Electoral Representation in Washington State

2016-2024

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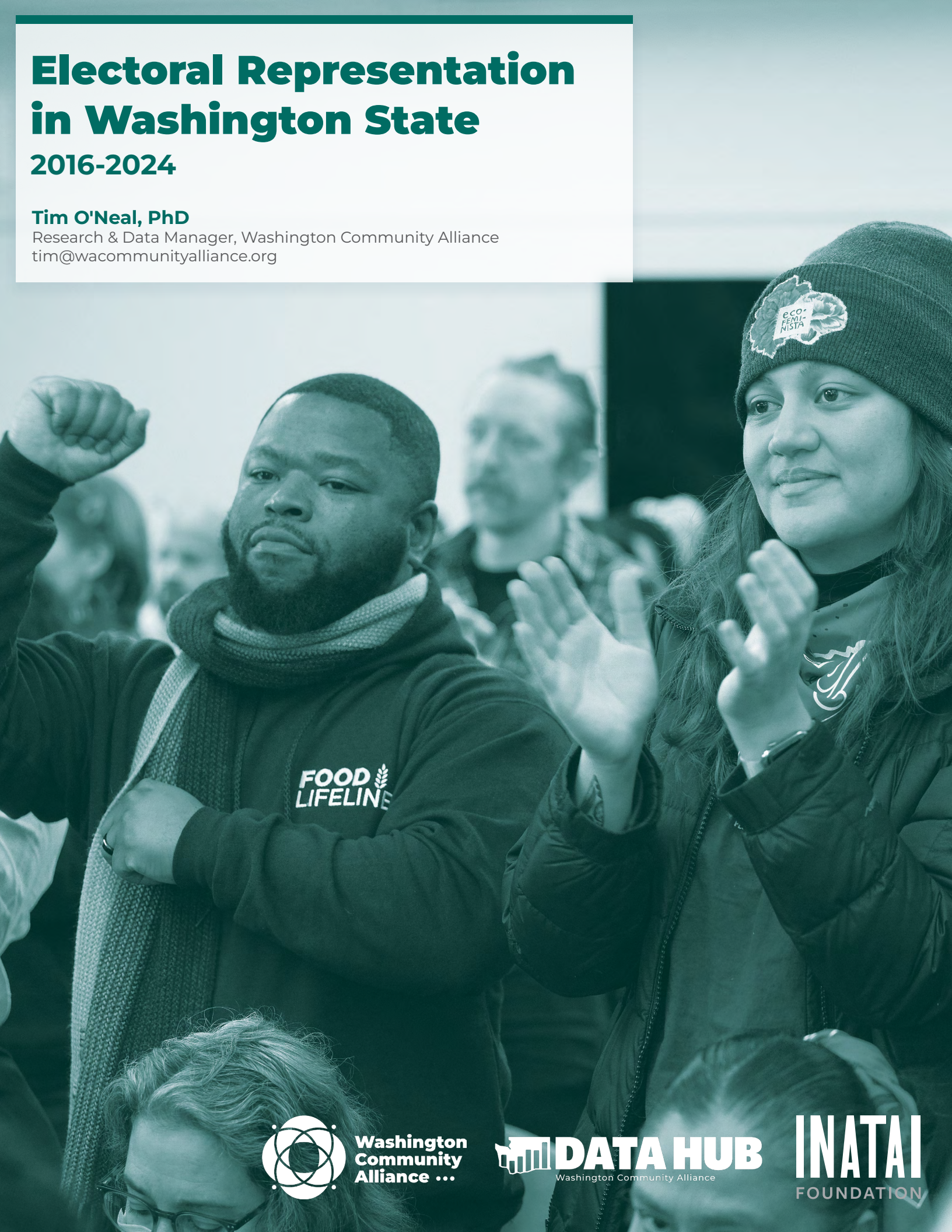

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Overview

Background

Washington State's population has been steadily rising in recent years, driven by rapidly growing Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) populations in the state. However, whether a similar diversification is reflected among Washington's elected officials remains to be seen. Using open data sourced from Washington's Secretary of State and the U.S. Census Bureau matched to Washington's voter file, we compared the demographic profile of elected officials with their constituencies across multiple jurisdictions, offices, and districts. This project was funded by the Inatai Foundation, whose mission aims to shift the balance of power in Washington State and ensure equity and racial justice for all.

Purpose

Ensuring that electoral power is held equitably by different communities is essential for truly representative government. To gain clarity into how electoral power is currently distributed in Washington, this project sought to answer four outstanding questions: (1) How does the full demographic profile of Washington's population differ from officials elected to office? (2) Does the demographic profile of elected officials differ across jurisdictions and offices? (3) How critical is campaign funding for electability, and how does fundraising differ by demographics? (4) Where are elected officials more and less representative of their constituencies?

Key findings

From 2016 to 2024, more than half of all electoral contests in Washington were uncontested, exemplifying the advantage incumbents have once elected. Local offices were the most likely to be uncontested, and unchallenged incumbents were disproportionately older, White, and male, compared to their respective constituents. Campaign financing was highly predictive of a candidate's success – particularly in Legislative, Congressional, and Statewide races – and older, White, and male candidates received the majority of campaign contributions. However, women and candidates of color on average receive more money than men and White candidates, suggesting general enthusiasm from donors to contribute to more diverse candidates.

Considerable gender, age, and racial disparities persist between elected officials and their constituencies across Washington. In rural areas with majority young and Latino populations (e.g., Franklin, Benton, and Yakima counties) local elected offices remain overwhelmingly held by older, White candidates. Conversely, in larger population centers (e.g., Seattle, Olympia, Bellevue, and Tacoma) the number of young candidates and candidates of color who have been elected to office more closely match the overall population. State representatives and state senators are more representative of their constituencies, while county-level officials are least representative.

