

Navigating Representative Bureaucracy: Benefits, Barriers, and Vulnerabilities of Ohio Advisory Diversity Commissions

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RESEARCH QUESTION

R1: How do commissions that have been enacted by the Ohio General Assembly (OGA) specifically to serve as a liaison between government and minority communities establish reform, efficiency, and accountability?

R2: How do Ohio descriptive representatives of racial and ethnic minorities view themselves and their importance in being a state liaison to their diasporas?

INTRODUCTION

The popular historical checkpoint of DEI can be seen in the advocacy efforts of the Civil Rights Movement gaining prominence, as well as the politicization and tension accompanying affirmative action and equal employment legislation. People of color's impact on democracy and its quality is very much linked to the ability to access representation. Representation is a manifestation of upward mobility, a consequence of a growing presence in society. Descriptive representatives are considered in the representation literature to be those who have physical, cultural, or at the very least, experiential similarities to that of the people they represent (Mansbridge, 1999). Theoretically, a descriptive representative, aware of their identity and subsequently acting as symbolic agents, then taps into their group consciousness to elevate minority interests in the political sphere. Their position alone carries symbolic significance for citizens who see it as valuable irrespective of substantive representation (Hayes and Hibbing, 2017; Lawless, 2004). Executive branch diversity commissions are an innovative, almost experimental approach to solving longstanding dilemmas in representation and arising issues in contemporary American governance.

Table 1. Organization Origins

 <p>OHIO COMMISSION ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES</p>	 <p>New African Immigrants Commission</p>	 <p>Ohio Asian American Pacific Islander Advisory Council</p>
<p>Mission Statement: Identify and promote strategies and public policies to foster improvements in the social, economic, and educational problems that affect the African-American population in Ohio.</p>	<p>Mission Statement: Advocates for the development and implementation of policies and programs to address the needs of the state's sub-Saharan African population.</p>	<p>Mission Statement: The Ohio Asian American Pacific Islander Advisory Council (OAAPI Advisory Council) promotes Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI's) rights and well-being through education and mobilization of all stakeholders including AAPI communities, government agencies, and the Ohio society in general.</p>
<p>Creation: 118th General Assembly; 1989</p>	<p>Creation: 127th General Assembly; 2009</p>	<p>Creation: 128th General Assembly, 2010</p>

Table 1. Each organization's missions and more precise objectives emphasize the following key words in relation to their target populations: "advocate", "identify", "develop", and "promote". This suggestive language matches the fact that all organizations cite their core properties as being immersed in the social, economic, and educational problems that their communities face and elevating them to a main stage. For example, all commissions have some variation of a standing committee dedicated to education and health. Elaborating on an organization's origin story, visibility, and public intentions shows their defining principles and interests. The superficial aspects of these organizations are used to tighten the parameters in which commissioners or advocates can work and engage communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study centers around the use of formal, semi-structured in-depth interviews and thematic content analysis. As Kennedy (2013) notes, qualitative social science methodology is largely absent from the field of descriptive representation and the narrower pocket of representative bureaucracy. Once the contact information of commissioners had been collected from their commission's respective websites and their personal social media pages, I requested Zoom interviews through email or a direct social media message. If their contact information was available publicly, they were asked to participate. The sample includes 4 individuals either currently or previously appointed by an Ohio governor to serve on a formal diversity commission, 3 individuals previously having served on the OAAPI Advisory Council, 1 individual currently associated with ASIA Ohio, and a former state congressperson significantly involved with the formation of a state diversity commission. Five participants' tenures are between 4 to 6 years, three are at least 7 years. Six can cite being positioned as a leader within their respective organizations and being deeply involved, making them key informants. I proceeded with the comparative thematic content analysis by coding the transcript text, identifying patterns, and defining themes using the open-source qualitative data analysis tool known as *Taguette*.

Figure 1. Key Questions Asked

- Do you think that the government should create liaisons between them and minority communities? Why?
 - Do you consider diaspora members to be the ideal advisors for state institutions in these cases? Why?
 - Do you think commissions like [insert here] are the proper mechanism for building strong relationships with communities?
 - Do you think diversity commissions are the proper mechanism for changing policy in a way that substantially benefits minority populations?
 - Do you think the [insert commission] is necessary?
 - Do you believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion is meaningful to the government process?
- Do you have any mixed feelings, doubts, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding these issues that you would be willing to share?
- How much do you trust the government to work for you?

Figure 1. All participants were first asked a series of broad questions establishing their background and the life experiences they had that led to them joining their organizations. Open-ended questions were asked to spark back and forth conversation based on things participants highlighted in their response. Later interviews included questions that developed after important themes and concepts arose as a pattern in the earlier interviews.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION – Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Participant 8 (P8): *You don't want a liaison, you want to get into the room.*

Commission Origins/Context – Almost all participants reported that the originating context of their commission (or commission advocacy efforts) stemmed from:

- Performative behavior and interests from state actors.
- A response to national rumblings of discontent related to the community.
- The belief that creating a state commission was a step along the natural evolution of community advocacy.

Appointees "not [being] chosen solely for their ability to increase agency performance in a narrow, technocratic sense" is a common phenomenon (Hollibaugh, 2019), yet the reality is nonetheless demeaning. In the aftermath of a settled advocacy battle, participants shared a core understanding of feeling like being on shaky ground.

