentWomen
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A thriving democracy is within our reach, but we must ensure that women across the racial, ideological, and geographic spectrum of the U.S. have equal opportunities to enter political office so that our nation's rich diversity is reflected in our government.

This brief reviews the history of first-generation Americans in U.S. politics and explores why first-generation American women, in particular, are underrepresented.

For additional information or to share your comments on this report, please contact:

RepresentWomen

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 240

Takoma Park, MD 20912

<https://www.representwomen.org/>

info@representwomen.org

RepresentWomen is a research-based advocacy group that promotes the use of systems strategies to advance women's representation and leadership in the U.S. and abroad. To achieve our mission, RepresentWomen partners with allies across the country and political spectrum who help amplify our work by putting what we've researched into practice. By working in concert with our allies to address political barriers to office, we can ensure that more women can RUN, WIN, SERVE & LEAD.

Lead Author: Alisha Saxena

Editors: Paige Chan, Katie Usalis, Kaycie Goral, and Courtney Lamendola

Note on Methodology for the Candidate Database: Candidate lists were pulled from the Federal Election Commission and other sources, and candidate websites, interviews, and local journalism articles were primarily relied on to collect data on place of birth. In the case that no information could be found, such candidates were excluded from the analysis.

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Introduction

The [American Immigration Council](#) reported that there were roughly 44.7 million first-generation Americans living in the U.S. Within this population, there were roughly 2 million more women than men. The top countries of origin for immigrants were Mexico, India, China, the Philippines, and El Salvador. Despite making up 13.6% of the U.S. population, first-gen Americans are often left out of conversations about representation in politics - this report seeks to help remedy that.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), first-generation Americans are defined as the first people in a foreign-born family to become U.S. citizens. For the purpose of this report, individuals born abroad to American parents are referred to as foreign-born and are excluded from the following analysis.

Mainstream discourse on immigrant representation often groups first- and second-generation Americans together, but the [Pew Research Center](#) found that second-generation Americans are much better represented in Congress, as they make up 11% of all voting members of Congress. On the other hand, **first-generation Americans are only 3% of all voting members in Congress, despite being almost 10% of all eligible voters in the 2020 elections. Why are first-generation Americans underrepresented in the federal government?**

To answer this question, this report conducts a historical analysis of first-generation representation to understand electoral barriers for first-generation voters, candidates, and officials. Then, this report showcases data from our original database on first-generation candidates for Congress in the 2020 elections. Finally, after highlighting some first-generation women, the report concludes with action items.

Historical Analysis: 1789-1949

Since the sample size of first-generation politicians is quite small in the most recent Congressional sessions, this report analyzes historical trends of first-generation representation to provide a clearer outlook on their representation.

In [The Foreign-Born in Congress, 1789-1949: A Statistical Summary](#), Murray G. Lawson from the US Information Agency analyzed the 374 foreign-born representatives who were elected in the first 80 congresses.

Lawson found that there was a lack of diversity in the first 160 years of Congress; 373 of the 374 members were white, wealthy, and of European or Canadian origin. He also found that, while 23 nationalities were represented, only England, Canada, Ireland, and Scotland were statistically significant.

But please bear in mind that Congress was not always made up of 435 representatives. The U.S. House used to increase its membership after each Census; barring the accessions of Hawaii and Alaska, the last time the House was expanded was in 1911, as depicted in the chart above. Notably, almost half of the foreign-born members were elected in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio. Although 45 states elected at least one foreign-born representative each, only 11 states elected ten or more foreign-born representatives before 1911.

This report challenges the popular notion that first-generation representation is significantly lower now than it was during the first 160 years of Congress when, in fact, it was always low.

What it meant to be a first-generation American greatly evolved over time, partly due to the [four waves of immigration](#) that diversified the American population.

The first wave in 1820 was mostly English-speaking British immigrants, while the second wave in the 1840s and 50s was mainly Irish and German Catholics who wanted to counter Protestant dominance.

The third wave brought over 20 million European immigrants between 1880 and 1914. Finally, Latin American and Asian immigrants came in the 1970s, dominating the fourth wave.

Gaps in immigration occurred due to the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. The chart to the right offers a broad overview of general immigration trends in the United States over time. See the next page for a brief list of specific immigration policies enacted during this time period.

To understand why waves of immigration did not translate into non-white, foreign-born elected representation during this time frame, it is crucial to consider the discriminatory [immigration laws](#) which targeted the sociopolitical and economic rights of marginalized

communities. A list is provided below, but not all restrictive immigration policies are mentioned.