Conclusions

This report identified (1) areas of Washington with relatively representative elected officials, providing a learning opportunity for understanding how communities have had more success in winning elections; and (2) areas of Washington with the largest representation gap between elected officials and their constituencies, highlighting communities that may need additional investment to achieve electoral representation.

Methodology

Data collection

This project includes data for Washington State's Primary and General elections from 2016 to 2024, limited only to candidates who filed for office; write-in candidates and candidates who filed PDC paperwork but not candidacy paperwork are not included. Data was sourced from Washington's Secretary of State (SoS)[1,2], including specific details on each contest and final results for each contest; Washington's Public Disclosure Commission (PDC)[3] and the Federal Election Commission (FEC)[4], including annual fundraising totals for state and federal contests, respectively; the Census Bureau[5], including population counts; Washington's Geospatial Open Data Portal[6], including shapefile data for congressional districts, legislative districts, counties, and municipalities; and the Voter Activation Network (VAN), including age, gender, and race data. Data prior to 2016 was not included in our analyses, so future work will be needed to facilitate long-term changes in electoral representation in Washington.

1 "Candidates who filed", Washington Secretary of State. https://voter.votewa.gov/CandidateList.aspx?e=894
2 "Reports, Data, and Statistics", Washington Secretary of States Election Division. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections
3 Washington Public Disclosure Commission. https://www.pdc.wa.gov/political-disclosure-reporting-data
4 "Campaign finance data," Federal Election Commission. https://www.fec.gov/data/
5 "Explore Census Data," United States Census Bureau. https://data.census.gov/
6 Washington Spatial Data. https://geo.wa.gov/

Data analysis & visualization

Data from the Census Bureau, SoS, PDC, and FEC were preprocessed using custom-written Python scripts to standardize data fields, and merged together into a single dataframe. For a more accurate count of Washington's non-White population, the total BIPOC population was calculated as the difference between the total population and the 'White alone' population, and total counts for the AAPI, Black, Latino, and Native population was calculated as the sum of people responding that race at all – e.g., the total AAPI population includes those who responded "AAPI only" and those who responded "AAPI + any other race". Demographic data was appended to the cleaned dataframe via Catalist's M Tool, using *Name*, *State*, and *Address* as matching fields; matches with a confidence level less than 0.9 were rejected and manually searched in VAN. Names that were not matched with the M tool or via VAN's search tool were manually researched in local newspapers from across Washington. Overall, 90.3% of candidates were matched using the M tool, 8.0% were matched using VAN's manual search tool, and 1.7% were matched by cross-referencing interviews and articles in local newspapers. Complete demographic data was matched for 98.7% of candidates, with partial data for >99% of candidates.

Washington does not collect race or ethnicity data as a part of voter registration, so race data modeled by the data vendor Catalist[7] was used for all analyses. Although this data is quite accurate at the aggregate level (census block and greater), it can be imprecise for individuals, especially for Native American and AAPI individuals. Final race classifications were spot-checked by multiple individuals, and cross-referenced to existing data on elected candidates of color[8,9]. Data was analysed and visualized using custom-written Python scripts, and final figures were created using Adobe Illustrator. Independent t-tests were used to compare win probability with campaign fundraising data, with jurisdiction or office as moderating variables and statistical significance set at $p<0.05$.

Results

Washington's population is steadily diversifying

Washington's population is among the fastest growing in the country, growing 15.5% from 2010 to 2022 (vs 7.7% nationally). This growth has been driven particularly by Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), increasing 56% in the past decade; and among Latinos, increasing 44% in the past decade. By 2023, Washington's population had grown to 7,812,880: an increase of more than 1 million people since 2010. Women and men make up equal shares of the population (49.9% and 50.1%, respectively), with an overall median age of 37.1 years Although the population is still majority White (69.9%), Washington's racial diversity has been steadily increasing, with more than one-quarter of the population self-identifying as multi-racial[10]. Overall, 21.9% identify as AAPI, 17.9% identify as Latino, 9.8% identify as Black, and 4.4% identify as Native American.

More than two-thirds of Washington's population lives in just five counties (**Figure 1**): King, Pierce, Snohomish, Clark, and Spokane. The density of people under 45 years old varies sharply across the state (52.8% ± 9.3%), ranging from less than 35% in Jefferson and San Juan to over 70% in Franklin and Whitman. Similarly, the total density of people of color varies widely (21.7% ± 10.3%), ranging from less than 10% in Lincoln, Asotin, Garfield, and San Juan to over 40% in Yakima, King, Franklin, and Adams.