Proximity to State Actors and Commission Privilege – For those with experience in an actualized diversity commission, commentary reflected feeling personally empowered and included acknowledgements of the privilege they enjoyed around state actors. Participants were aware of the uncommonness of diversity commissions, one calling their first impression "revolutionary". This proximity is strongly considered in an uplifting manner. For those blocked from having a diversity commission, perspectives were lined with frustration. Both commissioners and AAPI advocates perceive proximity to government to be immensely important when it comes to propelling both symbolic and substantive interests forward. Proximity is intimately attached to the concept of legitimacy. Being officially recognized by the government places Asian, African, or Black issues on a pedestal being deserving of a similar stature.

Personal and Commission Perseverance – I observed A) High subject and organization vitality and B) Strong community motivation. While their role perception of being a representative of minorities was first directional towards their community, their personal stake in the outcome of their advocacy also sculpted a personal importance and care with their duties. A role perception that stresses the warrior mentality participants described influences the culture of the organization. Participants do not desire financial compensation for their work. Their aims are to persist and dedicate themselves to achieving forward thinking changes that match the community's substantive interests.

Capability and Value of Diaspora Members – The social capital of diaspora members has informed participant attitudes about their capabilities and value in commissions or government bodies. Significant and continuing community service, leadership, and organizing is collectively confirmed to be a fundamental piece of their appointments or advocacy for a commission. "Preferable descriptive representatives have strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups." (Dovi, 2002, p. 729). While participants differed in their opinions on whether diversity commissions need to be exclusively representative of a community in order to fulfill the goals of their mandates, all emphatically agreed that it is crucial that there be representation from the community that would be served by the Commission to boost the tool of understanding.

DEI's Meaningfulness to Government –

- Participants expressed positive feelings like passion and pride in reference to serving their community in ways unprecedented for the Ohio government.
- Participants expressed ambiguous emotions like ambivalence when they considered DEI's meaningfulness to government and whether state actors work in the best interest of particular demographics.
- Some extended their honest reactions to be that of concentrated pessimism, doubt, and defeatism. One even mentioned happily moving to a different state partially due to these agitations. Some attributed their doubts about DEI's meaningfulness to the government and their shaken faith to suspicions about Ohio's political landscape. Many saw electoral interests as negatively affecting the government's reception of DEI, and indirectly minority communities.

The fragmented way DEI has operated so far in Ohio ultimately creates a vulnerable environment to occupy as a minority and has one commissioner expressing the disparaging feeling like an "extracurricular activity" or "a side project" relative to their non-BIPOC bureaucratic counterparts.

Commission's Capacity to Achieve Government Accountability – For those who are unsatisfied with the trajectories of their current commission or currently see a formalized body like a commission out of reach, it is considered that broader representation throughout government is better in supporting substantive interests and achieving government accountability, rather than being otherwise segregated. Under this point of view, diversity initiatives like commissions seemingly have an expiration date. The combined dynamics of feeling like a token or scapegoat for the wider government, an internalized threat of a decrease in programming funds or commission abolition added a level to the menacing external barriers.

Figure 2. Diversity Commission Targeted Substantive Interests



Figure 2. Both word color and size vary by frequency of interest named in participant transcripts. The more colorful and the bigger the word is, the more frequently it appears in a transcript. Across participant transcripts, the substantive interest of language access is highlighted as a sizeable and disproportionate obstacle affecting communities in Ohio.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study's narrow timeframe of 3 weeks of data collection did not lend itself to receiving a large number of participants, especially subjects in the busy, fast-paced political world. Despite the project's broad scope, the scale was limited due to time constraints, plus respondents participated without incentives. A small number of interviews helped in closely analyzing the depth of presented themes. Although there were attempts to include them, all contactable current commissioners of the Ohio Hispanic and Latino Affairs Commission declined to participate. Noting the study's limitations, future research could employ community-specific investigation that is inclusive of the Hispanic/Latin community. I also did not engage in cross-cultural analysis. This might establish new relationships and reveal more intimate findings. There is the future opportunity to evaluate other unexplored miscellaneous variables like how long someone's lived in the state, a person's gender, and age. In continuing to shine light on the outside-in perspective, it would be useful to get citizen-level perspectives of diversity commissions and whether it is a point of optimism for Ohioans, both in minority populations and more generally.

CONCLUSIONS

P2: *I think, when it comes to that, in Ohio in a Midwest state sometimes you have to, you've got to prove your worth.*

The quote above synthesizes the tone found in each participant interview. Through the six sub-themes, I produced the one overarching theme of embedded vulnerabilities in the thematic analysis. Due to instances of political alienation, neglect and ignorance as well as feeling their community has been minimized and discriminated against historically, perceptions of themselves as commissioners, their importance, and political service is threaded through the lens of political vulnerability. The liaison model between government and minority communities in the state of Ohio has created distinct benefits that participants showcase with fervor, but also has resistant external barriers that prevent its success in establishing political reform, efficiency, and accountability. The principal themes described in this research indicate that the status quo of minimizing and neglecting minority interests is being phased out on the surface yet is continuing to impede the pursuit of legitimizing DEI in Ohio government. Evolution of the liaison model deserves proper investment and refinement from government actors as evidenced by the potential for reform, efficiency, and accountability perceived by participants.

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