The Page Act (1875)

Known as one of the earliest legislations to restrict immigration, the [Page Act](#) prohibited recruitment of laborers from "China, Japan, or any Oriental country". This act was also a [method](#) to prevent Chinese women from migrating to the United States via "invasive and humiliating interrogation."

Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)

Since the 1850s, Chinese workers took jobs in gold mines, factories, railroad work, and agriculture. White Americans [blamed](#) Chinese workers for white unemployment and declining wages, and their resentment led to anti-Chinese violence and the Chinese Exclusion Act to [stop immigration](#) from China. The moratorium was renewed for ten years via the [Geary Act of 1892](#), and was even extended indefinitely by Congress at one point. It was only [repealed](#) in 1943 with World War II, as the US wanted to ally with China.

Emergency Quota Act of 1921

This quota immigration law [limited immigration](#) to "3 percent of residents of the same nationality" in the US as determined by the 1910 Census data.

United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923)

This [Supreme Court decision](#) resulted in naturalized Indian citizens getting their citizenship, owned property, and land revoked.

Immigration Act of 1924

This [xenophobic law](#) changed the 1921 quota to 2 percent. Not only did it target eastern and southern European immigrants, but it also established a ban on Japanese immigration that was not lifted until 1952.

While foreign-born representation may have been relatively monolithic during the first 160 years of Congress, there were signs of Congress becoming more diverse. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are not included in the graph below because there were not any AAPI elected officials at this time. Similarly, we excluded delegates from the raw data since they lacked equal voting and member powers in comparison to elected officials. See the next page for the full community-based analysis.

Women Representatives

[Jeanette Rankin of Montana](#) was the first woman to be elected to the House of Representatives in 1917, and [Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia](#) was the first woman to be elected to the Senate in 1922, though she only served for 24 hours. [Hattie Caraway of Arkansas](#) was the first woman to win her election for Senate in 1932 and was the first woman to chair a Senate Committee. Women were only 2% of all voting members of Congress at their peak in the 79th Congress.

Black/African American Representatives

In 1870, the [first Black/African American House and Senate members](#) were elected- Joseph Rainey of South Carolina to the House and Hiram Revels of Mississippi to the Senate. Yet,

this progress was short-lived: racism and systemic oppression quickly reversed this progress and resulted in the House not having Black/African American representation again for 28 years (1901-1929) and the Senate not having a Black/African American representative again for 86 years (1881-1967).

Not only did these barriers diminish the political power of Black/African American voters, political candidates, and elected officials, but it also created disproportionate negative impacts on Black/African American women. Congress did not see an elected Black/African American woman until 1969 in the House of Representatives ([Ms. Shirley Anita Chisholm](#)) and until 1993 in the Senate ([Ms. Carol Moseley Braun](#)).

Hispanic Representatives

There were 27 [Hispanic American members of Congress](#) during this time period. There were also many Hispanic delegates in Congress, but they lacked voting powers and even full speaking powers.

AAPI

Finally, there were no elected AAPI representatives during this time period. AAPI delegates like [Robert Wilcox](#) experienced language barriers that limited their ability to communicate the needs of their constituency.

Historical Analysis: 1949-1969

While the first 160 years of Congress showed signs of increased diversity, xenophobic immigration policies and monolithic first-generation representation made it clear that much progress was left to be made.

The [Pew Research Center](#) identified 19 representatives as foreign-born during 1949-1969. As expected, there was a continued lack of diversity within foreign-born representation during this time period, **as all of them were still white men, many being incumbents.**

This report analyzes representation of other underrepresented communities to determine if these barriers were affecting all non-white communities or just the first-generation American community. An analysis of the data below is on the next page.

Women

Though women's representation increased overall, they were only **4.5%** of all voting members at their peak in the 87th Congress. Also concerning was the fact that women's representation **declined by 30%** in the following Congress from 1963-1965.

Despite [monumental legislation](#) that passed in the 88th Congress, including the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 to ban sex discrimination in employment, there was no witnessed increase in women's elected representation in the 89th or 90th Congress.

Black/African American Representatives

While there was no decline in Black/African American representation, they continued to only be 1.6% of all voting members at their peak in the 90th Congress. **Long-term male incumbents** succeeded in their re-election bids, while freshmen legislators continued to be unsuccessful.