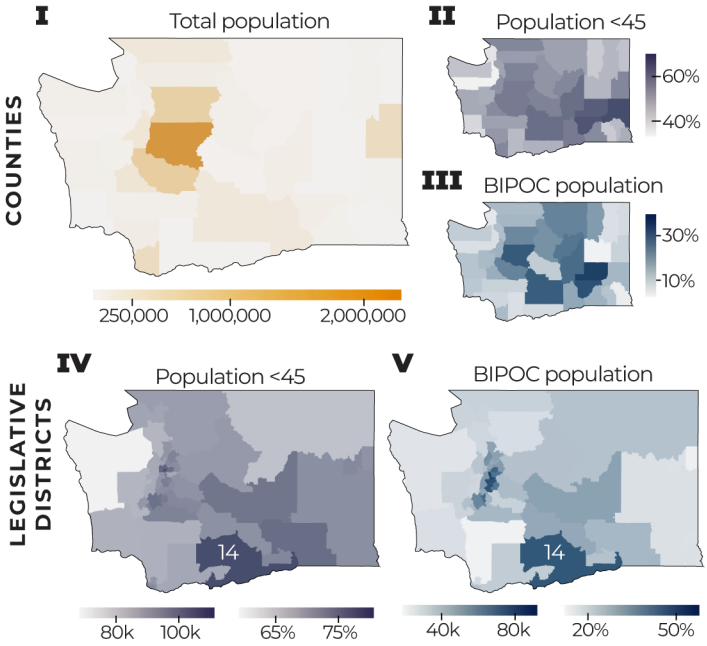

Figure 1 | Geographic distribution of Washington's population. (**I**) Total population, (**II**) percentage of population under 45, and (**III**) BIPOC share of population, mapped by county. (**IV**) Total and percentage of population under 45 years old and (**V**) total and percentage of population this BIPOC, mapped by legislative district. BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

7 Catalist Data. https://catalist.us/

8 "AA & NH/PI Current Elected Officials," Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies. https://www.apaics.org/aapi-current-elected-officials

9 "Black Legislators of Washington State," Washington State Library. https://washstatelib.libguides.com/c.php?g=1204829

10 "2023 American Community Survey", United States Census Bureau. https://data.census.gov/

Unlike the highly variable population density across counties – ranging from less than 10,000 in Garfield, Columbia, and Wahkiakum to more than 2.2 million in King – the population is relatively equal across the 49 legislative districts (156,909 ± 2,000 people). Young people make up the majority of the population in every legislative district except LD24 (43%), and more than two-thirds of the population in LD36, LD14, and LD43. People of color collectively make up less than one-fifth of the population in 15 legislative districts, many of which are in Northwestern Washington, the Olympic Peninsula and Southwestern Washington. However, people of color also make up the majority of the population in six legislative districts, including LD14 (Yakima Valley, Pasco), LD48 (Bellevue), and LD11, LD30, LD33, and LD47 (King County).

Importantly, Washington's BIPOC population is extremely diverse and spread throughout the state: the total Latino population makes up more than 30% of each legislative district in South Central Washington, including LD8, LD13, LD14, LD15, and LD16; the total AAPI population is highest in LD37 (South Seattle), LD11 (Renton), and LD41 and LD48 (Bellevue), making up more than 50% of the population in each district; the total Black population is highest in LD37 (South Seattle), LD29 (Tacoma), and LD30 (Federal Way), accounting for more than 30% of each district's population; and the total Native American population is highest in LD7 (Northeast Washington), LD14 (Yakima Valley), LD24 (Olympic Peninsula), and LD29 (Tacoma), making up over 10% of the population in each district.

Washington's elected officials are less diverse than candidates, the electorate, and the overall population

To better understand how electoral power is held by different groups in Washington, we compared the demographic makeup across four levels: the overall population (n=7,812,880), the electorate (n=5,018,842), the entire pool of candidates for office (n=12,239), and candidates who won their races (n=6,934). Overall, men, older people, and White people have disproportionate electoral power that increases with each level (**Figure 2**). Although the population is evenly split by gender and women make up a slightly larger share of the electorate (+3%), men account for large majorities of both the pool of candidates (+27%) and election winners (+23%). Similarly, while the median age of Washington's electorate is understandably greater than the overall population (48.2 years vs 37.1 years), the median age of candidates and election winners is even greater (53.1 years and 55.4 years, respectively). Lastly, although the population is becoming steadily more racially diverse, White voters maintain an outsized influence in the electorate (82% vs 69%) and make up an overwhelming majority of candidates (90%) and winners (91%) in Washington's elections.

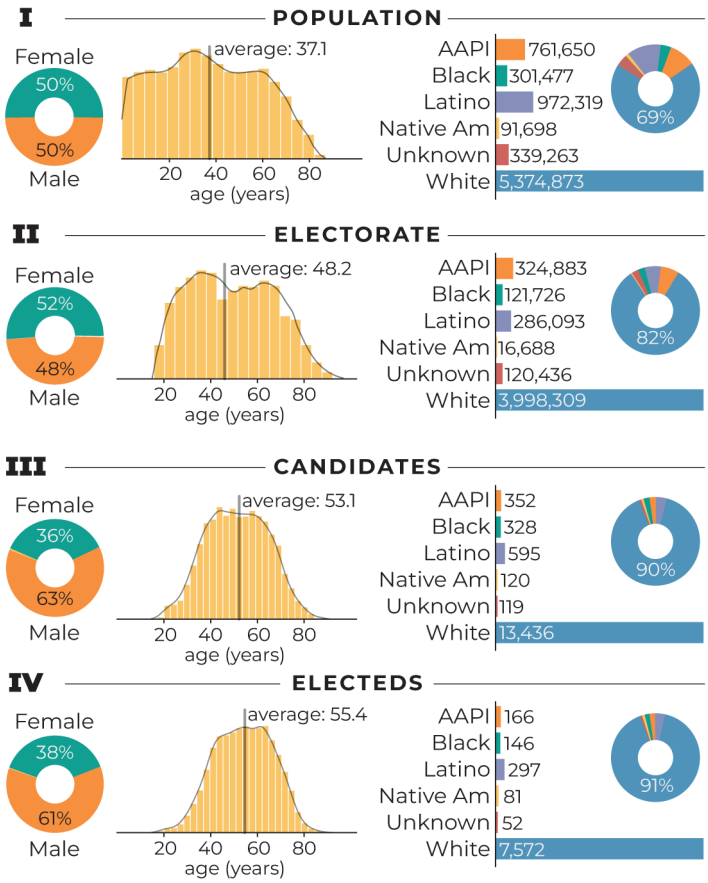

Figure 2 | Demographic diversity in Washington State. Subplots show the relative composition of Washington's (**I**) population, (**II**) electorate, (**III**) candidate pool, and (**IV**) elected officials, broken down by gender (pie charts), age (histograms), and race (bar charts, with inset pie charts).

