Avoiding "Checkbox Inclusion": Structuring Meaningful Inclusion of Underrepresented Groups in Policy Engagement

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The hindsight of 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic and the historic, global racial-injustice protests —highlights the significant work that remains to address questions of inequity and lack of diversity in the policy-making community.[1] In the national security and foreign service communities, for example, diversity levels (e.g., the number of Black employees in the US government) *declined*—increasingly disproportional to the changing demography of the United States (Detsch 2020). These percentages are similar for other underrepresented groups.[2] Women, for example, comprised less than 30% of senior leadership in the Trump administration's Department of Defense (Rogin 2020). As noted by signatories of a letter signed by more than 300 current and former employees of think tanks and research institutes, "Our industry largely focuses its efforts on promoting innovative policy ideas but inadequately promotes its own staffers of color. What a loss for the United States when organizations cannot see that stifling the latter actively hurts advancement of the former. Our industry must do better" (Detsch, Hadavas, and Meakem 2020).

There is no doubt that this lack of diversity and inclusion in government and the surrounding policy community has ripple effects for scholars and researchers working on policy-relevant research who attempt to forge policy engagement. Without partners and allies focused on mitigating these limitations, the nested, mutually reinforcing exclusions of both academia and the policy community may result in seemingly overwhelming challenges for scholars who are from traditionally underrepresented groups (e.g., in gender, race, training, discipline, or country of origin) and trying to seek out and establish policy-engagement opportunities. This article explores the substantial and often compounding exclusionary barriers that scholars face when they attempt policy engagement—especially when they are faced with half-hearted efforts at "checkbox inclusions" that can tokenize rather than fully include a diverse set of perspectives. The article concludes with recommendations for fostering meaningful inclusion at the nexus of academia and policy.

INEQUITY IN POLICY ENGAGEMENT: COMPOUNDING EXCLUSIONS AT THE NEXUS OF ACADEMIA AND POLICY

There is little doubt that the policy-making and government communities, as well as the private sector, have made demonstrable strides in addressing inequities in employment and leadership roles. Furthermore, the benefits of inclusion are starkly clear. Diverse perspectives improve decision making, leadership, policy effectiveness, teamwork, and various other outcomes of interest (Chin 2010). As noted by the current Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Bonnie Jenkins, "If we're making a foreign policy in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia and you do not have people who are from that culture, having that perspective in the room will enrich that conversation. I cannot see how that policy cannot be enriched if you do have that perspective" (Detsch 2020).

Yet, by most accounts, traditionally underrepresented groups remain underrepresented proportional to their population. Furthermore, their status as a minority remains a barrier for many positions in management and leadership (Chin 2010). Recent literature reveals that these issues are similarly pervasive in academia. For example, although women comprise more than 60% of undergraduate degrees and almost 40% of PhD recipients, only a third progress along the tenure track to an associate or full professor position (Hinojosa and Thies 2022). These percentages are even more alarming for other underrepresented minorities, including people of color (Garcia and Alfaro 2021).

What happens at the nexus of academia and policy? These seemingly disparate challenges become virtually insurmountable for scholars from underrepresented groups who are attempting to work in and engage with the policy community. Marginalized within the ranks of academia and without colleagues or partners who are willing to seek out diverse scholars or perspectives, those from underrepresented groups face prohibitively high barriers to entry in the policy arena. In addition to the combination of barriers from both policy and academia, scholars who identify with multiple underrepresented groups also face intersecting forms of oppression (Collins 2015). Furthermore, without being able to see

underrepresented scholars progress through the ranks ultimately to lead policy-engagement initiatives or assume other leadership roles on policy-relevant research projects (e.g., grants), younger scholars from underrepresented groups may be deterred from entering the policy arena, which further exacerbates inequities within the policy community.

Separate from the ramifications for representation among academics, from a policy perspective, this stifles the creativity and innovation pivotal to effective policy making and improved governance. Indeed, as noted by a critic of the Trump administration's white, male-dominated cabinet, "We need the best people at the table. And if you don't have it reflecting the reality of our country, it cannot possibly be the best" (Rogin 2020).

PITFALLS OF CHECKBOX INCLUSION

How can we address these challenges? An often-posed solution is to deliberately include members of underrepresented groups on proposals and policy-engagement projects. Although this certainly is an improvement over complete exclusion, we argue that this "checkbox inclusion" inadvertently may continue to exclude rather than meaningfully include, for various reasons.