This time period notably hosted the [Civil Rights Era](#), during which Black organizers successfully championed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 24th amendment to the US Constitution to ban federal poll taxes, and other anti-discrimination policies. However, these wins did not boost their representation as these policies failed to be properly enforced.

AAPI

Since Dalip Singh Saund of California was the first AAPI voting member elected into the 85th Congress, it is unsurprising that they were only roughly 1% of all voting members by the 89th and 90th Congress sessions.

Hispanic-Americans

Though they lost their Senate representation in the 88th Congress due to the death of long-term incumbent Dennis Chavez, Joseph Montoya would successfully be elected to the Senate in the 89th Congress and would also become a long-term incumbent.

With the rapid expansion of civil rights for certain communities, it is important to assess changes in voter demographics and voter turnout rates during this time period.

One likely reason for the decline in voter turnout rate, as compared to the previous time period, was because the eligible voter population was rapidly expanding. Especially during the Civil Rights Era, there was a focus on ending voter disenfranchisement such as by legally removing poll taxes at the federal elections.

It is widely accepted that the rapid expansion in the US population occurred due to immigrant waves, high birth rates, and low death rates. Even with this population increase, white people were 88% of the recorded population in 1960 based on data by the Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau also found that at least 90% of the Black/African American population was enslaved until 1860. Thus, their electoral participation depended on the enforcement of Civil Rights Era policies.

Finally, analysis of this historical time period ends with a discussion of [immigration policy and trends](#) during this time period.

Immigration and Nationality Act (1952)

While [this act](#) allowed for individuals of all national origins to become eligible for naturalization, it also: reaffirmed quotas based on national origin, limited Eastern Hemisphere immigration while keeping Western Hemisphere immigration unrestricted, and established preferences for skilled workers and relatives of US citizens.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs Policy (1952)

This government agency ended up selling 1.6 million acres of Indigenous/Native American land to developers, which contributed to the further marginalization of their community.

Refugee Relief Act (1953)

[Congress](#) allows for the admission of 200,000 additional refugees.

Cuban Refugee Program (1961)

Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution resulted in a mass exodus. As a result, the [Cuban Refugee Program](#) began assisting over 300,000 immigrants relocate across the US in the next two decades.

Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965

Civil rights movements during this time period had called for the quota system to be abolished. This act replaced preference based on national origin with preference based on categories, including: skilled workers, relatives of US citizens, and refugees. While the policy [did not](#) abolish quotas, it did diversify the immigrant population in the next 40 years.

Cuban Refugee Act

Allows for more than 400,000 immigrants to enter the US.

Historical Analysis: 1969-1989

As witnessed in the previous time period, there was a combination of successes and barriers which allowed for limited growth in marginalized community representation in the federal government. This report continues with an analysis of 1969-1989, or from the 91st Congressional session to the 100th Congressional Session.

Though there were only 12 foreign-born representatives during this period, two **first-generation women** were elected into Congress for the first time in 1983 and 1989. There was a continued lack of diversity in countries of origin represented. However, it was **no longer 100% European representation**, as the first representatives from Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago were elected in 1981 and 1989.

Women and Black/African American politicians each became almost 5% of all voting members of Congress, and these wins can be associated with increased success rates of freshmen candidates in getting elected to the House of Representatives. AAPI and Hispanic representation experienced no dramatic increases, with the former being less than 2% and the latter being 3% of all voting members.

For the first time, women were elected in Colorado, Nevada, and Rhode Island, and Black/African American politicians were elected in Indiana, Maryland, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington D.C.

Once again, to provide adequate context of voter turnout changes, we must assess [population trends](#) during this time period. While it is true that the **population increased at a decreasing rate** during this time period, this increase is still an indication that the number of eligible voters increased during this time period.

Thus, though the graph at first glance makes it appear that voter turnout declined or stagnated, this is simply because **the number of eligible voters likely increased** during this time period. In addition, some voter suppression tactics were removed in the previous time period, as seen through the passage of the 24th amendment against federal poll taxes. This liberated the vote for many individuals.

Finally, we conclude an analysis of this time period with some key legislation related to [immigration policy](#).

The Refugee Act (1980)

The Vietnam War resulted in great displacement of Vietnamese and Cambodian people due to political chaos and physical danger. Due to restrictive immigration laws for refugees at the time, 300,000 refugees could only be admitted via Presidential Action. To avoid reliance on Presidential Action in the future, this law was created to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act.