The gender and age makeup of Washington's candidate pool was similar each year from 2016 to 2024: more than 60% of candidates were men, and the median age was ≥51 years old. However, the share of White people in the candidate pool peaked in 2016 (92%) and reached the lowest level yet in 2024 (86%). Since 2016, more people of color have run for office in odd-year elections, accounting for ~10.3% of the candidate pool each year; however, since 2020, more people of color are running for office in even-year elections, accounting for 11.5% and 13.8% of the candidates in 2022 and 2024, respectively.

The makeup of Washington's elected officials has been fairly consistent since 2016, with some notable exceptions. School districts are the only jurisdiction with gender and age parity between elected officials and their constituencies (50% women, median age of 48 years), though more than 90% of School races have been won by White candidates. Fire, port, public utility, and water

districts have some of the most unrepresentative officials in the state, across gender, age, and race (>70% men, median age of >61 years, and 90% white for all). Overall, racial disparities are present across all jurisdictions, with BIPOC candidates collectively winning fewer than 10% of elections from 2016 to 2024 (22% of congressional, 19% of legislative, 13% of judicial, 10% of city/town, <5% in fire, public hospital, public utility, and water; **Figure 3**).

Candidates elected to the Washington State Legislature between 2016 and 2024 were the most representative of young people and people of color: the average age for elected legislative candidates was 53.5 years old, and BIPOC candidates collectively won 120 legislative elections from 2016 to 2024, a higher overall percentage than any other jurisdiction (6% AAPI, 5.7% Black, 5.2% Latino, 1.1% Native American). Although the majority of AAPI, Black, Latino, and Native American candidates elected were women, just 36% of White legislative candidates that were elected were women, resulting in sizable gender disparities in both chambers of the Legislature (house = 44% women, senate = 39% women).

Unlike the Legislature, elected officials at the county-level are among the most unrepresentative in the state: 66% of all elected candidates were men, the average age was 55.7 years old, and 97% were White (820 White, 14 Latino, 6 Black, 4 AAPI, and 1 Native American). Elected officials at the municipal level were slightly more representative over the same period: 62% of elected candidates were men, the average age was 54.6 years, and 89.5% were White (2,937 White, 176 Latino, 59 Black, 54 AAPI, 30 Native American). Across municipalities, more women, young, and BIPOC candidates were elected as city councilors (38% women, average age of 53 years old, 5.6% Latino, 1.9% AAPI, 1.9% Native American) than mayors (30% women, average age of 56.2 years old, 4% Latino, 1.4% Black, 0.5% Native American; **Figure 4**).

12,239 individuals have run for office since 2016, and just 1,236 were people of color (10.1%). Latino candidates made up the largest non-White share from 2016 to 2024 (n=498), running primarily in municipal (city and town, n=244), school (n=126), legislative (n=44), county (n=38), and judicial (n=28) elections. AAPI and Black candidates made up similar shares of candidates in the same time period (n=261 and 255, respectively), running primarily in municipal (n=107 and 110), legislative (n=44 and 50), school (n=44 and 46), judicial (n=27 and 21), and county (n=11 and 17) elections. Native Americans made up the smallest share of candidates from 2016 to 2024 (n=111), including

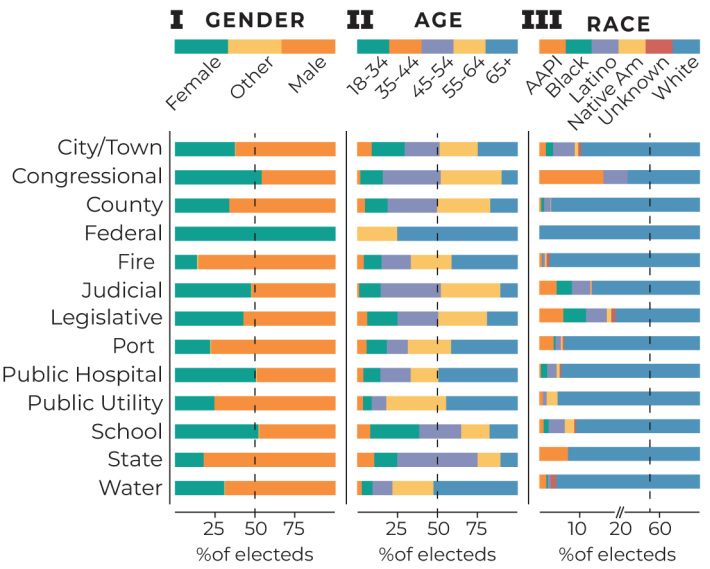

Figure 3 | Demographic diversity of elected officials by jurisdiction. Demographic composition of Washington's elected officials from 2016 to 2024 across 13 jurisdictions, by (**I**) gender, (**II**) age, and (**III**) race. Note: the right subplot uses a two-segment x-axis to better show data for candidates of color (1st segment: 0-20%; 2nd segment: 20-80%); dashed line = 50%.

