

IT'S DIFFERENT AT THE TOP

LEADERSHIP IN THE STATEHOUSE HAS SEEN PLENTY OF CHANGES IN RACE, GENDER AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND.

BY GARRY BOULARD

Colorado Senate President Peter Groff and House Speaker Terrance Carroll, both African-Americans, and the women of the New Hampshire and Maine legislatures are a few examples of the growing diversity in legislative leadership.

These leaders, the result of an unprecedented and unplanned series of election victories, signal that leadership in state legislatures increasingly reflects the race, gender and ethnicity of the people they represent, according to Richard Bucher, author of *Diversity Consciousness—Opening Our Minds to People, Cultures and Opportunities*.

"This is a very good thing for all of us because it vividly illustrates that our state legislatures as political institutions are open to change," says Bucher.

Here is a look at some of the notable firsts who demonstrate the changing look of state legislative leadership.

Assemblywoman Karen Bass

State: California

Post: Assembly speaker

Age: 55

Background: Bass was elected to the Assembly in 2004. She became speaker in 2008, making her the first African-American woman leader in any state. Bass grew up in a middle-class



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"Every state is facing challenges. As our nation diversifies its population, I think it's very important that the public sector reflects the diversity of our nation. You can't really address a population unless everyone is at the table."

California House Speaker Karen Bass

section of west Los Angeles. After college she went to work as a licensed vocational nurse but was also a community organizer and political activist. She began her rise to prominence when, in her words, she became "obsessed" with the crack cocaine epidemic, which hit inner-city black communities especially hard. She formed the Community Coalition in the late 1980s and got early funding from the first Bush administration.

Representative Barbara Buckley

State: Nevada

Post: House speaker

Age: 48

Background: Elected to the Nevada Assembly in 1994, Buckley is its first



"I have been approached by some senior citizens who have said to me, 'I am so proud. This would never have happened 50 years ago.' It touches me when I have a parent say, 'I want my girl to never know a glass ceiling. Thanks for breaking another one.'"

Nevada House Speaker Barbara Buckley on the political blog Dullard Mush

female speaker. She graduated with a B.A. from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and received a J.D. from the University of Arizona. After serving as assistant majority floor leader from 1997 to 1999 and majority floor leader from 2001 to 2005, Buckley won election as speaker in 2007.

Representative Armond Budish

State: Ohio

Post: House speaker

Age: 55

Background: Budish was elected the first Jewish speaker of the House in Ohio history this January. He received a B.A. from Swarthmore College and a J.D. from New York University Law School. In 1993, he founded the firm of Budish, Solomon, Steiner & Peck, and is the author of several books, including his most recent, *Why Wills Won't Work*. Budish was elected to the House of Representatives in 2006 and has served as a member of the Financial Institutions, Real Estate and Securities Committee.



Senator Colleen Hanabusa

State: Hawaii

Age: 58

Post: Senate president

Background: Hanabusa is the first woman to lead either house in the Hawaii Legislature and the first-ever Asian-American woman presiding officer in the United States. She was elected to the Senate in 1998 in her first run for public office. She's an attorney



State Senate President Colleen Hanabusa delivers her opening remarks in the 2008 legislative session opening day festivities.

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and officer in a family-run corporation. She received a B.A. in economics and sociology and an M.A. in sociology from the University of Hawaii, and a J.D. from the William S. Richardson School of Law.

Senator Steven Horsford

State: Nevada

Post: Majority leader

Age: 36.

Background: Horsford was elected earlier this year as majority floor leader—the first time an African American has held that title in



the Nevada Legislature. A graduate of the University of Nevada, where he majored in political science and communications, Horsford was first elected to the Nevada Senate in 2004 and quickly climbed the leadership ladder. He has served as co-chair of the Senate Committee on Finance.

Senator Alfred “Al” Lawson Jr.

State: Florida

Post: Minority leader

Age: 60

Background: Lawson was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1982 and the Senate in 2000. He became Democratic

minority leader in 2008 and is the second African American to hold the post in Florida. Born and raised in Midway, Fla., when it was officially segregated, Lawson’s first job was working in area tobacco fields. He showed an interest in public service early on, serving in student government at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, where he graduated in 1970. He received an MSPA from Florida State University in 1973 and in 1984 founded the marketing firm of Lawson and Associates.



Senator M. Teresa Paiva Weed

State: Rhode Island

Post: Senate president

Age: 49

Background: The first female president of the Rhode Island Senate, Weed also served as the first female Senate majority leader, beginning in 2005. She was first elected to the Senate in 1992 and led a historic effort to reform the state's welfare system. In 1997, Weed became the chairwoman of the Committee on Judiciary and was instrumental in securing passage of legislation that changed the way judges are



“What I have learned is that hard work, perseverance, compassion and a determination to clear any hurdle in your path will help you reach any goal you set for yourself. Young women should know: Anything is possible.”