This act redefined the meaning of refugee to include someone with a "well-founded fear of persecution," created a process to adjust refugee caps in light of international emergencies, required annual consultation between Congress and the President, and changed the cap from

17,400 to 50,000 refugees. Moreover, this act also funded an Office of US Coordinator for Refugee Affairs and an Office of Refugee Resettlement. A noteworthy feature of this policy is that the Senate unanimously passed this legislation in 1979.

Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA, 1986)

This legislation was created with an intention to control the illegal immigration crisis, and worked to achieve this goal via liberating and restricting methods. While it worked to provide amnesty and a clear path to green card status for individuals in this category, it also increased the resources and size of immigration policing agencies, though they proved futile in mitigating the crisis. Furthermore, employers were under stricter regulations to demand work authorization from all employees.

The Civil Liberties Act (1988)

This legislation paid \$20,000 and delivered a formal Presidential apology to over 80,000 Japanese Americans, and their heirs, who had been forced into internment camps by the American government.

Historical Analysis: 1989-2009

During the 101st-110th Congress, there were [16 elected foreign-born representatives](#), most being elected into the House. Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) and Representative Albio Sires (R-NJ) continue to serve today.

Though only 3 of these foreign-born representatives were women, their contributions to diversity were great. Representative Furse was the first elected foreign-born representative to hail from any African country and Representative Hirono was one of many to be the first elected foreign-born representative from Asian countries. Finally, [Representative Ros-Lehtinen](#) was the first Republican woman to ever be elected from Florida, and the first Hispanic and Cuban American woman elected to Congress.

Women became **21%** of all voting members at their peak in the 110th Congress. The sudden spike between the 102nd and 103rd Congress was largely due to the controversial confirmation of Justice Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court in 1991, as it raised questions about male dominance in the Senate. 1992 was declared the Year of the Woman, primarily because California became the **first state ever** to elect two women, Dianna Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, to the Senate.

While midterm election turnout remained relatively consistent, presidential election voter turnout did pass the 60% threshold.

When next looking at [population trends](#), the national population increased at a decreasing rate, which is evidence of more eligible voters taking part in elections.

Racial demographics significantly shifted, with Census data from [1990](#), [2000](#), and [2010](#) showing that non-white communities were almost 30% of the population by 2010, a 10% increase from 1990.

Case Study: Analyzing the 2004 Presidential Election

Note: refer to Appendix A for an analysis of 2004 election data

When looking at the gap between registered voters and voter turnout, the white and Black/African American community had an 8% disparity whilst the Hispanic community had a 10% gap. Only 50% of all eligible AAPI voters were registered, but 85% of registered AAPI voters did turn out.

The Hispanic and AAPI communities had the lowest citizen conversion rates to registered voters. In "[Asian Americans and Voting Participation: Comparing Racial and Ethnic Differences in Recent U.S. Elections](#)," professor Pei-te Lien reaches the conclusion that, while foreign-born AAPI voters were more likely to turn out to vote than US-born AAPI voters, the disparity in registration rates calls for a need to focus on community-specific mobilization efforts.

Similarly, in "[English Proficiency and Latino Participation in U.S. Elections](#)," Drs. Michael Parkin and Frances Zlotnick conducted an assessment of Latino participation in the 2000 Presidential election. Though not analyzing 2004 data, a lack of significant change is evidence that the problem persisted.

Surprisingly, they found that language barriers were greater hindrances to registration than turnout. Moreover, the Voting Rights Act proved to be ineffective in mitigation. Importantly, they found that non-English speaking Latinos were more likely to get registered when living within a large community of Latinos. They conclude with an important call to action.

"The results of this article show that extra effort is particularly necessary to ensure participation where Latino populations are smallest, and suggests that as the 'new destination' populations naturalize, local and state governments can facilitate the incorporation of immigrants greatly by providing affordable and accessible opportunities to learn English, as well as publishing official documents in all major languages used in the jurisdiction."

Black/African American Representatives

Though the number of Black/African American politicians increased by 87.5% during this time period, the progress made between the 102nd and 103rd Congressional sessions was not witnessed in the following elections. This is attributed to the lower rates of success of first-term Black/African American politicians in getting elected to Congress.

Overall, they were slightly more than 10% of all voting members of Congress at their peak in the 104th Congress. The states of Connecticut, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin elected Black/African American politicians for the first time during this time period.