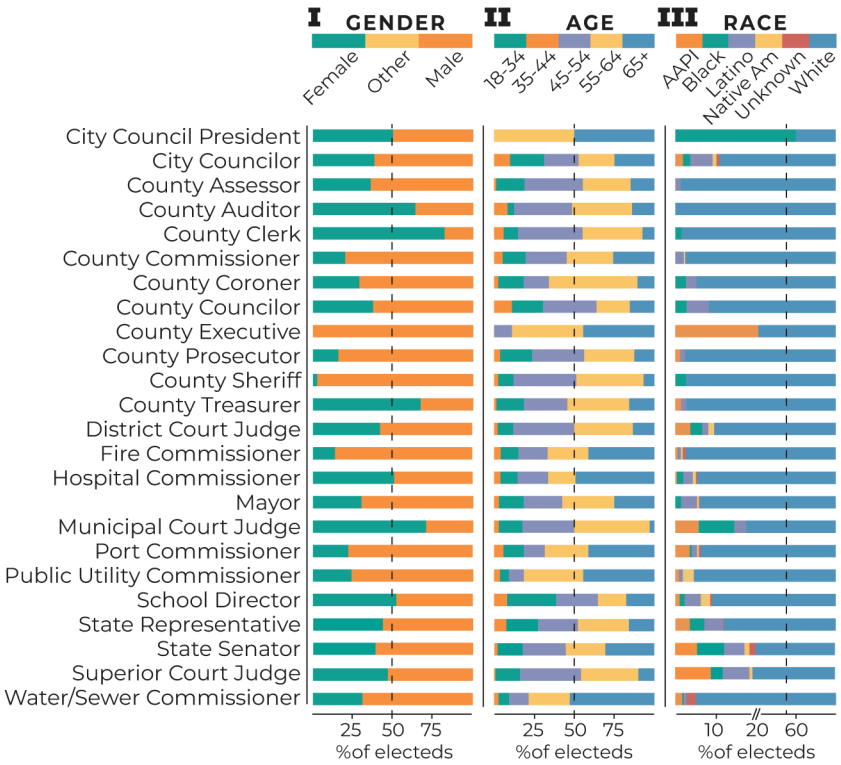

Figure 4 | Demographic diversity of elected officials in Washington by office. Demographic composition of Washington's elected officials from 2016 to 2024 across 22 local offices, by (**I**) gender, (**II**) age, and (**III**) race. Note: the right subplot uses a two-segment x-axis to better show data for candidates of color (1st segment: 0-20%; 2nd segment: 20-80%); dashed line = 50%.

school (n=54), municipal (n=27), and legislative (n=11) seats.

Fundraising strongly predicts success, particularly in legislative, congressional, and statewide elections

From 2016 to 2024, Washington's electorate voted in 7,679 individual contests, but fewer than half were contested (51.4% uncontested vs 48.6% contested). The majority of elections in county, fire, port, public hospital, school, and water districts were uncontested, and candidates who won uncontested elections were even less representative of the overall public than the entire candidate pool: 62% were men, 93% were White, and the median age was 56 years old. Since most uncontested elections were won without raising/spending any money, all following financial analyses focused solely on contested elections.

Candidates for office in Washington collectively raised $625,878,833 from 2016 to 2024, the overwhelming majority of which was raised during even-year elections (88% in even-years, 12% in odd-years). Over that time period, women received more total campaign contributions than men ($346 million vs $280 million), outraising men every year except 2016 and 2020. More than 58% of all campaign contributions were given to candidates over the age of 50, with the largest total to candidates between 55 and 64 years old ($176 million) and the smallest to candidates under 35 years old ($52 million). Similarly, more than 84% of all campaign contributions were given to White candidates ($527 million); AAPI candidates received the second most contributions ($41 million), followed by Latino candidates ($36 million), Black candidates ($18 million), and Native American candidates ($2.3 million). However, because White candidates were so overrepresented in the overall candidate pool, candidates of color on average raised more money than White candidates: AAPI candidates raised the largest average sum ($126k), followed by Latino candidates ($66k), Black candidates ($60k), White candidates ($48k), and Native American candidates ($32k).

To gain insight into the average cost to win different types of races in Washington state, data was filtered to include only winners of contested elections, then aggregated by jurisdiction and district (**Figure 5**). Federal elections were by-far the most expensive in the state, with candidates spending an average of $14.3 million to win. Congressional and statewide elections were the next most expensive, costing candidates $2.9 million and $1.9 million, respectively, though the cost for congressional elections varied considerably by year and district: from 2016-2020, congressional races in CD5 and CD8 were the most expensive ($4.5 million and $5.1 million, respectively), but in 2022 and 2024, races in CD3 and CD8 were the most expensive ($7.3 million and $7.9 million, respectively).

Legislative elections were the next most expensive, costing an average of $168k to win ($152k for State Representative seats, $258k for State Senate seats), though this also varied considerably by year and district: from 2016-2020, winning a legislative election was most expensive in LD28 ($401k), LD45 ($385k), LD5 ($337k), LD26 ($305k), and LD44 ($300k); in 2022, after decennial redistricting was completed, winning a legislative election was most expensive in LD42 ($572), LD26 ($546k), LD10 ($471k), LD2 ($381k), and LD30 ($316k); and in 2024, after additional redistricting in South Central Washington, winning a legislative election was most expensive in LD10 ($546k), LD42 ($435k), LD45 ($390k), LD26 ($376k), and LD14 ($352k).