An often-posed solution is to deliberately include members of underrepresented groups on proposals and policy-engagement projects. Although it certainly is an improvement over complete exclusion, we argue that this "checkbox inclusion" inadvertently may continue to exclude rather than meaningfully include, for various reasons.

First, deliberately establishing a quota for diverse voices (e.g., candidates, panelists, policy team members, and speakers) may perversely "tokenize" scholars. Rather than being included based on their contributions and merit, scholars instead may feel like their inclusion is solely to check a box based on one dimension of their identity or scholarship. Indeed, our own experiences in "filling the spot" as a woman or person of color often left us feeling undervalued and uncomfortable. Instead of being asked to serve because of the value added to a project or proposal, scholars instead may feel like the position is tied to the token role they fill. This is especially challenging when this sentiment is made known among other members of the group. As other scholars noted, "colleagues 'refuse to see [them] as an individual,' twisting the diversity mantra to anoint him representative of all Ghanaians or Africans and then check diversity off their to-do lists" (Detsch 2020). These tokenized scholars may feel like they are overburdened to represent all underrepresented minorities (instead of only their own perspective) or that their work and contributions are disproportionately scrutinized because they filled a spot that otherwise would have gone to a "normal" applicant. Additional burdens, without all of the benefits afforded to other members of the team, may become increasingly unappealing. This

may have the unforeseen and unfortunate effect of disincentivizing continued engagement or, at minimum, raising the costs of this engagement relative to the engagement of other—non-tokenized—scholars. Indeed, who would want to remain on a team when it is clear that she was asked only "because we needed a woman"?

Somewhat paradoxically, in considering the previous point, by creating a list of diversity dimensions that "must be" included, policy engagements reduce the perspectives of the involved scholars to unidimensionality, ignoring the multidimensionality of perspectives and the intersectionality of oppression that can systematically marginalize those perspectives. For example, Black scholars represent the Black perspective, even though those scholars undoubtedly have other dimensions to their identity and perspective. Scholars from Latin America are perceived, first and foremost, as knowing about Latin America—regardless of other perspectives they may bring to the table. This reductive approach to inclusion obfuscates the multidimensional perspectives that comprise the impetus for academic-policy partnerships in the first place. As noted by the policy community, "Unfortunately, I feel like many think tanks think the solution here is performative, and it really does need to be transformative. We're not going to change these systems unless we hire intentionally, unless we think about how we're talking about bigger issues" (Detsch 2020).

Finally, in academic-policy partnerships, we argue that there are dimensions of diversity that are critically important but often overlooked in a typical checkbox-inclusion approach. Similar to most decisions, designers and leaders of policy-engagement opportunities establish a set of priorities on questions about diversity and inclusion. By rightfully focusing on establishing parity for women, people of color, and many other groups whose representation does not accurately reflect their numbers in the population, organizations inadvertently may discount other important aspects of diversity (e.g., graduate institution, advisor, and discipline). For example, our experience has taught us that policy engagements often suffer from network effects, in which advisees of a particular scholar or graduates of a particular school are approached to participate in policy-engagement opportunities before others. This becomes a vicious cycle, whereby scholars continue to recruit those in their network and those external to the network find it difficult to break in. The few members of underrepresented groups who also are members of the favored network become the tokenized minorities. However, broader representation is

not achieved—again at the expense of meaningful and productive policy engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEANINGFUL INCLUSION IN POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Based on our experiences with policy-engagement opportunities, as well as our observations of policy engagement more generally, we make the following four recommendations. The audience for these recommendations are those in a position to design and direct policy-engagement opportunities: senior academics who are enlisted by policy partners to design such opportunities and policy representatives who are strategizing about how to work with academics.

The first recommendation relates to the Detsch (2020) quote cited previously. A critical first step to achieve meaningful inclusion is to consider how to do so in the design stage of an academic-policy partnership. When policy-community representatives or scholars are developing a policy-engagement opportunity—for example, a workshop hosted by a policy organization or a commissioned research project—the designers should deliberately assess which voices need to be part of the opportunity, given the organizations and topics in question. Carefully identifying valuable perspectives *before* recruitment begins avoids automatic checkbox-inclusion tendencies. It is important to note that the ideal group composition might vary from engagement to engagement. For example, perhaps a policy engagement focused on conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa should involve scholars from postconflict societies and Sub-Saharan African countries. A policy engagement focused on nuclear proliferation instead might prioritize the perspective of female scholars, who are particularly underrepresented in research communities focused on international security.