AAPI Representatives

There was no progress made in increasing AAPI representation in Congress, and long-term incumbents continued to make up a majority of AAPI representation. Daniel Inouye served in the Senate during all ten terms explored, and Daniel Akaka also served in the Senate from the 102nd-110th sessions during this time period. If any progress was made, it was that Louisiana, Oregon, and Virginia elected AAPI representatives for the first time. This report later explores why AAPI representation stagnated.

Hispanic-American Representatives

On the other hand, Hispanic-American representation increased by 100% during this time period, and they became 7% of all voting members of Congress at their peak in the 110th Congress. Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, and New Jersey elected representatives for the first time.

Brothers John Salazar and Kenneth Lee Salazar were elected in the 109th Congress, with one being elected to the House and the other to the Senate. Loretta Sanchez was elected to represent California in the House in the 105th Congress; she was joined by her sister Linda Sanchez, who was elected to represent California in the 108th Congress. **They are the first pair of sisters to simultaneously serve in Congress.**

Case Study: Analyzing the 2008 Presidential Election

Note: refer to Appendix A for an analysis of 2008 election data

Despite the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections providing insights into community-based registration barriers, the disparities were prevalent at similar rates in the 2008 Presidential election.

The AAPI community continued to have the lowest registration rates- only 55% of AAPI citizens registered to vote. However, due to a variety of reasons, AAPI non-citizens no longer were 50% of the community population; in 2008, the [US Census Bureau](#) reported that 67.5% of AAPI residents were US citizens. Furthermore, as seen in previous elections, the Hispanic community continued to have the greatest disparity between registered voters and actual turnout rates.

While major participation costs make this conversion from registration to casting a ballot difficult, research has also shown that voters across the board are sensitive to even minor participation costs. In "[The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections](#)," professors Gomez, Hansford, and Krause found that **election day rainfall "reduces turnout in a county at roughly 0.8% per inch"** and if it rains more than expected in a certain county, the percent of eligible voters that turnout decreases by almost 1%.

In "[Don't Forget to Vote: Text Message Reminders as a Mobilization Tool](#)," Drs. Dale and Strauss argue that the act of registering to vote makes voting more desirable and helps citizens view themselves as voters; sending a reminder such as a text message helps remind citizens of the commitment they made to voting when they first registered. After all, in the 2006 elections, **the top four reasons for registered voters not voting included: "too busy/conflicting schedule, illness or disability, not interested, out of town."** Overall, their field experiment found that text messages increased turnout rates by 3%, proving their worth as a low-cost mobilization tool.

Immigration Policies

Finally, analysis of this section is concluded with a discussion on [relevant immigration policy](#) during the time period.

Immigration Act of 1990

Congress revised the Immigration Act of 1965 to implement the H1-B worker visa, which did provide opportunity for conversion to permanent residency, and the diversity visa lottery for populations unable to enter via the installed preference system.

Challenging Selective Denial of Asylum (1991)

Salvadorians and Guatemalans were fleeing their homelands in the 1980s due to violence, but their asylum applications were being denied. A legal challenge put an end to this discriminatory practice and forced the US to change their policies on handling asylum cases.

Chinese Student Protection Act (1992)

The Chinese government was violently responding to student protests in their country- the US offered permanent residency to Chinese students in response.

Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (1996)

Similar to IRCA, this act further expanded the resources of immigration policing institutions despite their lack of proven efficacy for the crisis.

The Flores Settlement (1997)

This was a result of the 1993 Reno v. Flores Supreme Court case, and set standards for the treatment of unaccompanied minors in immigration detention.

Haitian Refugee Immigrant Fairness Act (1998)

This allowed some Haitian nationals who were residing in the US to become permanent residents.

Historical Analysis: 2009-Present

Listed below are the 32 first-generation politicians in Congress who served between the 111th and 117th Congressional sessions, with **22 first-generation politicians still serving in office today in the 117th Congress.**

[Table of First-Gen members of 111th-117th Congress]

As of the 117th Congress, only 5 of the 22 foreign-born politicians are newly elected, but four of these five are women, and three hail from South Korea. 10 of the 22 foreign-born politicians are women, and **first-generation members are now 5% of all voting members of Congress.**

Vermont remains the only state which has not elected a woman to Congress.