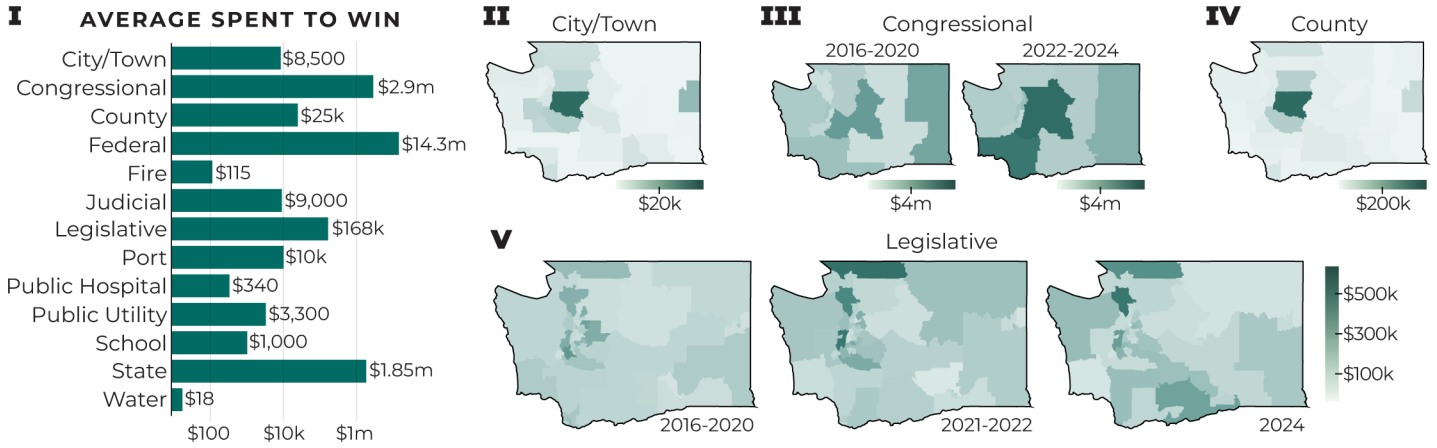

Figure 5 | Campaign spending by elected officials across Washington, separated by jurisdiction and district. (**I**) Bars show the average amount spent by winning candidates from 2016 to 2024, broken down by jurisdiction. Note: the x-axis uses a logarithmic scale to enhance readability. Maps show the average amount spent by winning candidates in (**II**) municipal elections, aggregated by county; (**III**) congressional elections, aggregated by district; (**IV**) county elections; and (**V**) legislative elections, aggregated by district. Maps for congressional and legislative elections are shown on relevant district bounds; data is only included for contested elections.

Local elections typically cost considerably less to win than legislative, congressional, and statewide elections, though this also varied by jurisdiction and district. Winning a countywide election cost on average $25k, ranging from $443k in King, $116k in Snohomish, $114k in Pierce, and $88k in Spokane to less than $5k in Whitman, Adams, Skamania, Columbia, Wahkiakum, Pacific, Lincoln, Asotin, Garfield, and Ferry. Although winning a city/town election costs on average $8,500, these elections are considerably more expensive in Washington's major cities: $376k in Seattle, $127k in Spokane, $91k in Bellevue, and $88k in Tacoma. Similarly, although school board elections are typically won with an average of just $1,000, spending is many times higher in some districts, including Seattle ($32k), Mead ($32k), Clover Park ($26k), Bellevue ($23k), and Peninsula ($22k). All other jurisdictions – including fire, judicial, port, public hospital, public utility, and water – were typically won by candidates who spent less than $5,000, with few exceptions.

To understand just how critical campaign funding is for candidates' success, individual contested elections were clustered by year, jurisdiction, district, and office, and the relative fundraising for each candidate was compared with the final electoral outcome. Overall, there was an extremely significant effect of fundraising on win probability ($p<0.0001$), where candidates who raised more money were more likely to win. This effect was also seen across most jurisdictions, including city/town, congressional, county, federal, legislative, school, and statewide ($p<0.01$). Notably, there was no significant relationship between campaign spending and outcome in fire, judicial, port, public hospital, public utility, and water elections ($p>0.05$), suggesting campaign spending may be less of a factor in less salient contests.

Stark disparities between elected officials and their constituencies are prominent through Washington

In a fully representative democracy, the demographic makeup of elected officials in a given jurisdiction would match the makeup of the population: for example, a town with an older, majority White population would have older, majority White elected officials, while a city with a younger, majority Latino population would have younger, majority Latino electeds. To begin to understand which places in Washington are closer vs further from equitable representation, the gender, age, and racial composition of the population was compared with the gender, age, and racial composition of all candidates who won elections in that jurisdiction since 2016, and a "representation gap" was calculated as the difference between the two values (e.g., King County's population is 49% female but only 31% of elections have been won by women, so the gender gap in King County is 18%). This analysis was done separately at the county level (including county executive, county commissioner, and county council elections) and at the local level (including mayor, city council, and city attorney elections) (**Figure 6**).

Across Washington's 39 counties, women make up an average of 49.8% of the population, ranging from 47.8% in Mason County to 51.0% in Jefferson County. Similarly, across the 277 incorporated cities and towns included in our analyses, women make up an average of 49.7% of the population, ranging from 37.6% in Airway Heights to 57.8% in Starbuck. Since 2016, women have won an average of just 34% of county elections, with <20% in five counties (Franklin, Lewis, Benton, Chelan, and Douglas) and >50% in just four counties (Jefferson, Ferry, San Juan, and Island). Overall, the gender gap in county-level elections was 15% across Washington, with underrepresentation of women in 35 counties; just three counties – Pend Oreille, Whitman, and Jefferson – have a gender gap of <5%, while nine counties have a gender gap >25%.