The second recommendation is to create low-barrier, low-cost opportunities for policy engagement and then ensure that they are widely publicized outside of the network of those who already have benefited from these opportunities. Unlike a typical research project in political science, policy engagement need not require a significant investment of time and other resources. There are various low-cost opportunities, such as speaking on a panel, facilitating a session at a workshop, and writing a policy brief on a particular topic. In our experience, these opportunities can be made available to a broad set of

Either in combination with or instead of the second recommendation, our third recommendation is to reserve spots in each policy-engagement opportunity for "new voices." We hasten to point out that this is different from reserving spots for a particular demographic or group. These spots could be reserved for those "new" to policy engagement entirely or for those who simply have never previously worked with the policy organization(s) in question. Encouraging the inclusion of those who have not already had opportunities for policy engagement would diminish the powerful network effects that commonly plague academic-policy partnerships, as well as reduce the problems associated with checkbox inclusion. For example, there are more than a few schools that produce qualified scholars, there are more than a few qualified scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa, and there are more than a few qualified female scholars of color. Facilitating the participation of those new to the policy table is critically important to ensure that a broad set of scholars is included.

The third recommendation may beg the following question: How can those crafting policy engagements *identify* qualified scholars from underrepresented groups, especially when scholars from underrepresented groups have routinely been barred from the roles that lead to the recognition of expertise? The fourth recommendation provides one answer. We recommend replicating the models of "Women Also Know Stuff" (WAKS) and "People of Color Also Know Stuff" to compile pools of experts representing other demographics. For example, WAKS provides an online, searchable, free database of female political scientists with expertise in various topics; women can self-register for free, thereby self-identifying as experts (Women Also Know Stuff 2021). A similar tool could be developed for other groups—Black female scholars or scholars from South America, for example. Alternatively, as Zigerell (2019) recommended, a tool could be developed that is open for self-registration to all political science scholars but that allows intersectionality-conscious filtering by characteristics such as gender identity and race when searching for experts. This "diversity infrastructure" (Minta and Sinclair-Chapman 2012) would make it seamless for policy partners and those leading policy-engagement initiatives to deliberately include scholars with relevant background and expertise, as well as to seek out new voices.

Ultimately, meaningful inclusion in policy engagement would result in more effective and productive academic-policy partnerships and would ensure the representation of a broader set of scholars who could positively contribute to such partnerships.

scholars to enable them to "get a foot in the door." Then, once they are known to the policy partners, more significant opportunities often follow. Policy partners can facilitate this cycle by weaving in these opportunities throughout an engagement—for example, kicking off a large-scale impact evaluation by hosting a panel discussion or commissioning a set of policy briefs on the topic.

We hasten to add two caveats to these four recommendations. First, these initiatives should not be enacted with any finality. Initiatives to increase representation must be designed flexibly so they can evolve as needs and conditions evolve. Second, these initiatives are not "one size fits all" and do not constitute a complete solution to issues of representation at the nexus of academia and policy. We recognize that

many scholars—perhaps especially those from intersectionally marginalized groups—may seek or require different or additional initiatives to address other barriers and to meaningfully advance representation in policy work.

CONCLUSION

This article considers the nested exclusions that occur at the nexus of academia and policy. Underrepresented scholars interested in policy engagement must overcome marginalization in academia compounded by systematic exclusion in the policy arena. Attempting to address these issues often results in checkbox inclusion—that is, the inclusion of one or a few minorities in policy-engagement opportunities to "check a box" rather than meaningfully recruit and involve scholars from underrepresented groups. By drawing on our own experiences in policy engagement, we developed four recommendations: (1) map relevant dimensions of diversity in the design stage of an academic-policy partnership; (2) create low-barrier, low-cost opportunities for policy engagement; (3) reserve spots in each policy-engagement opportunity for "new voices"; and (4) replicate the "Women Also Know Stuff" model to develop online, searchable expert databases for scholars from other underrepresented groups. By implementing some or all of these recommendations, we believe that academic-policy partnerships could foster meaningful inclusion while also mitigating the pitfalls of checkbox inclusion. Ultimately, meaningful inclusion in policy engagement would result in more effective and productive academic-policy partnerships and would ensure the representation of a broader set of scholars who could positively contribute to such partnerships. ∎

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, references to the terms "policy community" and "policy makers" are meant in a broad sense to include anyone working in or with government institutions. For the purpose of this article, government officials, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations whose work is affected by policy all would be considered part of the policy community.

2. There are varying definitions of which groups comprise "historically and traditionally underrepresented groups." For the purpose of this article, we use the following definition: groups whose representation differs from their representation in the US population (National Science Foundation 2017).

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