State Diversity Stats:

- 20 states have never elected a Black/African American official
- 35 states have never elected a Hispanic-American official
- 38 states have never elected an AAPI official

2020: First-Generation Candidates

The map below outlines the number of first-generation candidates who ran for a seat in the House of Representatives. **See the inside cover for a detailed explanation of our methodology.** Our [database](#) provides more in-depth information on these first-generation candidates. The maps exclude foreign-born individuals to American parents, but our database includes such individuals.

[Map of US showing how many First-Gen candidates ran for the House in 2020, in each state]

The map below outlines the number of first-generation candidates who ran for a seat in the Senate. See the inside cover for a detailed explanation of our methodology. Our [database](#) provides more in-depth information on these first-generation candidates. The map excludes foreign-born individuals to American parents, but our database includes such individuals.

[Map of US showing how many First-Gen candidates ran for the Senate in 2020, in each state]

Note: not all states had a Senate election in 2020- light grey states are the ones that did not have a Senate race in 2020. Dark grey states are states that held Senate elections with no first-generation candidates.

Overall, our [database](#) documents 142 foreign-born federal candidates, and 19 of these individuals were not first-generation Americans. Only 9 of the 123 first-generation candidates ran for the Senate. 29 first-generation and foreign-born officials won their bids for office, and all but 5 members were incumbents. **All but one of them won their elections with at least 50% of the total votes.**

Country of Origin

12% of candidates hailed from India, making it the most popular country of origin. However, the low percentage is a testament to the diversity of this group of candidates- a total of 54 countries and territories, spread across 5 continents, were represented.

Seat Type

Challenger seats were the most frequent seat type for first-generation candidates in the 2020 elections.

Challenger Seat- approx. 63%

This classification is for first-generation candidates who were challenging an incumbent for the elected position. This is typically viewed as the most challenging type of race, as challengers are rivaling their opponent's incumbency advantage.

Open Seat- approx. 20%

This classification is for first-generation candidates running in a district where the incumbent was not seeking re-election. Oftentimes, this encourages a large number of candidates to declare their bids for office, which increases competition but also increases candidate diversity.

Incumbent Seat- approx. 17%

This classification is for first-generation candidates who ran for reelection. Only 1 candidate in this group lost their bid for re-election.

Our [database](#) also documents state and gender breakdowns. See an introductory analysis of the data below.

State Representation

For the **Senate**, 9 states produced first-generation candidates, and **30%** of these candidates were women. Women overall are only 24% of elected representation in the Senate. As for the **House**, 25 states produced first-generation candidates. Of the 123 first-generation candidates who ran for a seat in the House, approximately **34%** were women.

As discussed throughout this report, the four states which have historically produced the most first-generation representatives were New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio. Of these four states, Illinois was the only one to host a Senate election in 2020, and sure enough, there was a first-generation candidate in that race.

But, surprisingly, these states severely underperformed in the House elections. While New York produced 13 first-generation representatives, Ohio had no first-generation candidates, and Illinois and Pennsylvania also only had one first-generation candidate each. California and Florida outperformed New York.

Next, this report dives into the case study of Minnesota's 5th House District, where 4 first-generation women were running for office. Then, this report will highlight some female first-generation candidates and officials.

Case Study: MN House District 5 Candidates

Minnesota's House District 5 was not an open seat in 2020, as incumbent Ilhan Omar was running for re-election, but it still had 13 candidates vying for the seat. **Shockingly, 30% of the candidates in this race were first-generation women**, a feat unique to this district.

Ilhan Omar was born in Somalia and is the first Somali-American member of Congress. She successfully fought for a second term in 2020, earning 64.3% voter support in her re-election bid. She is a member of the Democratic party.

Dalia Al-Aqidi was born in Iraq and fled to the US at a young age. She worked as a journalist, and frequently covered the White House as a political correspondent. She lost the Republican primary, earning 4.7% of the votes.

Leila Shukri Adan was born in Somalia. Though she withdrew before the Democratic primary and did not vehemently oppose Ilhan Omar, she noted that Omar was not focusing on local issues and her constituents.

Lucia Marina Vogel was born in Honduras. She withdrew from the Republican primary in order to run for the Minnesota State Senate, where she lost in the general election.

Highlighting First-Gen Women

As the report has shown, there were many women who ran for office in the 2020 Congressional elections. This report continues by highlighting a few first-generation female candidates and officials.

Young Kim was born in South Korea after serving in the California State Assembly in 2014 and 2016, she decided to run for Congress in 2018. Though she won the Republican primary, she fell short in defeating the Democratic incumbent. In 2020, however, she successfully managed to win the election with 50.6% of the votes, becoming one of the first three Korean-American women ever elected to Congress.