Women won 37% of local elections from 2016 to 2024, though this varied considerably by a number of factors, including population: women won 43% of elections in cities with a population over 10,000, but just 34% in places with a population less than 10,000. Overall, the gender gap in local elections was 12.7%, with underrepresentation of women in 214 municipalities and overrepresentation of women in 62 municipalities. Women won >75% of elections in just five municipalities, including Sammamish and Tumwater, while men have won >75% of elections in 66 municipalities, including Kennewick, Pasco, Wenatchee, Walla Walla, and Oak Harbor.

Because age data is provided by the Census Bureau in pre-binned totals (under 18, 18-44, 45-64, and 65 and over), analyses of age disparity among the population were split into two categories: less than 45 years old ("young"), and 45 years and over ("older"). Young people make up an average of 53% of the population across Washington's counties, ranging from 34% in Jefferson and 36% in San Juan to 71% in Franklin and 73% in Whitman. Since 2016, young people have won just 20% of county-level elections, including <10% in seven counties (Franklin, Pend Oreille, Lewis, Chelan, Asotin, Island, and Grant) and >40% in just two counties (Snohomish and Kittitas). Overall, the age gap in county-level elections was 32% across Washington, with underrepresentation of young people in every

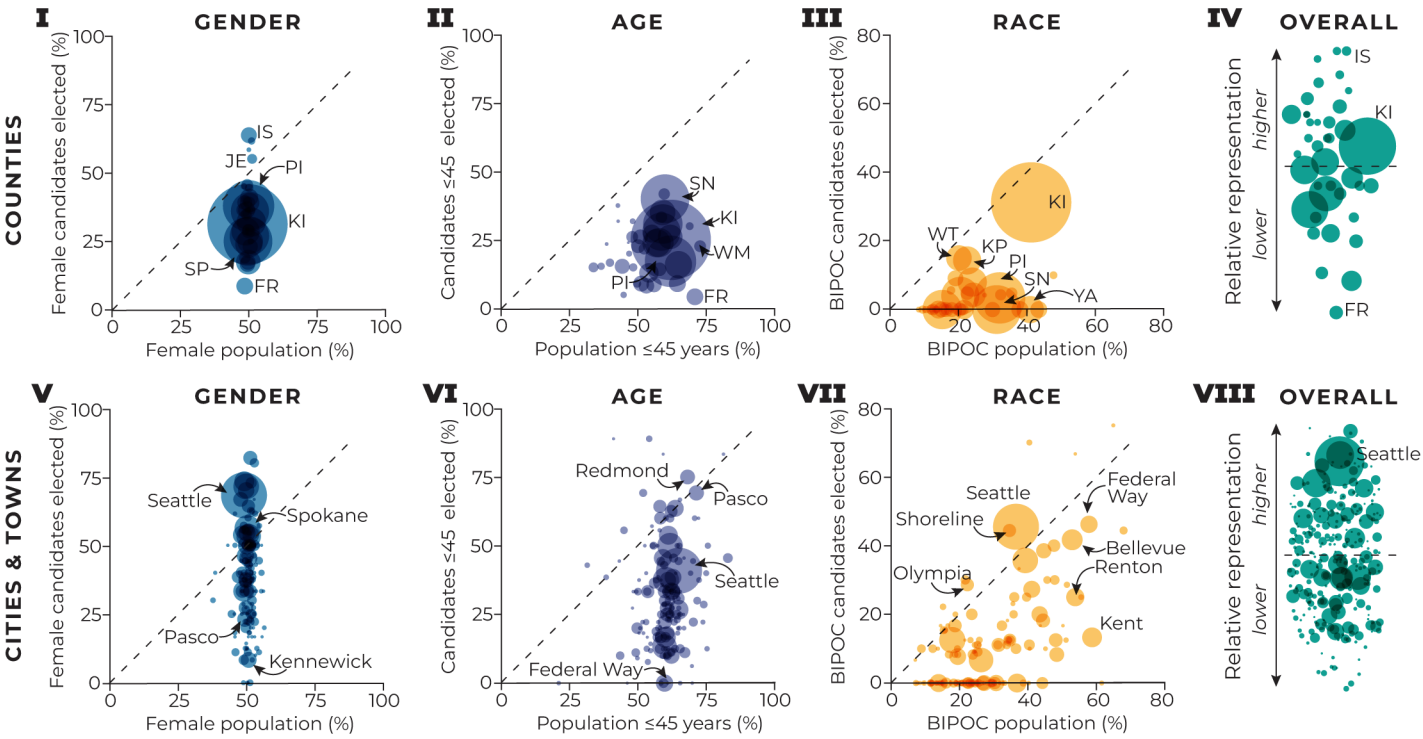

Figure 6 | Relative representation of Washington's elected officials and their constituencies. (**I-III**) Scatterplots show the relationship between the demographic composition of each county and its elected officials, separately by (**I**) gender, (**II**) age, and (**III**) race. (**IV**) Swarmplots show the relative demographic representation across Washington's counties. (**V-VIII**) Scatterplots show the relationship between the demographic composition of each city or town and its elected officials, separately by (**V**) gender, (**VI**) age, and (**VII**) race. (**VIII**) Swarmplots show relative demographic representation across Washington's legislative districts. Dashed line on scatterplots = electoral parity between elected officials and their constituencies, with a larger disparity in places further below the line; dashed line on swarmplots = median representation gap, with higher overall representation in places above the line and lower representation in the those below the line; for all plots, the size of individual bubbles is proportional to the population.

county. The age gap was lowest in Ferry, Columbia, and Wahkiakum (<15%) – counties where young people make up a relatively smaller segment of the population – and highest in Chelan, Yakima, Whitman, Grant, and Franklin (>45%)– counties where young people make up the majority of the population.