Rhode Island Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed, upon her election to head the chamber

selected to a merit-based process. In 2002 she was named as the deputy chair of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety and the Environment as well as vice-chair of the Senate Finance Committee.



Representative Joe Straus

State: Texas

Post: Speaker of the House

Age: 49

Background: Elected in what many observers said was a surprise victory in January of this year, Straus is the first Jewish speaker of the House in Texas history, although David

“My faith is a personal thing for me and my family. Yes, I’m Jewish, but my service has been more public service than it has been through the temple.”

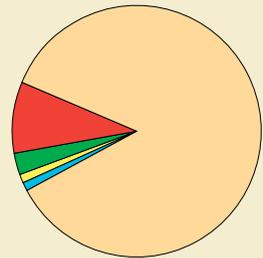
Texas House Speaker Joe Straus to the Austin American-Statesman

Kaufman, also Jewish, was the speaker of the Congress of the Republic of Texas before Texas joined the union. Straus was a former executive assistant to the Commissioner of Customs during the Reagan administration and business liaison deputy director at the U.S. Department of Commerce under the first President Bush. He did not enter electoral politics until 2005 when he won a special election to the Texas House. His election as speaker came after a group of dissident Republicans joined with House Democrats, backing Straus as a compromise candidate. It made him, *The New York Times* said, “a junior lawmaker with not quite two terms under his belt one of the most powerful people in the state.”

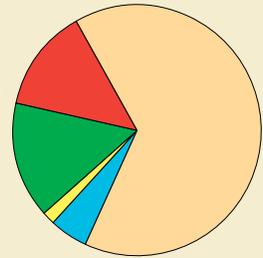
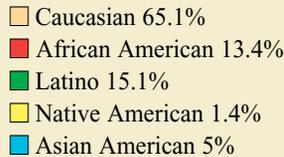
THE CHANGING FACE OF STATE LEGISLATURES



LEGISLATORS BY RACE, 2009



AMERICANS BY RACE, 2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

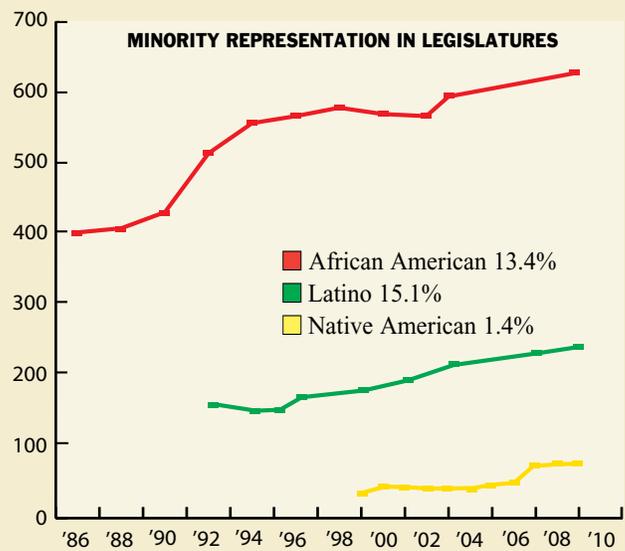
There are more women, African Americans and Hispanics serving in state legislatures now than at any other time in our nation’s history, according to a recent NCSL survey.

The number of women serving in legislatures has increased substantially in the past 30 years, from several hundred to 1,792—or 24.3 percent of state legislative seats nationwide. African Americans now hold approximately 9 percent of all seats, and Latinos a little more than 3 percent. Asian Americans and Native Americans each hold slightly more than 1 percent of all legislative seats.

More than any other minority group, African Americans have seen the greatest increases over the past four decades. In 1970, there were only 169 African-American lawmakers; today there are 628. “The greatest gains for African Americans came in the early to mid-1990s as a result of redistricting,” says David Bositis, a senior political analyst for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. “We are also seeing a growing number of African Americans elected to majority-white districts, and that is encouraging for the future.”

Delaware Representative Joseph Miro, a Latino, is confident that the number of Latinos seeking elected office will continue to increase as well. “As the Latino community continues to grow and expand throughout the country, we will see a growing number of Latinos getting involved at the grassroots level and running for office,” he says. “We still need to continue to encourage the Latino community to get involved in the political process and exercise their right to vote, but I am very optimistic about the future.”

—Morgan Cullen, NCSL



Source: NCSL, April 2009