Peggy Huang was born in Taiwan- she has been involved with California politics since her early adult years as a Senate fellow, and has recently been involved with the Yorba Linda City Council since 2014. In 2020, she unsuccessfully ran a congressional bid for California's 45th District. However, after this failed bid, she was successfully re-elected as the Mayor of Yorba Linda in 2021.

Nydia Velázquez was born in Puerto Rico and has a long history of serving the state of New York in Congress. In 1992, she was first elected to represent the 12th district- congressional redistricting in 2012 modified her district to become the 7th district, but she still managed to win every election. Not only has she won at least a simple majority in every general election, but she has also earned upwards of 90% of the votes in more recent elections.

Sima Ladjevardian was born in Iran- she served as a key advisor to the 2018 Beto O'Rourke campaign before launching her own Congressional bid against newly elected incumbent Dan Crenshaw. She received an endorsement from Former President Obama and other key political figures, but was significantly outraised by Crenshaw's campaign. As a result, she lost the general election with 42.8% of the votes. If elected, she would have been the second Iranian-American to ever be elected to Congress.

Conclusion

The goal of this report was to offer the reader insight into a highly underdeveloped topic: first-generation representation in the United States. We explore both the evolving definition of first-generation representation and the gender gap which continues to prevail.

First-generation representation meant something different in the 1700s, 1800s, and even 1900s: most of the representatives then were wealthy, white European male immigrants who spoke English as a native language. They did not experience the same intersectional racial, socioeconomic, gender, and language barriers that many first-generation candidates experience today. **This evolved definition makes it inadequate to compare historical levels of first-generation representation to rates of representation today.**

The report offers a comprehensive historical analysis of diversifying representation in Congress, and considers immigration-related policies that would have hindered or bolstered the political power of immigrant communities. Then, we contribute our original resource, the First Generation Candidates Database, which analyzes Congressional candidates who ran in the 2020 Congressional elections. Of the 123 first-generation candidates who ran in the House, 34% were women; of the 9 first-generation candidates who ran in the Senate, 30% were women.

There are many ways in which this discourse can be expanded, many of which you will find on the next page with our Action Items. The scope of this report did not include an analysis of first-generation candidates at the local and state level, and while it did discuss immigrant waves to explain geographical disparities, it did not extensively dive into other reasons for these disparities. Finally, the report did not include an analysis of why first-generation citizens from certain countries, like India, were more likely to run for office than first-generation citizens from other countries.

Action Items

This report proposes a few action items to bolster first-generation political participation and representation as voters, candidates, and elected officials.

Making First-Generation Inclusion a Diversity Marker

Discourse on legislative diversity often excludes any conversation on immigrant status, let alone first-generation status. In order to better understand intersectional electoral barriers and the political gender gap, mainstream discourse must incorporate discussion on first-generation status and immigrant status.

Considering Inclusivity for First-Generation Voters

Inadequate political party outreach and language barriers greatly limited first-generation voters from fully participating in the political process. This report calls on political parties and organizations to consult with first-generation community leaders to effectively **incorporate smaller immigrant communities into the political process**. Immigrants hail from many countries and many ethnic immigrant communities are less than 1% of all American immigrants. They all deserve to be included.

Bolstering Party Support for First-Generation Candidates

Non-native English speaking candidates **struggled to fully participate in debates, media interviews, campaigning and fundraising, and the endorsement collection process**. Political parties should provide more intentional support to candidates to help create a more inclusive political process and to reduce barriers for first-generation candidates. Party recruitment should also not only focus on diverse first-generation representation, but also on recruiting more first-gen women to help address the gender gap.

Further Reading

This report offered an introductory glance into a topic that continues to be inadequately discussed in mainstream discourse. To encourage more dialogue on this crucial topic, some key sources in this report and other new sources of information are listed below for further reference.