At the local level, young people have had more success running for office, winning 30% of local elections since 2016; however, 28 municipalities have not elected a single person under 45 years old (including Federal Way, Des Moines, North Bend, Union Gap, and Ocean Shores) in the same time period. Overall, the age gap in municipalities was 25%, with underrepresentation of young people in 240 municipalities and overrepresentation in just 35 municipalities – including Enumclaw, Port Angeles, Port Townsend, Redmond, and Olympia.

People of color collectively make up more than 30% of Washington's population, but won less than 10% of all elections between 2016 and 2024; moreover, AAPI, Black, Latino, and Native American candidates separately won less than 4% of all elections each. To assess racial disparities across different jurisdictions, the total non-White population was compared with the total number of non-White candidates elected to office. Although this analysis alone does not capture specifics for AAPI, Black, Latino, or Native American folks in Washington, it is a useful starting point for identifying jurisdictions that have stark disparities between elected officials and the overall BIPOC population. From 2016 to 2024, people of color collectively won just 3% of county-level races in Washington state, with the largest share in King (31%), Whatcom (15%), Kitsap (15%), and Adams (10%). People of color did not win a single county-level election in 25 counties, including Franklin, Yakima, Grant, and Snohomish, where people of color make up more than one-third of the population. Overall, the county-level racial gap between elected officials and the population was 19%, with a gap <10% in just seven counties (King, Island, Garfield, Asotin, Lincoln, Kitsap, Whatcom) and a gap >30% in six counties (Franklin, Yakima, Grant, Adams, Snohomish, and Douglas).

Candidates of color have had more success in local elections, winning 10.5% of elections since 2016; however, 161 municipalities did not elect a single person of color in that time period, and just 10 municipalities elected

≥50% candidates of color. Overall, the racial gap across Washington's municipalities from 2016 to 2024 was 14.6%, with underrepresentation of people of color in 245 municipalities and overrepresentation of people of color in just 32 municipalities – including Toppenish, Grandview, Wapato, Shoreline, Seattle, Olympia.

To gain a better sense of which municipalities' elected officials are more or less representative of their constituencies, a relative representation index was calculated for each municipality: (1) the gap between the population and all elected candidates was calculated for gender, age, and race, as described above, (2) municipalities were sorted and ranked separately for each of the three gaps, and (3) the mean ranking for each municipality was calculated. Across Washington's 39 counties, the representation gap between elected officials and their constituencies was lower for gender (mean: 15.4%) than race (mean: 19.0%) or age (mean: 31.7%); accordingly, elected officials were most representative of their constituencies in counties with older, Whiter populations.

From 2016 to 2024, San Juan, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Pacific elected candidates who were most representative of their constituencies (mean representation gap = 10.4%), while Franklin, Yakima, Chelan, and Grant elected candidates who were least representative of their constituencies (mean representation gap = 39.9%). Seven of the eight least-represented counties are in Central Washington, the area of the state with the fastest growing Latino population, while five of the eight most-represented counties are in Northwestern Washington and the Olympic Peninsula, areas of the state with older, heavily White populations. Of Washington's five most populous counties, which collectively account for two-thirds of the state's population, only King and Clark elected candidates who were more representative of their constituencies than the rest of the state; Pierce had one of the largest age gaps in the state (45%), Snohomish had one of the largest race gaps in the state (31%), and Spokane had some of the largest gender and age gaps in the state (23% and 28%, respectively).

The representation gap between elected officials and the population was much more variable at the city level from 2016 to 2024. In fact, in some cities, elected officials were more representative of the minority population than the majority: the average age of elected officials was below the population's average in 35 municipalities, including Redmond, Olympia, Bothell, Burien, Port Angeles, Anacortes, and Enumclaw; the majority of elections were won by women in 62 municipalities, including Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Vancouver, Kent, Yakima, Bellingham, Olympia, and Shoreline; and the share of elections won by candidates of color was greater than the relative population of color in 32 municipalities, including Seattle, Olympia, Toppenish, Wapato, Friday Harbor, and Grandview.

Overall, 33 municipalities had elected candidates that were highly representative of their constituencies (mean gap ≤5%), including many cities in the Puget Sound (Seattle, Tacoma, Redmond, Shoreline, Burien, College Place), Yakima Valley (Yakima, Toppenish, Mattawa), and Southwestern Washington (Longview and Battle Ground). Conversely, 73 municipalities had elected candidates that were highly unrepresentative of their constituencies (mean gap ≥25%), including many in South Central Washington (Kennewick, West Richland, Walla Walla), North Central Washington (Wenatchee, East Wenatchee, Moses Lake, Okanogan, Omak), Northwestern Washington (Marysville, Lake Stevens, Lynnwood, Mount Vernon, University Place, Burlington), and the Olympic Peninsula (Oak Harbor, Port Orchard, Poulsbo).

Conclusions

Men, older people, and White people continue to hold a disproportionate share of elected offices in Washington, with few exceptions. State legislators are most representative of their constituencies, while local officials are the least representative. Future research should expand on this work, for example looking further back than 2016 to better understand historical trends in population growth and elected representation; and diving deeper into districts and municipalities with relatively higher representation to provide insight into what work may be needed elsewhere to increase representation.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by Inatai Foundation. Tim O'Neal (Washington Community Alliance) led experimental design, data collection & analysis, and writing & editing, with support from Emma Noyes (Inatai, experimental design), Andrew Hong (WCA, data collection), and Alma Aguilar (WCA, editing).

Cover photo: participants at the 2025 Farmworkers Tribunal in Olympia, WA (courtesy of Ulysses Curry).