[English Proficiency and Latino Participation in U.S. Elections](#) by Michael Parkin and Frances Zlotnick (2011)

[Don't Forget to Vote: Text Message Reminders as a Mobilization Tool](#) by Allison Dale and Aaron Strauss (2009)

[Asian Americans and Voting Participation: Comparing Racial and Ethnic Differences in Recent U.S. Elections](#) by Pei-te Lien (2004)

[The Foreign-Born in Congress, 1789-1949: A Statistical Summary](#) by Murray G. Lawson (1957)

[Immigrants and Children of Immigrants Make Up At Least 14% of the 117th Congress](#) by Sara Atske, the Pew Research Center (2021)

[Fact Sheet: Immigrants in the United States](#) by the American Immigration Council (2020)

[Electoral Discrimination Against Immigrant-Origin Candidates](#) by Lea Portmann and Nenad Stojanovic (2018)

[Toward a Better Vision For Democracy, A Scorecard for Immigrant Leadership in America](#) by the New American Leaders Project (2020)

[The Political and Civic Engagement of Immigrants](#) by Caroline B. Brettell, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2020)

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[English Proficiency and Latino Participation in U.S. Elections](#) by Michael Parkin and Frances Zlotnick (2011)

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[Immigrants and Children of Immigrants Make Up At Least 14% of the 117th Congress](#) by Sara Atske, the Pew Research Center (2021)

[Fact Sheet: Immigrants in the United States](#) by the American Immigration Council (2020)

[The Immigration Act of 1924](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Analysis of US vs. Bhagat Singh Thind](#) by UC Berkeley

[67th Congress Immigration Act](#) (1921)

[Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Chinese Exclusion Act](#) (1989)

[Chinese Exclusion Act Signed Into Law](#) by EJI

[Before the Chinese Exclusion Act, This Anti-Immigrant Law Targeted Asian Women](#) by Jessica Pearce Rotondi (2021)

[43rd Congress Immigration Act](#) (1875)

[Apportionment to the US House of Representatives by the US Census Bureau](#) (1993)

[Trends in Migration to the US by Phillip Martin, the Population Reference Bureau](#) (2014)

[Immigration Laws and Prerequisites](#) by CUNY (2010)

[Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Robert W. Wilcox](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Women Senators](#) by the United States Senate

[Rebecca Latimer Felton: A Featured Biography](#) by the US Senate

[Women in the US Congress](#) by the Republican National Committee, Women's Division (1959)

[Hispanic-Americans in Congress: 1822-2012](#) by the US Office of the Historian (2013)

[Hispanic-Americans in Congress](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Black Americans in Congress](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[African-American Members of the U.S. Congress: 1870-2020](#) by the Congressional Research Service

[History of Women in the US Congress](#) by the CAWP (2021)

[Iranian American Sima Ladjevardian Loses Congressional Race](#) by Al Jazeera (2020)

[Counterpoint: Minnesota's Fifth District Deserves More](#) by Leila Shukri Adan (2020)

[By the Numbers: US Overview](#) by RepresentWomen (2020)

[Immigration History Timeline](#) (2019)

[The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections](#) by Brad T. Gomez, Thomas G. Hansford, and George A. Krause (2007)

[Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008](#) by the US Census Bureau

[Ileana Ros-Lehtinen Biography](#) by the US Office of the Historian

[Civil Liberties Act of 1988](#)

[The Refugee Act of 1980](#) by the National Archives Foundation

[Senators Born Outside the US](#) by the US Senate

[Fewer Immigrants in Congress Today Than in Years Past](#) by George Gao and Peter Bell (2015)

[Immigration and Relocation in US History](#) by the Library of Congress

[1790-1990 Census Statistics](#) by the US Census Bureau

[National Voter Turnout Rates](#) by the United States Election Project

Appendix A: Analyzing Election Data

Analyzing the November 2004 Presidential Election

Fig. 1: There was a greater increase in the voter turnout than in the number of registered voters between the 2000 and 2004 Presidential Elections.

Raw Data [Source](#)

Fig. 2: Women continued to have higher turnout percentage rates than men

Raw Data [Source](#)

Fig. 3: Americans 55 and older had the highest rates of registration and turnout, and had the most political power in this election. This is likely because this election was a presidential incumbency election.

Raw Data [Source](#)

Analyzing the November 2008 Presidential Election

Fig. 4: Voter turnout was at 63% in both the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections, but more people were eligible to vote, and voted, in 2008.

Raw Data [Source](#)

Fig. 5: As there are more women than men in the United States, and more male than female noncitizens, it is unsurprising that women have higher registration and turnout than men.

Raw Data [Source](#)

Fig. 6: Americans aged 45 to 54 had the highest rates of registration and turnout, and had the most political power in this election. This is different from previous elections, as Americans 65 and older have typically claimed this title.

Raw Data [Source](#)